

**The Ethnographer's Nostalgia in Hollywood:  
Towards a Dialectic of the Frontier**

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I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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## Abstract

The historical encounter between indigenous populations and colonial powers in North America has been a central issue for any theory of American history and culture. It appears that now, more than ever, images of the “Frontier” resonate in the Hollywood tradition. This dissertation proposes that existing critical studies of this issue, whilst productive, have been brought up short in accounting for the peculiarly seductive qualities of the American West. It argues for a new critical approach anchored in philosophical issues that emerge along with ethnology in the eighteenth century. The first chapter introduces a theoretical vocabulary running from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean Baudrillard to Jacques Derrida’s proposed turn to Friedrich Nietzsche. The second chapter detects this vocabulary in the classical Western, examining George Stevens’ *Shane* (1953) and John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) as foundational examples of imagining the American West. The third chapter examines how visions of the West persisted in the post-classical Hollywood era, surveying Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971), Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969), Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven* (1978), Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The final chapter examines how the narrative encounter with the “savage” first projected in the early nineteenth century returns forcefully in the Hollywood cinema of the 2000s. Terrence Malick’s *The New World* (2005), Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto* (2006), and James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) indicate a new mode of ethnological fantasy emerging. Concluding with Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* (2015) as a profoundly Nietzschean repudiation of this tradition, it proposes a developmental trajectory in which the fantasy encounter with a radically different form of society at the Frontier serves an increasingly Utopian function: the collective attempt to crystalize a vision of human existence freed from the afflictions that characterize our own historical moment of late capitalism.

## Abbreviations

Works frequently cited have been identified in text by the following abbreviations:

- EC* Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.
- EN* Bahktin, Mikhail M. "Epic and Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 3-40. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- JF* Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man." In *Structural Anthropology 2*, translated by Monique Layton, 33-43. London: Penguin, 1973.
- OG* Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997.
- PS* Pippin, Robert B. "What is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 223-246.
- PU* Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- SD* Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men or Second Discourse." In *Rousseau: The Discourses and other early political writings*, edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch, 111-222. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- SM* Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971.
- SS* Wright, Will. *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

# 1. The Ethnographer's Nostalgia

## 1.1 The Poetic Preference for the Savage

*For us European earth-dwellers, the adventure played out in the heart of the New World signifies in the first place that it was not our world and that we bear responsibility for the crime of its destruction; and secondly, that there will never be another New World...*

— Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

Any theory of American historicity has had to confront an alarming central contradiction: since its earliest days, the American cultural imagination has displayed a “poetic” preference for the order of the “savage.”<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the attempt to build an exemplary society of the future (freed from the unwanted residue of European history), there is a worrying tendency for the emissaries of this historical project (explorers, fur trappers, mountain men, pioneers, and cowboys) to regard the attachment to their culture of origin as less a privilege than a burden, abdicate their ties to “civilization” and “descend” into savagery. To phrase it this way is of course unacceptable in current times, and rightly so, as to uncritically employ the term “savage” is to admit the ideological residue of nineteenth century ethnocentric formulations that have only been brought to light through assiduous scholarly efforts.<sup>2</sup> Yet the term seems to persist as a lingering after-image in our cultural vocabularies, a vague heuristic applied to those collectively held images of human existence that strike us as most utterly unlike our own. In a way that is now rapidly vanishing from view, we are still

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to the “savage” and “savagery” should be regarded as enclosed within quotation marks and subject to critical scrutiny for historical and ideological connotations. Wherever possible I have substituted the term “ethnological Other.”

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive treatment of the history of ethnocentrism in media representations see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Donald L. Fixico, “Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History,” in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 84-99.

occasionally brought up short by the startling historical fact that people have indeed lived very differently in remote times and places.<sup>3</sup>

This ideologically unpalatable heuristic then makes its appearance in any number of theories of America as a historic project that remakes both the individual and society. It is to be found in the classical conception of America that can be traced to the Age of Discovery which instituted the first rhetorical tropes of virginity, purity, newness, or wholeness, to describe this “New World.”<sup>4</sup> In this conception, the term “America” came to stand as the antinomy to what Derrida called the “theatre society” of Europe.<sup>5</sup> This pair of terms then corresponded conceptually to “nature” and “culture.”<sup>6</sup> In perhaps the most famous formulation of American historicity, Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier thesis,”<sup>7</sup> the unique conditions that “furnish the forces dominating the American character” were to be found in a “return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line.”<sup>8</sup> At this “meeting point between savagery and civilization,” the “wilderness masters the colonist:”

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Patricia Nelson Limerick retains the category in her influential contribution to the “New Western history.” In her analysis it connotes “hunting and gathering, not agriculture; common ownership, not individual property owning; pagan superstition, not Christianity; spoken language, not literacy; emotion, not reason.” See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 190.

<sup>4</sup> For an influential account of the phenomenon of “savagism” from the earliest days of American colonial history see Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 305 (hereafter cited in text as *OG*).

<sup>6</sup> For an influential history of America’s national ideology of the “wilderness” see Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 31-60. For a discussion of the historical context and significance of the “Turner thesis” see Kerwin Lee Klein, “What was the Frontier Thesis?,” in *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13-22.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 32.



It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for man.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite this apparent “regression,” the wilderness’ power over the colonist is not permanent, and eventually civilization regains the upper hand. Yet the result is that the “wilderness” and “Indian ways” still somehow persist, structurally embedded, within this “new product that is American.”<sup>10</sup>

This historical experience furnished American literature with a great storehouse of narrative raw materials. From the eighteenth century, tales of colonial adventure found favour with both domestic and international readerships. The “Myth and Symbol School” of American Studies has grasped this phenomenon in a number of ways. In his pioneering study of popular nineteenth century literature, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*,<sup>11</sup> Henry Nash Smith noted that there were “two conflicting attitudes to westward pioneers.” Whilst the majority of the population admired the pioneer “for blazing trails farmers could follow to tame the land,” and saw in their deeds “a glorious victory of civilization over savagery and barbarism,” there also existed a “delicious melancholy... in regretting the destruction of the primitive freedom of an untouched continent.”<sup>12</sup> The tension between savagery and civilization was “solved” for Smith in images such as that of the Western “yeoman” (the freehold

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<sup>9</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 33.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 34.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950).

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 55-56.

farmer) who retained the benefits of contact with “nature,” whilst contributing to the heroic task of nourishing the American nation.<sup>13</sup>

This contradiction was grasped by another important figure of American Studies, Leo Marx, as an even greater cause for alarm. In *The Machine in the Garden*,<sup>14</sup> Marx tried to discern the relation between “spurious” and “genuine” forms of American pastoralism. The former was characterized by a “primitivist” hero who “locates value as far as possible, in space or time or both, from organized society.”<sup>15</sup> This “naïve” or “sentimental” pastoralism, according to Marx, merely indulged the tendency of American popular narrative towards “puerile fantasies” and “simple-minded wishfulness.”<sup>16</sup> However, the latter was to be found in the literary tradition represented by Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau and the like. The mediating figure for Marx was the Virgilian image of the pastoral shepherd, who represented a “resolution of the conflict between the opposed worlds of nature and art.”<sup>17</sup> It was this attempt to “resolve” the tension between “nature” and “civilization” that characterized the “high” literary tradition in America.<sup>18</sup>

Yet another model appears in *The American Adam*,<sup>19</sup> in which R. W. B. Lewis offers a third character “type” whose function is to mediate between nature and culture, the past and the future. For Lewis, a “radically new personality” emerges in nineteenth century literature, “the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 141 and 154.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

of his own unique and inherent resources.”<sup>20</sup> Lewis calls this figure the “American Adam,” and nominates Natty Bumppo (whose adventures with the Mohicans form the core of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Saga*<sup>21</sup>) as its most important prototype.<sup>22</sup> Lewis proposes that such a figure occupies a central position in a “native American mythology.”<sup>23</sup>

It would be possible to continue enumerating these models.<sup>24</sup> The attempt to decode this poetic preference for the savage historically found its natural home

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *Leatherstocking Saga*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954).

<sup>22</sup> Lewis argues in *The American Adam* that “if there was a fictional Adamic hero unambiguously treated— celebrated in his very Adamism— it was the hero of Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*: a self-reliant young man who does seem to have sprung from nowhere and whose characteristic pose, to employ de Tocqueville’s words, was the solitary stance in the presence of Nature and God... The evolution of the hero as Adam in the fiction of the New World— an evolution which coincides precisely, as I believe, with the evolution of *the* hero of American fiction generally— begins rightly with Natty Bumppo” (91).

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> For other notable formulations of this thematic see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Armando José Prats, *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American West* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002). Prats is a recent example of a postcolonial scholar for whom the conceptual model retains some value. His perspective is instructive as it resists any simple “resolution” to this conceptual dilemma and comes close to expressing the figure in terms of structural contradiction:

The frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner told us more than a century ago, produces the American. Begotten of the conflict between civilization and savagery, straddling the fine line between history and myth, the triumphant American hero stakes out his exceptional status and character. With this I have no real quarrel, or at least not one that is relevant here. Nor do I necessarily dispute the assertion that the dialectic between civilization and savagery produces the American— an American synthesis, so to say. For that synthesis corresponds to my own assertion, just now, that the white hero, though he may become savage for civilization’s sake, is still himself integrally. I contest only the assumption, implicit throughout the famous “Thesis,” that the American, in becoming just such a creature, resolves (perhaps dissolves) the opposing forces that fashion him, as if the old elements were lost in the new chemical. In other words, I hold that the concentration of the contending forces that design and construct him does not thereby constitute a resolution of the conflict,

within the literary vein of the discipline of American Studies. But in our own moment, in our “society of the spectacle,”<sup>25</sup> saturated as it is with screen narratives of all kinds, it appears that this poetic preference for the savage now finds a cinematic form of expression that is at least as rich as the older literary traditions. Perhaps the most evocative and persistent inquiry into this contradiction can be found in the genre theory of the Western. In the models proposed by the leading genre theorists, the Western has been read according to a structuralist methodology which locates the very source of the genre’s plots in the master antimony of “civilization” and “savagery.”<sup>26</sup> The character type of the “Westerner” now mediates between these two narrative worlds whose historical relation is extinguished by the closing of the Frontier. As a result, the genre projects a vision of an imagined national past that is charged with a certain nostalgia. The resulting complex of films is often held to be, along with jazz, amongst the greatest of America’s cultural achievements.<sup>27</sup>

More recently, images of “savagery” in colonial narratives of adventure and exploration have been the subject of sustained critique by post-colonial scholars who have sought to reveal the profoundly ideological function of such images (of “naturals,” “savages” and “Indians”) in the American national imaginary.<sup>28</sup>

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or a dissolution of the constituent elements (to stick to the chemical metaphor). He is an American, rather, because his identity *perpetuates* the two opposing tendencies that constitute him. (185)

<sup>25</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977). I employ this periodization following Fredric Jameson for whom it constitutes one of the major diagnoses of the period also referred to as “late capitalism.” See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 18.

<sup>26</sup> For influential examples of this critical approach to the Western see Jim Kitses, “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 57-68; John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971); Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>27</sup> See for example Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 1.

<sup>28</sup> For surveys of this highly influential critical approach see Jenni Ramone, *Postcolonial Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, “Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An

Inspired by the revisionism of the “New West history,”<sup>29</sup> post-colonial critiques revisited the old “mythic” images of American Studies to uncover their ideological function and complicity in colonial domination. In this turn, historical power relations form the mastercode of textual interpretation, and cultural figuration is understood both as a strategy used by the hegemonic social group to instill “false consciousness,” as well as a potential site for subaltern subversion and resistance.<sup>30</sup> These patterns have been grasped through new interpretive tools, such as structural “effacement,” “cultural appropriation” and complex forms of “Othering.” This scholarly perspective has sought to draw attention to the ways in which such images obscure and distort the lived experience of those

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Introduction,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 1-20; Neil Lazarus, “Introducing postcolonial studies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-18; Bart Moore-Gilbert, “Postcolonial criticism or postcolonial theory?” in *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 5-33; Leela Ghandi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Henry Schwarz, “Mission Impossible: Introducing Postcolonial Studies in the US Academy,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000), 1-20.

<sup>29</sup> For influential examples of the New Western history see Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*; Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward A New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For more specific discussions of the problem of history and colonial domination of Native American peoples see Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Angela Cavendar Wilson, “American Indian History or Non-Indian Perceptions of American Indian History” in Mihesuah, *Native and Academics*, 23-26.

<sup>30</sup> For an influential example of this form of criticism see Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Huhndorf her critique in a lineage following Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said and Stuart Hall (12). See also Prats, *Invisible Natives*; Jane P. Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John E. O'Connor, “The White Man’s Indian: An Institutional Approach,” in *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 27-38.

who have suffered colonial domination, thereby subjecting colonized peoples to ongoing forms of alienation in the present. This is, of course, a very real social consequence of the way the American West is imagined.

In the project at hand however, my central contention will be that these methodological approaches for reading the “paradox of the Frontier,”<sup>31</sup> whilst illuminating and productive, have been brought up short in one way or another. The older American Studies tradition has historically celebrated such national “myths” in an uncritical and unacceptably ideological fashion.<sup>32</sup> More often than not, such readings shy away from any subversive critique of the ideology of “civilization” to be found in these narratives. More recently, many postcolonial critiques appear to bristle at the “agonizing and incomprehensible persistence”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Johnson is an example of a critic who preempts the current project by phrasing his discussion of the West in terms of paradox and contradiction. He cites Donald Worster as the New West historian who reiterates the “Western paradox” as a “deep contradiction” in its attachment to “two dreams subsumed by a wild-tame dialectic...” (401). See Michael L. Johnson, “Conclusion: Some New Vision: Resolving the Western Paradox,” in *Hunger for the Wild: America’s Obsession with the Untamed West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 401-403.

<sup>32</sup> For historiographic accounts of the construction of the national “myth” of the American West see Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, “The Myth of the West,” in *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2000), 472-511; Gerald D. Nash, “The West as Utopia and Myth 1890-1990,” in *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 197-257.

<sup>33</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 359. Discussing the literature of Philip K. Dick, Jameson employs this expression to describe the maddening recurrence of a phenomenon which appears ideologically or ethically objectionable to a critical perspective that fails to grasp its origin in a contradiction within “politico-economic dynamics”:

If you like, the contradiction is more one inherent in liberal thought than in reality: if world politics is seen, not as the expression of class and national politico-economic dynamics which have an inner logic of their own, but rather as the result of the decisions of free conscious agents, some of whom are good (us) and some of whom are evil (the enemy, whoever he happens to be), then it is clear that the problem of the evil adversary's sources of power will return again and again with a kind of agonizing and incomprehensible persistence. Like any good American “leftist”, of course, Dick sees the enemy as the American power elite and in particular its nuclear physicists; yet that point of view, as attractive as

of such narratives that show no sign of ceasing, despite their past complicity in colonial domination. One intractable problem is that these critical perspectives often understand such figuration as mere cultural “myth” (in the sense of simple false belief) to be expunged by rational persuasion and falsification.<sup>34</sup> It is often assumed that if only an “objectively accurate” account of the past could be achieved, the problematic ideological residue of such narratives would finally fall away.

However, these approaches fail to grasp the role played by “structural contradiction” in these conceptions of savagery and civilization. This expression belongs to the German theoretical tradition that links Hegel with Marx and describes the relation between a set of categories that, whilst appearing antithetical, display the unsettling tendency to turn “inside out,” as it were, in such a way as to reveal the presence of each in the other, suggesting that, far from being static, stable and independent concepts in a relation of simple opposition, they are in fact integral parts of a single, unified, but internally unstable and self-negating phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> Jameson has recently highlighted the need to move beyond the conceptual model of the “antimony” towards the more dynamic model of “contradiction”:

In fact, to foreground the term “contradiction” is to discover a splendid opportunity to kick the ladder away and to expunge the last traces of that structuralism which offered us a starting point here. For the structuralist perspective always grasps contradiction in the form of the antimony: that is to say, a logical impasse in which thought is paralyzed and can neither move forward nor back, in which an absolute structural limit is reached,

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it may be, remains a prisoner of the same basic contradictions as the liberal ideology it imagines itself to be opposing. (359)

<sup>34</sup> See for example Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968). Fiedler cites Henry Adams and Mark Twain as prominent figures in a tradition that chastises the “primitivism” of national myths such as the Pocahontas legend in terms of “veracity” (81-82).

<sup>35</sup> For an extended discussion of the recent status of contradiction as a fundamental term in the vocabulary of “dialectical” theory, see Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009).

in either thought or reality. This deconcealment of the antimonies at the root of practical or theoretical dilemmas can serve as a powerful instrument of ideological analysis (as in deconstruction), but it should not be confused with that more dynamic and productive act of setting the antimony in motion, that is to say, revealing it to have in reality the form of a contradiction: for it is the unmasking of antimony as contradiction which constitutes truly dialectical thinking as such.<sup>36</sup>

What I intend to demonstrate is such narratives must be understood according to Friedrich Engels' second "law" of the dialectic which expresses the structure of contradiction as the "interpenetration of opposites."<sup>37</sup> I propose that what has been grasped by so many scholars as the "paradox" of the Frontier must instead be grasped as a "dialectical" structure centred around a fundamental contradiction in which the terms "civilization" and "savagery" are set in productive motion by the very dynamic of narrative itself.<sup>38</sup> I propose that it is from this essential structure that this narrative tradition continues to draw its force.

Furthermore, I propose that the significance of this structural contradiction (between "savagery" and "civilization") is to be found in the role that ethnology has played as a stimulus to thought within Western philosophy and its descendent, critical theory.<sup>39</sup> Ethnology refers to the mode of anthropological

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<sup>36</sup> Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Engel, *Dialectics of Nature*, ed. and trans. Clemens Dutt (New York: International publishers, 1940), 26. Quoted in Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> This attempt to grasp the Frontier as a dialectical structure is prefigured by Klein in "Frontier Dialectics," *Frontiers of Historical Imagination* (78-88) and Prats in *Invisible Natives*, see note 24 above.

<sup>39</sup> For surveys of the relation between "philosophy" and "critical theory" see Jon Simons, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Critical Theorists*, ed. Jon Simons, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 1-17; Drew Milne, "Introduction: Criticism and/or Critique," in *Modern Critical Theory: An Anthology of Theorists Writing on Theorists*, ed. Drew Milne (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2003), 1-22; Tim Dant, "Criticism by Theory," in *Critical Social Theory: Culture, Society and Critique* (London: Sage, 2003), 1-16; David M. Rasmussen, "Critical Theory and Philosophy," in *Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. David M. Rasmussen (Oxford:



inquiry that confronts the sheer empirical diversity of forms that human society takes in different times and places. It thereby constitutes one of the most fundamental forms of inquiry into human existence, and one whose mission consists in accounting for cultural and historical difference.<sup>40</sup> By assembling an interpretive mastercode from a sequence of theorists in whose thought ethnology plays a central role, I seek to posit an explanation for the persistence and popularity of such narratives and hope to overcome the tendency in much of the scholarship to become paralyzed before the “ironies,” “paradoxes” and “contradictions” inherent in the poetic preference for the savage order.

In doing so I wish to bring this central, unavoidable and extraordinary form of contradiction— the vexing difficulty of isolating historical “progress” from “regression,” “civilization” from “savagery” and the “Self” from the “Other”— to the fore. It is a contradiction that structures the Hollywood traditions to which I will now turn, but also surely structures our real, lived, social and historical experience. These cinematic narratives appear to crystalize this realization in a shared vocabulary that solicits our attention. In order to grasp the Frontier according to such a philosophical conception of ethnology, I will begin by parsing a visionary cinematic moment drawn from recent Hollywood history.

## 1.2 The Moment of Ethnological Consciousness

The encounter that takes places at the Frontier has been a vital source of plots for Hollywood, which undoubtedly draws upon that “vast lumber room of

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Blackwell, 1996), 11-38; Thomas McCarthy, “On the Idea of a Critical Theory and Its Relation to Philosophy,” in *Critical Theory*, eds. David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1994), 7-30; David Ingram, “The Philosophical Roots of Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory and Philosophy* (St. Paul MN: Paragon House, 1990), 1-28; Stephen Eric Bonner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> See Mike Morris, *Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=1170363>. For Morris the term denotes “the scientific attempt to construct explanations for social and cultural phenomena by the comparative study of different peoples, namely what anthropologists do” (85).

stereotypes and fantasies” which Althusser terms the *ideologique*.<sup>41</sup> It has recently attracted the attention of no less a filmmaker than Terrence Malick, undoubtedly one of the most significant auteurs in the history of American cinema.<sup>42</sup> This content assumes its clearest form in *The New World* (2006). In the opening scene, Malick re-stages the encounter at the heart of the North American colonial project: the luminous spectacle of the arrival of English ships into Chesapeake Bay (see fig. 1). The camera swoops out over the water and a title appears: “Virginia 1607.” The camera tilts upwards and registers three ships bathed in the light of a summer afternoon. The composition and radiant light is reminiscent of the work of the seventeenth century French painter Claude Lorrain (see fig. 2). Malick’s cinematography mimics the arc drawn by the explorer’s compass, elegantly charting colonial geometry upon the Earth’s surface and echoing the montage of period maps that forms the opening title sequence. The angle of the shot gives full expression to the rise of the sails, born aloft, and the parallax of the tracking movement registers the protrusion of the bowsprit. Malick’s spectacle presents the maritime technologies of the Age of Discovery in all their material glory on an historical occasion of profound importance. In this shot, Malick makes clear his intention to draw an entire historical image vocabulary up into the frame and re-articulate it as cinematic spectacle.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted by Fredric Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse (1977),” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. 2, *Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 90.

<sup>42</sup> For extended treatments of Malick’s auteurism see Steven Rybin, *Terrence Malick and The Thought of Film* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Lloyd Michaels, “Terrence Malick: A Cinema in Front of Our Eyes,” in *Terrence Malick* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1-19; Hannah Paterson, “Introduction: Poetic Visions of America,” in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Paterson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1-13. For influential formulations of the filmmaker as “auteur” see Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 565-589; Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 35-45. Malick is a foremost example of an American director that displays what Sarris calls a certain “*élan* of the soul” (43).

Meanwhile, ashore, the indigenous people of the bay, and the spectator, witness the arrival of the colonizer. The camera pans laterally along the bank, surveying the indigenous subjects that move from tree to tree in a forest clearing overlooking the bay. This European glimpse of the “fresh green breast of the New World”<sup>43</sup> is accompanied by a commitment to rendering the moment in which an indigenous subjectivity experiences its own expansion in consciousness as a result of the arrival of beings who appear as if from some other world. It is a profound moment of confrontation and each society will be forever changed by the encounter. In each case, a dawning awareness of the “Other” will bring the old epistemology of the culture of the “Self” up short.<sup>44</sup> The change will, of course, be an irreversible one. In the project at hand, I will seek to show that the type of event that Malick figures in this sequence catalyzes one of the most significant transformations in the history of Western thought or consciousness.

The remainder of Malick’s narrative will be dedicated to re-imagining the narrative phenomenon often called the Pocahontas “myth.”<sup>45</sup> Caught in the indeterminate zone between a national history and mythology, this ur-narrative

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<sup>43</sup> The image directly evokes the iconic image employed by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 140.

<sup>44</sup> The “Other” is broadly defined in postcolonial theory as “anyone who is separate from one’s self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as ‘other’ through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view.” Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 169.

<sup>45</sup> For discussions of the “Pocahontas myth” see Frederic W. Gleach, “Pocahontas: An Exercise in Mythmaking and Marketing,” in *New Perspectives on Native North America: Cultures, Histories and Representations*, eds. Sergei Kan, Pauline Turner Strong and Raymond Fogelson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 433-455; Pauline Turner Strong, “Playing Indian in the Nineties: Pocahontas and *The Indian in the Cupboard*,” in Rollins and O’Connor, *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, 187-205; Fiedler, “The Basic Myths II: Love in the Woods,” in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, 63-83; for a comparative discussion of *The New World* and its precedents see Edward Buscombe, “What’s New in *The New World*?” *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009): 35-40.

inaugurates the entity of the United States by an original, erotic union between two figures, Captain John Smith and the Powhatan “princess” Pocahontas, as representatives of two profoundly different forms of social and cultural existence. It is difficult to conceive of a better starting point than Malick’s audacious vision for examining how this imagined encounter will furnish America’s national ideology with a kind of ultimate conceptual horizon.



Figure 1 *The New World*: The arrival in Chesapeake Bay



Figure 2 Claude Lorraine (Claude Gellée), *The Trojan Women Setting Fire to Their Fleet*, ca. 1643. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 3 *The New World*: The reverse shot of the Powhatan Other

### 1.3 The Study of an Ideologeme

My contention is that the electrifying effect of this passage lies in its recuperation of an original moment of “ethnological” contact. As it is somewhat anachronistic to project the modern categories of the discipline of anthropology (the “science of man”) back upon this encounter, it might be preferable to suggest instead that what we witness here is that radically new kind of event that brings anthropology into historical possibility. Colonial exploration in the Age of Discovery catalyzed new forms of knowledge as European thought was called upon to account for a new object of empirical study: freshly revealed forms of Otherness in the New World.<sup>46</sup>

It is of course true that categories of Otherness can be traced back further in European thought to the Classical World. The Ancient Greeks are understood to have constructed their civic categories of identity around the Otherness of the “barbarian,” the figure which did not speak in the language of the Self.<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche suggests that feudal European society inherited this construction. According to Nietzsche, the “barbarian” is subsumed into the Western ethical tradition which places the figure of the Self in opposition to the Other according

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<sup>46</sup> For detailed accounts of colonial exploration and the emergence of anthropology see John F. Moffitt and Santiago Sebastián, “An Indian Eden Lost,” in *O Brave New People: The European Invention of the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 249-336; David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984); Jayme A. Sokolow, *The Great Encounter: Native Peoples and European Settlers in the Americas, 1492-1800* (Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> See Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989). Hall argues that “the story of the invention of the barbarian is the story of the Greeks’ conflict with the Persians....” (56); Jonathan Hall argues in *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) that “by establishing a stereotypical, generalized image of the exotic, slavish and unintelligible barbarian, Greek identity could be defined ‘from without’, through opposition with this image of alterity” (47); see also Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54.

to a mastercode of “good” and “evil.”<sup>48</sup> The category of the barbarian as “evil Other” was therefore a profoundly ideological vehicle, positively valorizing the identity of the Self, the European, and the “civilized” as “good.”<sup>49</sup>

However, the indigenous inhabitants of the New World were ideologically produced according to a fundamentally distinct category, that of the so-called savage. From the earliest reports, this figure performed a number of contradictory functions in the European imagination. Whilst it was undoubtedly invoked to legitimize certain colonial ideologies (similar to the category of the barbarian), it equally confounded the most fundamental conceptualities of European thought. The apprehension of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas (foremost amongst the peoples encountered around the globe during this period) spurred European thought to unprecedented speculations on the “original” nature of history, society and indeed human existence itself. If the barbarian can be grasped as an ethical construction, the savage can be grasped in a rather different fashion as a *metaphysical* construction— as a catalyst for trying to think man’s collective origins.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Michael A. Scarpitti (London: Penguin Classics, 2013). Nietzsche argues that “the image[s] of the ‘barbarian,’ the ‘evil enemy,’ perhaps of the ‘Goth’ and of the ‘Vandal’” are fused together as an ethical conception of the Other (29).

<sup>49</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002) (hereafter cited in text as *PU*): “To move from Derrida to Nietzsche is to glimpse the possibility of a rather different interpretation of the binary opposition, according to which its positive and negative terms are ultimately assimilated by the mind as a distinction between good and evil. Not metaphysics but ethics is the informing ideology of the binary opposition; and we have forgotten the thrust of Nietzsche’s thought and lost everything scandalous and virulent about it if we cannot understand how it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination” (101). See also Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*: “Finally, the centered narrative subject inevitably posits the ancient ethical binary most famously denounced by Nietzsche: ‘the other characters in the story are sharply divided into good and bad, in defiance of the variety of human characters that are to be observed in real life. The “good” ones are the helpers, while the “bad” ones are the enemies and rivals, of the ego which has become the hero of the story” (46).

<sup>50</sup> I refer to Jameson’s characterization of metaphysics in *Valences of the Dialectic* as the search for “a form of philosophical system... specifically oriented around

In examining how the poetic preference for the savage order persists in the American cultural vocabulary, it is advantageous to re-frame this cultural phenomenon according to Jameson's formulation of the "ideologeme." Jameson suggests that in order to properly grasp the figures that populate our cultural lives it is vital to:

pursue, by means of radical historicization, the "essence," "spirit," "worldview," in question [until it] is revealed to be an ideologeme, that is, a historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a "value system" or "philosophical concept," or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy.<sup>51</sup> (*PU*, 102)

The "ideologeme" thus displays a dual orientation as a unit of analysis. It directs our attention on the one hand towards a textual or narrative form of expression (emerging as a "protonarrative" or "collective fantasy") and an abstract or theoretical form of expression (a "philosophical concept") on the other. It therefore invites an analysis that explicitly mediates between our collective consumption of narrative and philosophy. By populating, inflecting, shaping and vehiculating the spectator's "imaginary relations" to their "real conditions of existence," the ideologeme is also necessarily implicated in the production of

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some basic identity of being which can serve as a grounding or foundational reassurance for thought" (141).

<sup>51</sup> See also *Archaeologies of the Future* in which Jameson offers another characterization of the ideologeme as "a specific narrative unit which in and of itself — in its own formal language— transmits a historical or a social message or meaning. It is a proposition which can be 'verified' by finding the same ideologeme at work in other genres and other media during the same general period. If therefore we are able to detect the presence of this narrative unit at work beneath the different narrative and formal conventions of some of the other sub-genres, then we may feel ourselves on somewhat firmer ground in advancing the hypothesis that such a narrative motif has a certain autonomy of its own and knows a certain independence from any of the individual texts in which it can be discovered..." (322). This characterization has the benefit of drawing attention to the "autonomy" of the narrative unit and the need to isolate and "verify" it across multiple sources.



ideology.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly however, an ideologeme must be grasped as operating around a “conceptual antimony” which generates the narrative and which it is the narrative’s “mission to ‘resolve’” (*PU*, 115). I will propose that narratives of the Frontier, with their tendency to envision a “descent” or “regression” into savagery, represent a collective fantasy system that corresponds to an abstract or philosophical concept that emerges with ethnology. This correspondence may then be grasped as part of a single, larger, and most importantly, historical process.

In order to rewrite the conceptual antimony of the Frontier as a contradiction born in the emergence of ethnology, I will survey some of the most salient films in the history of American cinema (whether that notoriety is measured according to box office, critical esteem, or cultural influence). I will begin in the era of “Classical Hollywood”<sup>53</sup> with the emergence the Western. I will examine how the Hollywood Western, transforming various literary and artistic discourses of the nineteenth century, fundamentally orients the American cinematic imaginary in relation to an “ethnological Other.” Through the narratives generated at this point of historical contact between “savagery” and “civilization,” the genre yields a conflicted and deeply ideological construction: the “Westerner” character type as a prototype of American subjectivity. I will read this manifestation in two of the most classical of American Westerns, John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) and George Stevens’ *Shane* (1953).

In the second chapter, I will turn to the generic innovation known broadly as the “revisionist” Western in which the ideological infrastructure of the classical Western comes in for sustained interrogation.<sup>54</sup> Rather than assess these texts

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<sup>52</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.

<sup>53</sup> See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) for a highly influential discussion of the forms and institutions that characterized Hollywood production from 1917 to 1960.

<sup>54</sup> For two influential discussions of this historical development in the form of the Western see Barry Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” *Film &*

for their ability to redress the historical injustice of ethnocentric representations (as the dominant methodology of post-colonial criticism seeks to do<sup>55</sup>) I will argue that these films preserve a nostalgia for the “Old West” in the “New Hollywood.”<sup>56</sup> Three seminal New Hollywood films will serve as case studies: beginning with Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971), moving through the road iconography of Dennis Hopper’s seminal *Easy Rider* (1969), and ending with Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven* (1978). Following these renewed visions of the American West in the 1960s and 1970s, I will pivot towards an altogether different period of Hollywood history in order to witness the emergence of a strong form of ethnographic nostalgia in Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Finally, I will suggest that the stylistic and ideological transformations wrought upon the “codes” of the Western in these films flow into Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). In this last film, I will argue that the figure of the Westerner is deployed in the service of a deeply provocative ideological task: the “naturalization” of male homosexual desire within the American national imaginary.

In the final chapter, having arrived at recent Hollywood cinema, I will propose that the imagined ethnological encounter (which has been present in the Hollywood vocabulary since the very earliest days of the Western) is re-articulated at a higher level. The three films in this chapter all display an extraordinary desire to reveal the “life world” of an ethnological Other in unprecedented ethnographic detail. I will return to *The New World* as the culmination of Malick’s interest in the condition of American historicity. I will then shift the geographic focus of the analysis from North America to Central America to trace the way in which Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto* (2006) deploys the

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*History* 33, no. 2 (2003): 26-35, and Tag Gallagher, “Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the ‘Evolution’ of the Western,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 262-276.

<sup>55</sup> See note 30 above for examples of this methodological approach.

<sup>56</sup> For influential discussions of the “New Hollywood” see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Techniques* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-10; Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2002), 184-205.

aesthetics of the “action blockbuster” in an ethnographic mode. Finally, James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) will furnish this project with the opportunity to retrace the problematic of ethnographic nostalgia within a new generic context—fantasy-science fiction. *Avatar* appears as the film by which the ideologeme of interest passes from an American national imaginary to a properly global mass consciousness.

I want to suggest that far from being an antiquarian footnote in cultural history, the imagined historical interface that generates the Frontier in the American West persists as an image, a spectacle and a narrative complex in our contemporary cultural vocabulary. Jameson invites us in *The Political Unconscious* to continue the process of inventorying, cataloguing and interrogating the ideologemes that populate this vocabulary (*PU*, 73). It is towards that invitation that the current project is oriented. I will seek to decode the surface manifestations of this cinematic tradition for the deeper operation of an American national “political unconscious” as it confronts its historical circumstances.<sup>57</sup>

In order to account for this poetic preference for the savage, I will now survey a sequence of related philosophical developments. The origin point for the mastercode that I wish to assemble is suggested by that common heuristic device that abounds in the literature— “the noble savage”<sup>58</sup>— which is indelibly linked with the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century Swiss philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This common but ultimately unproductive heuristic device masks a rich vein of conceptual resources that will furnish the current project

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<sup>57</sup> Jameson argues that “The methodological requirement to articulate a text’s fundamental contradiction may then be seen as a test of the completeness of the analysis: this is why, for example, the conventional sociology of literature or culture, which modestly limits itself to the identification of class motifs or values in a given text, and feels that its work is done when it shows how a given artifact ‘reflects’ its social background, is utterly unacceptable” (*PU*, 66).

<sup>58</sup> For an example of the use of this heuristic that fails to articulate its organization around a central structural contradiction see Johnson, “Inventing the Indian: The Noble Savage,” in *Hunger for the Wild: America’s Obsession with the Untamed West*, 94-99; see also Prats, *Invisible Natives*, 163-164; Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 136-150.

with the tools to decode this narrative tradition that displays a certain longing for the life world of the ethnological Other.

#### 1.4 Rousseau and the Emergence of Ethnology

The attempt to locate the origin of ethnology in Western thought might begin at a number of points. If the exercise is limited to properly “philosophical” texts, Montaigne offers a vivid and provocative account of cultural difference in his essay *On Cannibals* (1580).<sup>59</sup> Alternatively, the category of the “savage” also appears in the work of both Thomas Hobbes<sup>60</sup> and John Locke.<sup>61</sup> If the scope is widened, it is possible find proto-ethnological observations in texts from the early days of the settlement of North America.<sup>62</sup> To take one example, Robert Beverly observed in *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) that the indigenous inhabitants of the continent had not been:

...debauch'd nor corrupted with those Pomps and Vanities, which had depraved and inslaved the Rest of Mankind; neither their Hands harden'd by Labour, nor their Minds corrupted by the Desire of hoarding up Treasure: They were without Boundaries to their Land; and without

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<sup>59</sup> Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” in *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. E. J. Trechmann, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), 202-214.

<sup>60</sup> See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The category is implicit in Thomas Hobbes’ infamous diagnosis of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a state in which “men live without a common power to keep them all in war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.” Hobbes continues noting that “the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner...” (84-85).

<sup>61</sup> See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). The category is implicit in Locke’s theory that “in the beginning all the World was America...” (319). See Herman Lebovics, “The Uses of America in Locke’s Second Treatise of Government,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 4 (1986): 567-581; Ronald L. Meeks, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), 37; Jimmy Casas Klausen, “Room Enough: America, Natural Liberty, and Consent in Locke’s Second Treatise,” *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007): 760-769.

<sup>62</sup> For an account of the early colonial period see Pearce, “Part 1: Antecedents and Origins, 1609-1777,” in *Savagism and Civilization*, 1-49.

Property in Cattle; and seem'd to have escaped, or rather not to have been concern'd in the first Curse, Of getting their Bread by the Sweat of their Brows: For, by their Pleasure alone, they supplied all their Necessities; namely, by Fishing, Fowling and Hunting; Skins being their only Cloathing; and these two, Five Sixths of the Year thrown by: Living without Labour, and only gathering the Fruits of the Earth when ripe, or fit for use: Neither fearing present Want, nor dolicitous for the Future, but daily finding sufficient afresh for the Subsistence.<sup>63</sup>

In this passage it is possible to detect many of the thematics that will come to confound European thought as it confronts cultural difference. But it is not until Rousseau's famous and incendiary essay of 1755, the "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (or Second Discourse),"<sup>64</sup> that such proto-anthropological observations are marshaled into a coherent critical program which displays an awareness of its observational standpoint, and in which ethnological observation of the Other becomes a tool for unveiling the historical specificity of the culture of the Self. I therefore begin with the oeuvre of Rousseau because, as will shortly become clear, it is through this figure that the observation of the ethnological Other or "savage" becomes central to thinking the nature of "civilization."

Rousseau's intellectual project, which concurrently partakes of the great intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment and is the first to critique them,<sup>65</sup> was vast and complex. In his attack on the so-called "author function,"

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Marx, *The Machine and the Garden*, 77.

<sup>64</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men or Second Discourse," in *Rousseau: The Discourse and other early political writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-222 (hereafter cited in text as *SD*).

<sup>65</sup> See Asher Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Horowitz notes that Rousseau's work displays a "complex dialectical structure: it begins to form a pattern aimed at supplanting the philosophy of history of the Enlightenment without retreating from all the achievements of the Enlightenment" (89). See also Roland Barthes, "The Last Happy Writer," in *Critical Essays* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 83-89. If Voltaire was the "last happy writer," as Barthes suggested,

Foucault reserved the title of “founder of discursivity” for those theorists who produce the “possibilities and rules for the formation of other texts” and nominates Marx and Freud to assume this privileged position.<sup>66</sup> It is undoubtedly a high threshold to meet. However Horowitz argues that the ambit of Rousseau’s project was indeed comparable to that of his more influential successors.<sup>67</sup> If this is the case, Rousseau then represents something like a “founder of discursivity” in that certain innovations within his work helped bring the intellectual revolutions of the nineteenth century into historical and conceptual possibility. The innovation that I wish to bring to the fore here is Rousseau’s attempt to imagine a properly anthropological account of human development, what Horowitz calls his speculative “historical anthropology.”<sup>68</sup> As a result of this method, the *Second Discourse* belongs to that privileged handful of texts which radically revise the dominant narrative of human history.

Composed for an annual essay competition held by the Academy of Dijon, Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* scandalized the intellectual climate of mid-eighteenth century Europe. Originally viewed as a *philosophe* by his intellectual compatriots, the *Second Discourse* ruptured the relationship between Rousseau and his peers by calling the official ideology of this transformation into question.<sup>69</sup> In order to address the competition’s official question (“What is the origin of inequality among men, and whether it is authorized by the natural Law”) Rousseau set himself a preparatory task, to offer a speculative account of

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Rousseau must presumably have been the “first unhappy writer.” He undoubtedly displayed the “tragic spirit” (85) that Barthes argued Voltaire lacked and Barthes confirms that the “anti-Voltaire is indeed Rousseau” (89).  
<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion and trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1998), 217-218.

<sup>67</sup> Horowitz argues in *Rousseau, Nature and History* that “Rousseau discovered even more territory than that more fully explored by Kant, Hegel and Marx” (12).

<sup>68</sup> See “Rousseau’s Historical Anthropology,” in Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 50-85.

<sup>69</sup> For discussions of the relationship between Rousseau and the *philosophes* see Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Robert Wokler, “The Enlightenment Hostilities of Voltaire and Rousseau,” in *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, eds. Robert Wokler and Bryan Garsten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 80-87.

the emergence of “civilization” from a hypothetical “state of nature” (a well-established philosophical exercise in the Early Modern period). In doing so, Rousseau followed the path established by the British political philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, whose own accounts of the emergence of “civilization” from “savagery” stood, at the time, as dominant philosophical narratives.<sup>70</sup> However, whilst for Hobbes especially the “state of nature” was negatively valorized as a form of human immiseration to be transcended, for Rousseau the speculation carries a certain positive charge. The proposition was scandalous. Voltaire, for instance, is famously said to have observed of Rousseau’s essay that “never has so much intelligence been expended in the attempt to turn us back into brutes.”<sup>71</sup>

Rousseau preempts the inevitable theological protests that his narrative will elicit and asserts that in this speculative historical anthropology, the “facts” are of little significance. In a startlingly contradictory manoeuvre, Rousseau asserts that the issue of whether “Man” ever existed in this “state of nature” is an inessential consideration:

Man having received some lights and Precepts immediately from God was not himself in that state, and that, if the Writings of Moses are granted credence owed them by every Christian Philosopher, it has to be denied that, even before the Flood, Men were ever in the pure state of Nature, unless they relapsed into it by some extraordinary Occurrence: a Paradox most embarrassing to defend, and altogether impossible to prove. (*SD*, 132)

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<sup>70</sup> For more detailed comparative discussions of the relationship between the state of nature in Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke (and how the latter two differ) see Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 52, 116-117; Allan Bloom, “Introduction,” in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 5; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 188.

<sup>71</sup> Voltaire to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 30 August 1755, on the website of the Voltaire Society of America, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.whitman.edu/VSA/letters/8.30.1755.html>.

Having cleared this productive new form of epistemological terrain, which is at once speculative and hypothetical yet apparently historical and anthropological, by “setting aside all the facts” (*SD*, 132), Rousseau commences his narrative. Whilst he follows Hobbes and Locke in searching for a “state of nature,” he contentiously claims that none of his forebears have yet found it. Hobbes and Locke merely “spoke of Savage Man but depicted Civil man” (*SD*, 132) and in doing so, inadvertently installed contemporary psychologies of “need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride” (*SD*, 132) as immutable, ontological conditions.<sup>72</sup> Instead, Rousseau reveals in the Exordium of his treatise his intention to re-write the narrative of human history:

Here is your history such as I believed I read it, not in the Books by your kind, who are liars, but in Nature, which never lies. Everything that will have come from it, will be true: Nothing will be false but what I will unintentionally have introduced from my own. The times of which I speak are very remote: How much you have changed from what you were! It is, so to speak, the life of your species that I will describe to you in terms of the qualities you received, which your education and your habits could not destroy. (*SD*, 133)

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<sup>72</sup> See Jameson, “Rousseau and Contradiction,” in *Valences of the Dialectic*, 303-314. For Jameson this is indeed the momentous discovery of the distinction between synchrony and diachrony and as a result, the dialectic itself:

So Rousseau was not only the impossible founder of structuralism; he was the equally impossible founder of the dialectic itself. He was not only the discoverer of the tension between synchrony and diachrony; he also stumbled upon the necessity of the dialectic which is rooted in the historicity of language itself... But it would be enough to return to the *Second Discourse* to observe the same dialectical lucidity at work in his frequent identifications of anachronism in the language of his philosophical opponents. What can the word ‘misery’ mean, when applied to the state of nature? He responds to Hobbes; ‘explain to me what the word *oppression* means’ in such a state, he adds; and finally, how could the words ‘power’ and ‘reputation’ have any significance for those people you call ‘savages’? This is the other face of the opposition between the synchronic and diachronic; it reflects the secret historicity of this apparently historical and antihistorical opposition— the history revealed by the inapplicability of the elements of our own synchronicity, our own historical system, to a radically different one. (313)



Already in the opening passages, Rousseau's historical model of subjectivity seeks to coordinate an archaic, inner, "natural" heritage ("qualities you received") that stands in an antagonistic relation to an outer, cultural and "acquired" modification of being ("education and habits"). The critical gesture governing Part One of the *Second Discourse* then consists of "stripping this Being of all the supernatural gifts he may have received" (SD, 134) to reveal a radical conception of an inner condition of *natural* man. It is essential to be clear here about the hypothetical model proposed as the "first embryo of the species" (SD, 134) for the question clouds the debate. For Rousseau, "natural man" (or man in the "state of nature") is imagined as a pre-social, pre-linguistic and pre-historical being living alone in the primordial forest, only coming into contact with others sporadically to satisfy bodily, as opposed to social, needs (namely reproduction).<sup>73</sup>

At this point, Rousseau imagines no systematic differentiation between the needs and desires that shape being, behavior and experience. There is no imagination that projects futurity. This form of being, not yet recognizably constituted as human, is animated by a single, uncontested drive— a sense of "natural" care for the wellbeing of the Self that Rousseau calls *amour de soi* (it is in contrast to this instinct that Rousseau diagnoses an alternate sense of care for the Self, *amour propre*, which he theorizes as an inauthentic and historically stimulated regard for the Self through the eyes of others<sup>74</sup>). In this condition, there is no division of labour, no symbolic communication, no economy, no coercive relations nor domination. It is then by the institution of language that

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<sup>73</sup> See Horowitz's account of the narrative in "Rousseau's Historical Anthropology," in *Rousseau, Nature, and History*, 50-85.

<sup>74</sup> For Rousseau's discussion of these terms see Note XV [1] of the *Second Discourse*: "*Amour propre* [vanity] and *Amour de soi-meme* [self-love], two very different passions in their nature their effects, should not be confused. Self-love is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to attend to its self-preservation and which, guided in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour propre* is only a relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do one another, and is the genuine source of honor" (SD, 218).

social relations are properly constituted and by this development man is ushered into the state of historical sociality. Rousseau devotes a significant passage to hypothesizing the emergence of language here, and this thought experiment is further developed in the “Essay on the Origin of Languages.”<sup>75</sup> Finally, Rousseau offers a profound and startling speculation in this passage: that the experience of death anxiety is a *historical* phenomenon. Prior to this passage, “natural man” entertains no conceptuality of death, which is rather “one of man’s first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition.” Death and its “terrors” are, for Rousseau, born of the social and cultural order, which is the order of imagination.<sup>76</sup>

Having acquired language through some extraordinary (quite literally “unthinkable”<sup>77</sup>) event, natural man has now become recognizably human. It is this second civilizational phase of Rousseau’s narrative— the historical climate of savagery— that yields important speculations for the following analyses. Rousseau draws the attention of the reader to the sheer fact of human diversity, a fact revealed by colonial exploration.<sup>78</sup> But it is the indigenous peoples of the

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<sup>75</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” in *Rousseau: The Discourse and other early political writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 247-299. Rousseau’s theorization of the emergence of language has been of profound scholarly interest. See for example the discussion of Paul DeMan’s reading of Rousseau in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 219-259; see also Derrida, “Genesis and Structure of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*,” in *Of Grammatology*, 165-268.

<sup>76</sup> Rousseau argues that “the only good he knows in the Universe are food, a female, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain, and hunger; I say pain, and not death; for an animal will never know what it is to die, and the knowledge of death, and of its terrors, is one of man’s first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition” (*SD*, 142).

<sup>77</sup> Jameson argues in “Rousseau and Contradiction” in *Valences of the Dialectic*: “Indeed, the greatness of Rousseau lies precisely in this, to drive his thought on until it reaches that ultimate limit which is the contradiction, what is incompatible and ultimately unthinkable” (312).

<sup>78</sup> In Note X [11] Rousseau performs a proto-ethnological survey of global peoples:

... the whole earth is covered with Nations of which we know only the names, and yet we pretend to judge mankind! Let us suppose a Montesquieu, a Buffon, a Diderot, a Duclos, a d’Alembert, a Condillac, or

Americas that are of particular interest.<sup>79</sup> This speculative historical “phase” meets famously with Rousseau’s qualified approval (the source of the “noble savage” heuristic). For Rousseau, colonial observations in the Age of Discovery have apparently revealed a startling fact: in this climate, human consciousness does not appear to suffer from the crippling antagonisms that characterize “civilized” man:

Thus, although men now had less endurance, and natural pity had already undergone some attenuation, this period in the development of human faculties, occupying a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our *amour propre*, must have been the happiest and the most lasting epoch. The more one reflects on it, the more

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men of that stamp, traveling with a view to instruct their compatriots, observing and describing as they do so well, Turkey, Egypt, Barbary, the Empire of Morocco, Guinea, the lands of the Bantus, the interior and the East coasts of Africa, the Lamabars, Mongolia, the banks of the Ganges, the Kingdoms of Siam, Pegu and Ava, China, Tartary, and above all Japan: then, in the other Hemisphere, Mexico, Peru, Chile, the Lands [around the Straits] of Magellan, without forgetting the Patagonians, true or false, Tucumán, Paraguay if possible Brazil, finally the Caribbean, Florida, and all the Wild regions, this being the most important voyage of all and the one that should be undertaken with the greatest care; let us suppose that on their return from these memorable travels, these new Hercules set down at leisure the natural, moral and political history of what they had seen, then we would ourselves see a new world issue from their pen, and would thus learn to know our own...(SD, 211).

See also Note VI [2]:

The reports of travelers are filled with examples of the strength and vigor of men from the barbarous and Savage Nations; they scarcely praise their skill and agility any less, and since it takes only eyes to observe these things, there is no reason not to trust what eyewitnesses report on this score. I draw some examples at random from the first books that come to hand. (SD, 194).

<sup>79</sup> Rousseau begins to survey alternate socio-cultural orders from the abstract ground of the “State of Nature”: “the Caribs, which of all existing Peoples has so far deviated least from the state of Nature, are in fact also the most peaceful in their loves and the least given to jealousy, even though they live in a scorching Climate which always seems to rouse these passions to greater activity...” (SD, 156).

one finds that this state was the least subject to revolutions, the best for man, and that he must have left it only by some fatal accident which, for the sake of the common utility, should never have occurred. The example of the Savages, almost all who have been found at this point, seems to confirm that Mankind was made always to remain in it, that this state is the genuine youth of the World, and that all subsequent progress has been so many steps in appearance toward the perfection of the individual, and in effect toward the decrepitude of the species.

So long as men were content with their rustic huts, so long as they confined themselves to sewing their clothes of skins with thorns or fish bones, to adorning themselves with feathers and shells, to painting their bodies different colours, to perfecting or embellishing their bows and arrows, to carving a few fishing Canoes or a few crude Musical instruments with sharp stones; In a word, so long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good and happy as far as they could by their Nature be, and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another; but the moment one man needed the help of another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling Fields that had to be watered with the sweat of man, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests. (*SD*, 167)

Rousseau's final speculation is that:

...the Savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment. (*SD*, 187)

To live “within one’s self” (to know what Derrida will call “self presence”) now corresponds to a unique historical privilege: the experience of a precious, originary form of existence characterized by an essential congruity between the internal, psychic experience of subjectivity (“consciousness”) and the outer historical, social and material conditions of collective human life (“society”).

Rousseau’s speculations are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the narrative of this historical anthropology is organized around a sequence of turning points by which human existence is transformed irrevocably. Rousseau hypothesizes a sequence of putative points at which fundamental forms of diremption, disruption, or estrangement occur, either within the individual being or within the social collective. These are taken to account for the institution of original forms of “alienation” in human consciousness (Rousseau employs the term “fatal accident”).<sup>80</sup> Following Derrida, I will refer to these as “*scandalon*”<sup>81</sup> (a term borrowed from biblical hermeneutics). However, this is not to suggest that these historical hypotheses are immediately reducible to the Christian doctrines of the “fall of man” or “original sin,” as Rousseau will seek a historical

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<sup>80</sup> The history of the term “alienation” is long and most commonly associated with the Marxist tradition, but I employ it here in relation to Rousseau following Horowitz, for whom it is a productive category of analysis in *Rousseau, Nature and History* (32); see also Andrew Biro, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Modernity and the Historicization of Alienation,” in *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 59-82.

<sup>81</sup> This term, drawn from biblical hermeneutics, appears in Derrida’s reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida characterizes it as “the dangerous supplement, which Rousseau also calls a ‘fatal advantage,’ [which] is properly *seductive*; it leads desire away from the good path, makes it err far from natural ways, guides it toward its loss or fall and therefore it is a sort of lapse or scandal (*scandalon*). It thus destroys Nature” (151). Jameson offers his own characterization of this fundamental break in *Valences of the Dialectic* in which Rousseau aims “to isolate, identify, and make dramatically visible not so much a fundamental Event as a fundamental change. That change can also be said to be the beginning of history, or, what is for Rousseau the same thing, the beginning of civilization: the beginning of something which, for him, and for Lévi-Strauss following him, had accidental causes and need never have happened in the first place” (303).

rather than supernatural logic to account for such moments of fundamental diremption.

Secondly, Rousseau incorporates that relatively new form of historical experience which we would now call “ethnological” observation into Western philosophy. It is this development that I propose to call “ethnological consciousness.”<sup>82</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss will take this moment to be the founding of the discipline of ethnology itself.<sup>83</sup> What I suggest we witness properly emerging in Rousseau is the use of ethnology as a conceptual guarantor for the speculative tendencies that characterize critical theory by throwing the historical specificity of any particular form of human existence into high relief. It is the apprehension of the radical Difference of an ethnological Other that stimulates thought about society, history and being. In other words, the sheer fact of the ethnological Other constitutes a vivid empirical form of argument that lived human experience is not everywhere the same. This observation stimulates in turn a related speculation: if it has been radically different in other places and at other times, it may be radically different again in the future. As we will come to see, ethnological observation nourishes hypothetical thought about the collective future.

Thirdly, an entire conceptual vocabulary of “origins” begins to crystalize here in which the climate of savagery displays a dual character. On the one hand, it is an imagined internal, psychic condition. In the “happiness” and “independent dealings” of the savage state the twin psychic forces of *amour de soi* and *amour propre* appear to retain some form of balance. In this sense, as Horowitz argues, the “savage supplies a prototype, in the immediacy of his psychic life, of human

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<sup>82</sup> Jameson notes in *Postmodernism* that “the discovery of older, radically different modes of production in the Americas and Tahiti” is one of the “new historical realities” that stimulated Rousseau’s exercise in the “Age of Reason” (222).

<sup>83</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man,” in *Structural Anthropology 2*, trans. Monique Layton (London: Penguin, 1973), 33-43 (hereafter cited in text as *JF*).

happiness.”<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, it is a social condition in which “equality” broadly obtains in the structure of society, and extreme forms of domination have yet to emerge as the experience of “slavery” and “misery.” It is this dual psycho-social orientation that allows the state of savagery to be imagined as an alternate climate in which subjectivity feels itself to be “at home.”

The third and fourth phases in Rousseau’s narrative usher man out of the savage order and into the “barbaric,” and later “civic,” orders by two important technological innovations:

Metallurgy and agriculture were the two arts the invention of which brought about this great revolution. For the Poet it is gold and silver; but for the Philosopher it is iron and wheat that civilized men, and ruined Mankind. Indeed, both were unknown to the Savages of America who have therefore remained such; even other Peoples seem to have remained Barbarians as long as they engaged in one of these Arts without the other; and perhaps one of the best reasons why Europe had political order, if not earlier then at least more continuously and better than the other parts of the world, is that it is both the most abundant in iron and the most fertile in wheat. (*SD*, 168)

Where the order of the barbarian appears to know one or other of these technological *scandalon*— either the use of metals or farming practices— the order of “civic” man knows both. This narrative then projects a certain bifurcation between American historicity and European historicity within a global narrative of civilizational “development.” In this narrative, the Americas, prior to colonization, knew only “savagery” as distinct from the Eurasian landmass with its European “civic” man and its “barbarian” Others to the East.

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<sup>84</sup> Note that this is an “original pattern” and “not an ideal” according to Horowitz in *Rousseau, Nature, and History*: “Rousseau’s ideal of human happiness— as it will be encountered in *Emile*— is a dialectical return to the psychic equilibrium of the savage, but after the limitations of savage existence have been overcome, a return that incorporates the extension of the human spirit developed in history” (131).

Finally, the sequence of historical *scandalon* culminates in the institution of private property as the material foundation of social domination:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say this is mine, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this impostor; You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the Earth no one's. (*SD*, 161)

It is then upon the basis of these accumulated *scandalon* that a form of society corresponding to the Hobbesian vision of savagery as *bellum omnium contra omnes* ("the war of all against all"<sup>85</sup>) can emerge:

Nascent Society gave way to the most horrible state of war: Humankind, debased and devastated, no longer able to turn back or to renounce its wretched acquisitions, and working only to its shame by the abuse of the faculties that do it honour, brought itself to the brink of ruin. (*SD*, 172)

Having arrived at a point of agreement with Hobbes, Rousseau can agree that the worst effects of these historical transformations necessitate a "social contract." It is from this conclusion that *The Social Contract* offers new prescriptions for nationhood and civic subjectivity in the "Age of Revolution."<sup>86</sup> The social contract is proposed as an ameliorating political device for a collective life that suffers from such "fatal acquisitions." But there is ultimately no prescription for "return" and Claude Lévi-Strauss argues Voltaire was incorrect to read into the *Second Discourse* such a program.<sup>87</sup> It is this "other" Rousseau, the social contractarian,

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<sup>85</sup> See note 60 above.

<sup>86</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

<sup>87</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1976), 512. Also see Note IX [14] in which Rousseau pre-empts his critics and asks: "What, then? Must Societies be



that is better known to political philosophy today. However, I will argue that the insights contained within this passage of the *Second Discourse* are equally momentous for intellectual history. This was deeply apparent to Lévi-Strauss, amongst the greatest of twentieth century anthropologists, for whom the *Second Discourse* represents the very birth of ethnology, a “whole century” prior to its emergence as a distinct scholarly discipline:

Rousseau did not restrict himself to anticipating ethnology: he founded it. First, in a practical way, by writing the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*, which poses the problem of the relation between nature and culture and in which one can see the first treatise of general ethnology. Next, on the theoretical plane by distinguishing, with admirable clarity and concision, the proper object of the ethnologist from that of the moralist and the historian. (*JF*, 35)<sup>88</sup>

From Rousseau onwards, ethnological observation could serve as a means by which the scandalous contradiction at the heart of the modernity’s treasured ideology of “progress” could be revealed. Viewed from a certain angle, it was apparent that civilization’s progress inverted somewhat inexorably into “decrepitude.” The two antithetical categories could not be held stable as distinct and separate historical phenomena. With this insight, Rousseau inaugurated a textual function whereby an imagined anthropological past could kindle a new sense of historicity and moreover, offer critical and existential standards by which the present may be indicted.<sup>89</sup> Rousseau dialectically inverted Hobbes’ vision of savagery as human immiseration such that speculative visions of

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destroyed, thine and mine annihilated, and men return to live in forests with the Bears? A conclusion in the style of my adversaries, which I would rather anticipate than leave them the shame of drawing it” (*SD*, 203).

<sup>88</sup> For another discussion of Rousseau’s significance for anthropology see Robert Wokler, “Perfectible Apes in Decadent Cultures: Rousseau’s Anthropology Revisited” in *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, eds. Robert Wokler and Bryan Garsten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1-28.

<sup>89</sup> Horowitz notes in *Rousseau, Nature and History* that “the scientific study of human variability has for Rousseau a primarily critical and negative value” (49).

alternate ethnological life worlds could become tools for diagnosing the ills of European “civilization” as it entered into new forms of modernity.

### 1.5 A New *Nostos*

Rousseau’s speculative historical anthropology (as a new “metanarrative” of human history) had the effect of imagining the state of savagery (and critically *not* the state of nature) as a new *nostos* or metaphysical form of “home” for human subjectivity.<sup>90</sup> It contained the startling proposition that the social forms of the deep human past might in fact have been superior to those of the present insofar as they accommodated human consciousness. They appear as structures within which consciousness feels itself to “belong” and the alienations of history appear measurably reduced (the past appears “homely” or “*heimlich*” as German philosophy would phrase it<sup>91</sup>). Where the Bible had served as the unimpeachable

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<sup>90</sup> The term “nostalgia” is well known to derive from the ancient Greek terms *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain). The conventional reference point for this characterization of philosophy is Novalis’ aphorism that “Philosophy is actually homesickness— the *urge to be everywhere at home*” (135). See Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). This aphorism is cited by György Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971) who adds “that is why philosophy, as a form of life or as that which determines the form and supplies the content of literary creation, is always the symptom of the rift between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed” (29). For a history of philosophy as nostalgia see Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012); Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Jeff Malpas, “Philosophy’s Nostalgia,” in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 161-176; Michael Janover, “Nostalgias,” *Critical Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2000): 113-133.

<sup>91</sup> See Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2004). Blickle offers a formulation of the notion of “*Heimat*” (or “home”) that pervades German philosophy as “the selectively idealized memory of the past” (28). He notes “the idea of *Heimat* in the modern sense and the works of Rousseau begin to appear at about the same time in German intellectual life” and argues that Rousseau’s thought is a precursor to the development of the notion of *Heimat* in German Idealism, noting that from 1762, Rousseau’s expression “*son pays*” in *Émile* was translated into German as “*Heimat*” (53).

European metanarrative of the human “species” prior to the Enlightenment, Rousseau conjectured an anthropological narrative to account for human subjectivity. Now it has been objected that this narrative merely transcribes the Genesis narrative from Christian theology into the alternative “code” of an emergent anthropology.<sup>92</sup> To be sure, there are indeed echoes between the two (Derrida suggests that “Rousseau naturalizes the Biblical accident: he makes a natural accident of the Fall” (*OG*, 260)). But the narratives differ in at least this singular and critical distinction: the *scandalon* of the Christian “fall of man” proposes that the institution of alienation is *transcendent* in nature and effect. In other words, man, as existing in time, space and history, is permanently denied access to a realm of restitution by the agency of God. The *scandalon* which purges subjectivity from an Edenic world without alienation is the institution of sin, indeed moral consciousness itself. The promise of any “reunification” of a fragmented subjectivity is then deferred to a non-worldly zone in the conventional figuration of “Heaven” and the afterlife.

However, where critical thought was somewhat strategically foreclosed under such a religious doctrine, Rousseau’s narrative denied the existence of such a transcendent relationship between history and alienation. No longer did the *scandalon* of original sin impose an absolute regime of alienated consciousness.<sup>93</sup> Rousseau’s transgression of a certain fundamental element of Christian theology

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<sup>92</sup> Elsewhere in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida falls into the problematic pattern of reading Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss as perpetuating the “onto-theology” of the Genesis narrative:

A fatal accident which is nothing but history itself. Not that, by this more or less overt reference to the idea of a fall into evil from the innocence of the word, Lévi-Strauss makes this classical and implicit theology his own. It is just that his anthropological discourse is produced through concepts, schemata, and values that are, systematically and genealogically, accomplices of this theology and metaphysics. (135)

Jameson however argues in *Postmodernism* that “it is clearly incorrect to attribute to Rousseau any univocal (and thus quasireligious) vision of this Fall, or any single form of causality or determination” (223).

<sup>93</sup> Horowitz argues in *Rousseau, Nature, and History* that “in opposition to the Christian myth of a transcendent heavenly community, Rousseau asserts the possibility of a truly egalitarian political community in history” (45).

opened up the possibility that alienation, at least to a certain degree, is socio-historical in nature. The *scandalon* that populate this metanarrative were no longer external to human society and consciousness, they were instead economic and social in origin. The relationship between consciousness and alienation was reconceived as *immanent* rather than transcendent, to be explained without reference to supernatural or divine intervention.<sup>94</sup> Upon this basis it became possible to conjecture a hypothetical “return” from alienation or what Adorno called *Versöhnung* (“reconciliation”), a “reunification” of subjectivity which Jameson characterizes as a “historical moment of completion or plenitude.”<sup>95</sup> To be sure, Jameson hastens to add that the “projection” of such a possibility into “historical chronology” may result in “metaphysical nostalgia” for the “blissful state of primitive man,”<sup>96</sup> but it is precisely the nostalgic projection of such a

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<sup>94</sup> See Horowitz’s analysis of Lionel Gossman’s position that “any real overcoming of the predicament that Rousseau diagnosed in modern European civilization must take place within history, not as a flight to a transcendent reality, whether religious or philosophical,” quoted in *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 28-30.

<sup>95</sup> This term appears repeatedly in Adorno’s oeuvre. See for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 381; *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 41 and 45.

<sup>96</sup> Jameson argues in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) that:

We are thus led little by little to reflect on the connection between such a dialectical vision of historical change, in which the various moments are articulated according to the various possible relationships between subject and object, and some hypothesis of a historical moment of plenitude or completion against which the other historical stages are judged and weighed. Such a moment is of course first and foremost nothing but a logical possibility: the concept of what Adorno calls *Versöhnung* or reconciliation between subjectivity and objectivity, between existence and the world, the individual consciousness and the external network of things and institutions into which it first emerges. The naïve projection of such a logical possibility into the realm of historical chronology can only result in metaphysical nostalgia (the golden age before the fall, the blissful state of primitive man) or in Utopianism. Yet in some subtle fashion, all so-called “theories of history” tend to organize themselves around the covert hypothesis of just such a moment of plenitude: think of Jeffersonian America or the “unity of sensibility” of the Metaphysical poets; of the humaneness of medieval economic doctrine or of the organic continuity of an *ancien regime*

vision that is of interest here. This fundamental Rousseauist gesture of employing a speculative form of the past to yield a hypothetical vision of the future will become extremely contentious in the ensuing theoretical debates.

## **1.6 Rousseau and the Critical Canon: Marx and Alienation**

Rousseau's scandalous historical speculative anthropology profoundly shaped later developments in European intellectual history. It is therefore necessary to establish a sequence of conceptual affinities whereby questions catalyzed by Rousseau's project find later development. I intend to build a "mastercode" by which to interpret the content of the films under discussion. Although Rousseau's claim on our attention today may seem tenuous, Lévi-Strauss' exhorts us to retrieve a sense of the degree to which his project was a provocative stimulus for thought:

We must not see in this [Rousseau's biography] the manifestation of a timid will, giving a quest for wisdom as pretext for its abdication. Rousseau's contemporaries were not deceived and his successors even less. The former perceived that this proud thinking, this solitary and wounded existence, radiated a subversive force the likes of which no society had yet felt. His successors made his thought and the example of his life the levers with which to shake ethics, law, and society. (*JF*, 40)

Lévi-Strauss' observation highlights the fact that Rousseau's theoretical legacy persists in the work of two such "successors" that appear closer and more salient to our own time: Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. The essential feature of this affinity that I wish to highlight is that both Marx and Freud will construct their metanarrative of human history according to an archaic temporality that is now inflected by Rousseau's speculative historical anthropology. This is the sense in which I propose that Rousseau's "ethnological consciousness" is a vital precursor

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unsullied by regicide or by the hubris of political self-determination; not to speak of the innumerable ideological exploitations of ancient Greece. (38)

to what Jameson calls the “Copernican revolution in thought” of the nineteenth century or the realization that “thought” is not “master in its own house,” a discovery essential to the critical tradition.<sup>97</sup>

However, there is another more methodological imperative behind turning towards these traditions. Rousseau does not offer the critic any “hermeneutic” or interpretive paradigm for grasping the given form or significance of a cultural object. In fact, he displays a certain hostility to “artifice,” representation and mimesis in cultural life in his scant writings on the theatre.<sup>98</sup> Rousseau is cited here rather as the source of a certain philosophical content or “raw material” as it comes into historical possibility (something I have already suggested takes the form of Jameson’s *ideologeme*). So it is to the traditions of textual interpretation generated by Marx and Freud that I will turn to gather what Jameson calls “mediatory codes.”<sup>99</sup> Mediator codes (or “mediations”) are those

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<sup>97</sup> Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 317-318. Horowitz argues in *Rousseau, Nature, and History* that “there is implicit in Rousseau’s writings an attack on the narcissistic Western evaluation of the self as a potentially transcendent rational ego, as radical in its implications as that which was to issue from Darwin to Freud” (33).

<sup>98</sup> For a discussion of Rousseau’s hostility to representation see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 304.

<sup>99</sup> Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious* (25) that:

Mediations are thus a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life (the separation, in other words, of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the gap between daily life and the practice of the academic disciplines) is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis. Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. The realm of separation, of fragmentation, of the explosion of codes and the multiplicity of disciplines is merely the reality of the appearance: it exists, as Hegel would put it, not so much in itself as rather for us, as the basic logic and fundamental law of our daily life and existential experience in late capitalism. The appeal to some ultimate underlying unity of the various “levels” is therefore a merely formal and

conceptualities that will allow the following analysis to “transcode” between the realm of film narrative and the philosophical realm of “Rousseauist discourse.” This critical gesture is then of profound importance according to Jameson, as it is a symbolic occasion for overcoming “the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life” (*PU*, 25). As will shortly become clear, it is by making such “connections,” by attempting to grasp a dynamic relationship between the realm of historical, lived, sociological reality and the realm of text, narrative and art, that the critic can attempt to overcome that strategic dismemberment of the various “zones” of human existence that Marxist criticism designates by the term reification.<sup>100</sup>

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau posits a number of historical developments (the increasing necessity of collective labour, the emergence of agriculture and metallurgy, and most dramatically the institution of private property) which foreshadow Marx in trying to account for man’s alienation by reference to economic and social organization.<sup>101</sup> The correspondence was apparently not lost on Engels who stated:

we find not only a sequence of ideas [in the *Second Discourse*] which corresponds exactly with the sequence developed in Marx’s *Capital*, but that the correspondence extends also to details, Rousseau using a whole series of the same dialectical developments as Marx used: processes in which their nature are antagonistic, contain a contradiction, are the

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empty one, except insofar as it supplies the rationale and philosophical justification for that more concrete and local practice of mediations with which we are here concerned.

<sup>100</sup> For a canonical discussion of reification in Marxian thought see György Lukács, “The Phenomenon of Reification,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 83-110. I employ the term here following Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* in which it functions as the central Marxian mediatory code (*PU*, 214).

<sup>101</sup> For an extended analysis of this category in Marx’s thought see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

transformation of one extreme into its opposite; and finally, as the kernel of the whole process, the negation of the negation.<sup>102</sup>

However the relationship between Marx and Rousseau is difficult to substantiate by direct reference in Marx's writing.<sup>103</sup> Levine, for example, argues that Marx's early writings display "an obvious, though largely unacknowledged, debt to Rousseau's moral vision of the world, a profound conceptual affinity."<sup>104</sup> The issue turns significantly on the degree to which Rousseau was able to grasp a relation between "nature" and "history" in the Marxian sense.<sup>105</sup> Horowitz notes the general Marxian position on Rousseau that, at the time he was writing (the mid-eighteenth century) "the development of capitalist relations of production is considered... to have not yet sufficiently matured to allow such an achievement [the accurate perception of history as animated by the dynamics of class struggle]."<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, Horowitz disagrees and reads in Rousseau's

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 5-6.

<sup>103</sup> For a broader discussion of the relationship see Galvano Della Volpe, *Rousseau and Marx*, trans. John Fraser (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978); Robert Wokler, "Rousseau and Marx," in *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, eds. Robert Wokler and Bryan Garsten, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 214-232.

<sup>104</sup> Horowitz cites Andrew Levine, *The Politics of Autonomy: A Kantian Reading of Rousseau's Social Contract* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), vii. According to Horowitz in *Rousseau, Nature and History*, "Levine indicates that this affinity rests largely on Rousseau's attempt in the *Social Contract* to overcome the alienation of man's essence, moral autonomy, which alienation, however, Rousseau understood as a historical product of social relations" (5). Horowitz also cites Lucio Colletti, "Introduction," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, by Karl Marx, ed. Quentin Hoare (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 9-56 (21).

<sup>105</sup> Jameson famously argues in *The Political Unconscious* that history retains an "ultimate philosophical and methodological priority" over the other competing mastercodes of textual interpretation that are available to us (5).

<sup>106</sup> Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature, and History*, 21. Lukács, for example, argues in *History and Class Consciousness* that in the eighteenth century "the 'receding of natural limits' was already starting to reduce everything to the social level and the reified relations of capitalism *without yielding the possibility of a clear insight into the situation*. For the contemporary state of knowledge made it impossible to look behind the two concepts of nature created by capitalism, viz. nature as the 'sum of the laws of nature' (the nature of modern mathematical science) and nature as a mood, as the model for a humanity 'ruined' by society (the nature of Rousseau and the Kantian ethic) and to glimpse their social unity, namely



historical anthropology the “first turnings” to history as “the contradictory unfolding of human nature... based upon the evolutionary necessity of social labour.”<sup>107</sup> Barthes concurs, arguing that Rousseau “set history moving again” after its hypostatization in the time of Voltaire.<sup>108</sup>

In any event, certain conceptual affinities are clear. The first line of affinity is that Rousseau’s proto-ethnological speculations functioned as an intellectual precursor to Marx’s formulation of the category of the “mode of production.” Jameson cites Ronald L. Meek’s thesis that Rousseau’s speculative historical anthropology combined with a number of other theoretical paradigms in the eighteenth century to become the “four stages theory” in which human history “knows four essential transformations: hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce.”<sup>109</sup> This theory will then be developed further into Marx’s classical historical schema of the modes of production “whose various forms are conventionally enumerated as follows: hunting and gathering (primitive communism or the horde), Neolithic agriculture (or the gens), the Asiatic mode of production (or so-called oriental despotism), the polis, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism.”<sup>110</sup> In the following analyses I will argue that the American West must be grasped as a narrative theatre in which two modes of production as “total synchronic structures”<sup>111</sup> meet, where alternate historical life worlds are figured cinematically as distinct modes of production.

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capitalist society with its dissolution of every natural bond” (237, emphasis added).

<sup>107</sup> Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 46.

<sup>108</sup> Barthes, “The Last Happy Writer,” 89.

<sup>109</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 403-405 and Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>110</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Marxism and Historicism (1979),” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. 2, *Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 172.

<sup>111</sup> Jameson states in “Marxism and Historicism” that “Marxism also proposes a master code, but it is not, as is commonly thought, either that of economics or production in the narrow sense, but rather that very different category which is the ‘mode of production’ itself... For the moment, suffice it to say that the concept of a mode of production projects a total synchronic structure” (149).

The second line of affinity is that Rousseau's ethnological speculations carry a certain "Utopian" charge.<sup>112</sup> Jameson argues in an extended discussion of the history of Utopian thought that:

the next development in Utopian form [in the eighteenth century]...is enabled by geographical exploration and the resultant travel narratives, which combine with philosophical materialism to produce a new and geographical experience of the enclave, in which new information about tribal societies and their well-nigh Utopian dignity are conjoined with Montesquieu's climatological determinism. The exotic travel narrative, along with Rousseau's near-Utopian fantasies about closed spaces such as Poland or Corsica, develops on into various influential post-Utopian ideologies: most directly into the primitivism revived by Lévi-Strauss and renewed study of primitive communism or tribal society...<sup>113</sup>

The thought of Rousseau, and its ethnological dimension (the search for an origin of human existence) specifically, allows for radical new forms of speculation on the *historical* relation between the subject and the object. Indeed it projects an imagined form of being in which subject and object are not yet organized in a

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<sup>112</sup> I employ this term, itself contentious and charged with profound implications, as it developed in Jameson's Marxist theory following Ernst Bloch's "utopian impulse" (see Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)). Jameson argues in "Marxism and Historicism" that the "originality of the Marxist position" lies in "the anticipatory expression of a future society, or, in the terms of our discussion above, the partisan commitment to that future or Utopian mode of production which seeks to emerge from the hegemonic mode of production of our own present. This is the final reason why Marxism is not, in the current sense, a 'place of truth,' why its subjects are not centered in some possession of dogma, but are rather very precisely historically decentered; only the Utopian future is a place of truth in this sense, and the privilege of contemporary life and of the present lies not in its possession, but at best in the rigorous judgment it may be felt to pass on us" (176). Horowitz concurs with the characterization of Rousseau's thought as Utopian in *Rousseau, Nature and History*, arguing that "current radicalism, Marxian and non-Marxian, has something valuable to rediscover in this 'petit-bourgeois' neurotic, not merely a theorist of democratic movements but a utopian political philosopher with a powerful vision of 'what nature permits the species to become'" (7).

<sup>113</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 18.

relation of intensifying antagonism. This imagined moment is then Utopian in the sense that the subject and object retain a certain “unity” and the subject enjoys a sense of “plenitude” or “completion.”

Thirdly, Rousseau, as the origin of a new ideology of nature, offers Marx what Jameson calls a “naturistic strategy” in which sociological analysis or diagnosis “draws its force from a rhetoric of the natural and unnatural”:

There is indeed a powerful tradition of what I will call the “naturistic strategy” in Marxism itself, one going back as far as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*; with their emphasis on a species being, these works argue, if not for a fixed and immutable human nature in the right-wing sense, then certainly for judgments based on a notion of human potential, of which they demonstrate the contemporary alienation.<sup>114</sup>

This is the first of many reminders that any figuration (or ideology) of nature must never be itself understood as “natural” or ahistorical and immutable. Rather, it must be understood as produced relative to a historically determinate “situation.” A similar historical insight can be found in Lukács who “saw in Rousseau’s concept of nature a radical departure from the bourgeois concept of nature.”<sup>115</sup> This departure takes the form of rejecting the older conception of nature as an immutable “formal system of laws governing phenomena.” Instead, Rousseau posits a new conceptuality that “concentrates increasingly on the feeling that social institutions (reification) strip man of his human essence and that the more culture and civilization (i.e. capitalism and reification) take possession of him, the less he is able to be a human being.”<sup>116</sup> The significance of this departure is that Rousseau may be cited as the origin point for theories in which “nature becomes the repository of all the inner tendencies opposing the

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<sup>114</sup> Fredric Jameson, “The Ideology of the Text (1975-76/86),” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. 1, *Situation of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 63.

<sup>115</sup> Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 21.

<sup>116</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 136.

growth of mechanization, dehumanization and reification” under capitalism and which exalt “that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more.”<sup>117</sup> Thus for Lukács, the longing for a “return to nature” (Rousseau’s “mood” in the words of Lukács) must be grasped as a longing for an alternate, collective, and non-alienating system of social relations. It is therefore at least partly on the basis of Rousseau’s speculations that Marx is able to go further, and radically historicize the division of labour as a social source of alienation.

It is therefore possible, in light of this conceptual affinity, to find subtly “Rousseauist” positions in Marx’s writing, in which his analysis is inflected by proto-ethnological observations. Once again it is argued that older forms of human existence displayed a certain “homely” quality<sup>118</sup>:

We have said above that man is regressing to the cave dwelling, etc.— but that he is regressing to it in an estranged, malignant form. The savage in the cave— a natural element which freely offers itself for his use and protection— feels himself no more a stranger, or rather feels himself to be just as much at home as a fish in water. But the cellar dwelling of the poor man is a hostile dwelling, “an alien, restraining power which gives itself up to him in so far as he gives up his blood and sweat”— a dwelling which he cannot regard as his own home where he might at last exclaim, “Here I am at home,” but where instead he finds himself in someone else’s house, in the house of a stranger who daily lies in wait for him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent. He is also aware of the contrast in quality between his dwelling and a human dwelling— a residence in that other world, the heaven of wealth.<sup>119</sup>

As in Rousseau, the point of the invocation of the savage and the recourse to the past as the source of existential standards by which the present may be indicted,

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<sup>117</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 136

<sup>118</sup> See note 91 above.

<sup>119</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 109-110.

is decidedly not to advocate “return” but rather to reveal the historicity of alienating forms of material existence in the present in order to begin speculating upon a Utopian future.

### 1.7 Freud’s Historical Development of the Psyche

Where the relationship between Rousseau and Marx furnishes the current project with certain social and economic codes, the turn to Freud will furnish the analysis with codes for grasping the psychic climate beyond the Frontier. My contention is that Rousseau’s schema of inner psychosexual development (including the psychic *scandalon* such as the predominance of *amour propre* over *amour de soi*<sup>120</sup>) is a precursor for the development of what Marcuse calls Freud’s late “metapsychology,” his grand hypothetical narrative of human psychic life across the transpersonal journey of history from its archaic origins to its present state.<sup>121</sup> Once again, a direct lineage between Rousseau’s work and that of Freud is somewhat difficult to establish in the documentary record, but is no less apparent in spirit.<sup>122</sup> For Horowitz, the essential affinity lies in Freud’s pessimistic ratification of Rousseau’s insight that “progress in civilization has inextricably meant an increase in mental suffering.”<sup>123</sup> This becomes clearest in Freud’s late work *Civilization and Its Discontents*,<sup>124</sup> which can be grasped as an attempt to re-write *The Second Discourse*. Just as the new historical realities of ethnological contact were a precursor to Marx’s theorization of the mode of production, in this work Freud explicitly refers to the role that ethnological observation has played in the historicization of psychic alienation:

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<sup>120</sup> See note 74 above.

<sup>121</sup> Marcuse’s defines Freud’s metapsychology as “his late theory of the instincts, his reconstruction of the prehistory of mankind” (*EC*, 6).

<sup>122</sup> For a broader discussion of the relationship between Freud and Rousseau see Joel Schwartz, “Rousseau and Freud on Sexuality and Its Discontents,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 87-109.

<sup>123</sup> Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 6. See also Gad Horowitz, *Repression: Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich, Marcuse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 154.

<sup>124</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1930).

The earlier of the last two historical developments [necessary for the emergence of an attitude of “hostility” towards civilization] was when, as a result of the voyages of discovery, men came into contact with primitive peoples and races. To the Europeans, who failed to observe them carefully and misunderstood what they saw, these people seemed to lead simple, happy lives— wanting for nothing— such as the travellers who visited them, with all their superior culture, were unable to achieve. Later experience has corrected this opinion on many points; in several instances the ease of life was due to the bounty of nature and the possibilities of ready satisfaction for the great human needs, but it was erroneously attributed to the absence of the complicated conditions of civilization.<sup>125</sup>

Freud is the first of the authors surveyed here to suggest that this ethnographer’s nostalgia and its attribution of a fundamental model of human happiness to the “primitive” state is in fact an illusion created by the improper perception of such societies from the outside, a notion developed later on in the thought of post-structuralism.

The first line of affinity that I wish to distil from Freudian thought is what Marcuse calls the “phylogenetic” and “ontogenetic” narratives of human history. Marcuse argues that in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

Freud’s analysis of the development of the repressive mental apparatus proceeds on two levels:

- A) Ontogenetic: the growth of the repressed individual from early infancy to his conscious societal existence.
- B) Phylogenetic: the growth of the repressive civilization from the primal horde to the fully constituted civilized state.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 45.

<sup>126</sup> Herbert Marcuse employs this term in *Eros and Civilization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 20 (hereafter cited in text as *EC*).

In Freud's scheme, each narrative is punctuated by certain traumas in which an earlier form of psyche meets the resistance of empirical, historical reality and must learn the necessity of repression, a sense of mastery over the instincts of the "pleasure principle."<sup>127</sup> The development of the individual thus re-enacts the "great traumatic events of the development of the genus" (EC, 20). For Freud, this is the process by which man learns to live with the repression necessary for the formation of civilization. Marcuse adds a certain historical gloss to this: it is also the process by which the psyche is "trained for alienation at its roots" under capitalism (EC, 47). I argue that Freud's diagnosis of "discontent" with civilization is now predicated upon Rousseau's speculative historical anthropology. It too tries to grasp the contradictory relationship between "civilization" and "progress" (which can no longer be assumed to correspond in any simple, proportionate fashion) by reference to a metanarrative of human history anchored by a speculative historical anthropology. Moreover, these two narratives (of the individual and of the species) are coordinated and interrelated, such that the biological life of the individual recapitulates the collective history of the species.<sup>128</sup> In this scheme, the child and the savage appear to correspond as the earlier forms of the individual and the species respectively in which the "reality principle" (that part of the psyche which learns to defer gratification into the future and reconcile the psyche to a sense of lack in the present<sup>129</sup>) has not

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<sup>127</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1969). Freud argues the "the pleasure principle stands in contradistinction to the reality principle as designating the psychic drive towards reduction in the 'tensions of instinctual needs' experienced as pleasure" (55).

<sup>128</sup> Marcuse observes in *Eros and Civilization* that "the two levels are continually interrelated. This interrelation is epitomized in Freud's notion of the return of the repressed in history: the individual re-experiences and re-enacts the great traumatic events in the development of the genus, and the instinctual dynamic reflects throughout the conflict between individual and genus (between particular and universal) as well as the various solutions of the conflict" (20).

<sup>129</sup> Freud argues in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* that "in this way [by way of conscious thought] the ego comes to a decision on whether the attempt to obtain satisfaction is to be carried out or postponed or whether it may not be necessary for the demand by the instinct to be suppressed altogether as being dangerous" (56).

yet “completed” its work. From a certain point of view, the psychic climate of the earlier state then appears preferable in each case.

Upon the basis of this dual narrative, Freud’s thought also contains a certain “naturistic strategy.” In each case, Freud posits an inner, “primitive” Self (broadly corresponding to the id and the “instinct” of the pleasure principle<sup>130</sup>) that continues to exist in permanent structural antagonism to an outer, “developed” Self governed by the reality principle and social norms (corresponding broadly to the ego and the supervisory function of the superego).<sup>131</sup> The crucial point is that even in “civilized man,” this archaic, inner Self continues to issue its demands. The memory of an archaic experience of gratification (grasped as an individual memory of childhood or a collective memory of prehistory or “savagery”) remains “unterminated” (EC, 15). However in this historical climate, such “inner” and “natural” demands are relegated to the level of the unconscious, from which they may contest the dominance of the reality principle as “the return of the repressed.” This quick sketch of Freud’s late metapsychology opens onto what Jameson calls “a genuine metaphysic, at its most resonant and attractive in its most extreme and grandiose versions... rich with death and the archaic, with its vision of the immortal struggle between Eros and Thanatos” (PU, 52). In this metaphysic, the dynamics of this internal psychic struggle play out on a transhistorical scale.

There is another, related sense in which Rousseau pre-empts the Freudian discovery of the essential opacity of the Self, the realization that the underpinnings of consciousness are not available to lucid thought in any clear or

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<sup>130</sup> In Freud’s classical topology of the psyche, the Id is that subconscious “reservoir of energy that the other parts of the psychical apparatus draw on but must contain” (242). See Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241-2.

<sup>131</sup> Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “the primitive type” (14), and the “early stages” (20) of the psyche persist, suggesting that the “primitive roots of the personality, [are] still unfettered by civilizing influences, and so become a source of antagonism to culture” (60).



simple fashion.<sup>132</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, the ethnological “situation” which isolates the Self from its social context (the apprehension of alien forms of human subjectivity in a remote place) throws the historical and contingent nature of the Self into high relief:

Paraphrasing Rousseau, the ethnographer could exclaim as he first sets eyes on his chosen savages, “Here they are then, unknown strangers, non-beings to me, since I wished it so! And I, detached from them and from everything, what am I? This is what I must find out first.” (*FS*, 36)

In attempting to grasp an empirical form of Otherness, the Self discovers its own essentially divided nature, anticipating the “famous formula ‘I is another.’”<sup>133</sup> This discovery of the social and historical alienation of the Self from itself (that “our language, our thought, our very concept of selfhood” do not originate with us but are “formed by the categories imposed by society”<sup>134</sup>) then generates the form of the confession<sup>135</sup>:

...in ethnographic experience the observer apprehends himself as his own instrument of observation. Clearly, he must learn to know himself, to obtain, from a self who reveals himself as another to the I who uses him, an evaluation which will become an integral part of the observation of the other selves. Every ethnographic career finds its principle in “confessions,” written or untold. (*JF*, 36).

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<sup>132</sup> For a variety of perspectives on Rousseau’s discovery of the “opacity” of the self see Timothy O’Hagan, ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Sources of the Self* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1997). O’Hagan argues that “Rousseau is one of the first and most powerful critics of the myth of ‘man’s glassy essence’” (vii).

<sup>133</sup> Lévi-Strauss argues that “Rousseau, by so eloquently speaking of himself in the third person... anticipates the famous formula ‘I is another.’ Ethnographic experience must establish this formula before proceeding to its demonstration: that the other is an I.” (*JF*, 37)

<sup>134</sup> T. M. Luhrmann, “Our Master, Our Brother: Lévi-Strauss’s Debt to Rousseau,” *Cultural Anthropology* 5, no. 4 (1990): 405.

<sup>135</sup> For a further discussion of Rousseau’s use of this form see Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau’s Confessions* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

This discovery then foreshadows Freud's later speculations as to whether conscious thought is indeed "sovereign" in the mind.<sup>136</sup> This revelation has the effect of calling into question the integrity of a unified subject, or the Cartesian "cogito."<sup>137</sup> What I will attempt to show in the ensuing narratives is that the dialectical dynamic here identified by Lévi-Strauss in the ethnological encounter (the "interpenetration" of the Self and the Other) will be played out at the level of narrative and fantasy. There will be an increasing tendency to unmask the Self as a form of historically alienated Other, whilst the Other will come to offer a metaphysically recuperated form of Self.

## 1.8 Marcuse's Utopian Speculations

Freud's late metapsychology undergoes a significant transformation in the work of Marcuse in which the focus of critique shifts from a relatively nebulous conception of "civilization" to a more specific historical diagnosis of capitalism as a mode of production. It has been noted that Marcuse's attempted grand synthesis of the Marxian and Freudian projects displays an extraordinary affinity with Rousseau's project.<sup>138</sup> Marcuse elaborates a system in which the alienations

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<sup>136</sup> Lévi-Strauss notes this is a "surprising truth" that emerges in the work of Rousseau "before psychology and ethnology made us more familiar with it." (*JF*, 37)

<sup>137</sup> Lévi-Strauss notes that "it is veritably the end of the *Cogito* which Rousseau proclaims in putting forward his bold solution" (*JF*, 38), and Horowitz concurs that "Lévi-Strauss is essentially correct in pointing out that Rousseau is attempting a radical overthrow of the philosophical tradition and proclaiming an 'end to the Cogito'" in *Rousseau, Nature and History*, 65 n27.

<sup>138</sup> I here follow Horowitz in *Rousseau, Nature and History* in linking Rousseau's project with Marcuse. Horowitz mounts a spirited defense of the value of Rousseau's legacy in these terms:

If there is a thinker who has resurrected the Rousseauan project it is Marcuse. In *Eros and Civilization* the utopian project of the lifting of excessive denaturation is conceived of once again, as the abolition of surplus repression and as a concrete possibility. Yet this project is not the exclusive burden of a particular class. Where Marcuse does see the possibility of a rupture in the order of domination is in the reassertion of its rights of the non-rational— in imagination, myth, fantasy. When Rousseau says that it is an impossibility to love the golden age, we must suspect him of falsehood, for his whole art was directed at making it

of the psyche on the one hand, and the instrumentalization of the body as a tool of alienated labour on the other, are unified under the regime of the “performance principle” that lies at the heart of capitalism.<sup>139</sup> Marcuse ratifies Rousseau’s original speculation that the evidence for the historicity of alienation or repression lies in ethnological observation. The discipline of anthropology is now formally deployed as a tool of critique. Consider for example this invocation of the work of Margaret Mead, for whom the world of the Arapesh people carries a certain Utopian charge:

In psychoanalytic literature, the development of libidinal work relations is usually attributed to a “general maternal attitude as the dominant trend of culture” (Roheim). Consequently, it is considered as a feature of primitive societies rather than as a possibility of mature civilization. Margaret Mead’s interpretation of Arapesh culture is entirely focused on this attitude:

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possible for men to love the golden age. Those who have condemned Rousseau for the socially and psychically regressive qualities in his work have never been able to see that the regression that led in his personal life to neurosis and to the denial of time, history, and society was still and always under the control of reason, that it was always, in his theoretical works, a regression in the service of the ego and of civilization. They have never been able to see that his condemnation of the rationality of domination and his defense of instinct were in reality the highest praise possible of reason itself. For reason in Rousseau’s eyes is not, in the final analysis, equated with repression and domination. (252)

Jameson argues similarly in “The Ideology of the Text” that it is in the work of Marcuse that the “naturistic strategy” of Marxism might be most strongly developed, that “there are signs, particularly in the work of Herbert Marcuse, that in our own peculiarly antinatural society, the concept of nature may once again recover some of its negative and critical virulence as an offensive weapon and a Utopian standard” (63).

<sup>139</sup> Marcuse uses this expression repeatedly in *Eros and Civilization* as that coercive power associated with capitalist society in which “happiness must be subordinated to the discipline of work as fulltime occupation, to the discipline of monogamic reproduction, to the established system of law and order. The methodical sacrifice of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially useful activities and expressions, is culture” (*EC*, 3).

To the Arapesh, the world is a garden that must be tilled, not for one's self, not in pride and boasting, not for hoarding and usury, but that the yams and the dogs and the pigs and most of all the children may grow. From this whole attitude flow many of the other Arapesh traits, the lack of conflict between the old and the young, the lack of any expectation of jealousy or envy, the emphasis upon co-operation. (Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*).

Foremost in this description appears the fundamentally different experience of the world: nature is taken, not as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a "garden" which can grow while making human beings grow. It is the attitude that experiences man and nature as joined in a non-repressive and still functioning order. (*EC*, 215)

Here again, Rousseauist ethnological observation functions in the work of Marcuse to rebuke and indict the present, the climate of capitalism and Western civilization as the culture of reference, the culture of the Self. It provides a vocabulary for envisioning a "non-repressive and still functioning order."

Moreover, Marcuse develops with force and clarity a vitally important Freudian mediatory code for the present purposes, the role of "phantasy" in the psychic life of the individual and the collective.<sup>140</sup> Phantasy for Marcuse can be grasped as that archaic psychic function and register dedicated obstinately to the "pleasure principle," which seeks to escape the gravitational pull and censoring function of the reality principle.<sup>141</sup> It is the vestigial part of the psyche that

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<sup>140</sup> Marcuse employs the alternate spelling of "fantasy" in order to place an accent on its role as a psychic, aesthetic or narrative structure by which Desire, which experiences dissatisfaction in reality, projects an imaginary scenario of fulfillment or satiation. See Buchanan, *Dictionary of Critical Theory* for a brief account of "fantasy" as an "imaginary staging of unconscious desire" (164).

<sup>141</sup> Marcuse argues that "only one mode of thought-activity is 'split off' from the new organization of the mental apparatus and remains free from the rule of the reality principle: phantasy is 'protected from cultural alterations' and stays

refuses to “bow” before the “performance principle” (*EC*, 160). Based upon the Freudian theory that the psyche recalls the prehistoric past of the species, Marcuse offers the radical proposition that this vision constitutes a privileged form of content—the memory of an archaic past that precedes the “historicization” of the psyche (as it encounters new and radically different forms of empirical reality throughout human history). This archaic past is characterized by an “original unity”:

However, phantasy (imagination) retains the structure and tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, prior to its becoming an “individual” set off against other individuals. And by the same token, like the id to which it remains committed, imagination preserves the “memory” of the subhistorical past, when the life of the individual was the life of the genus, the image of the immediate unity between the universal and the particular under the rule of the pleasure principle. In contrast, the entire subsequent history of man is characterized by the destruction of this original unity... (*EC*, 142)

Furthermore, civilization’s regimes of repression and domination (increasingly internalized by the introjection of the repressive mechanisms within the psyche) fails to extinguish the “dream” of a non-repressive order, which I will suggest finds a somewhat distorted historical expression in our own time through an ethnological vocabulary. The protestation of the repressive apparatus takes the form of tabooed and regressive images of a “rediscovered past” (*EC*, 19). Moreover, the psychic function of this phantasy yields the content of “art” (as the highest category of cultural production) which has the function of expressing a symbolics of the pleasure principle. Marcuse grasps the subversive implications of the fact that “the culture of the performance principle makes its bow before the strange truths which imagination keeps alive in folklore and fairy tale, in literature and art...” (*EC*, 160). In this way, art contains, and insulates, the archaic and archetypal images of Utopian freedom from the order of repression:

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committed to the pleasure principle. Otherwise, the mental apparatus is effectively subordinated to the reality principle.” (*EC*, 14)

Art is perhaps the most visible “return of the repressed,” not only on the individual but also on the generic-historical level. The artistic imagination shapes the “unconscious” memory of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed. Under the rule of the performance principle, art opposes to institutionalized repression the “image of man as a free subject; but in a state of unfreedom art can sustain the image of freedom only in the negation of the unfreedom.” Since the awakening of the consciousness of freedom, there is no genuine work of art that does not reveal the archetypal content: the negation of the unfreedom.<sup>142</sup> (*EC*, 143)

Lastly, Marcuse’s central role in the current study is confirmed by a final insight. Ethnographic nostalgia has been the subject of theoretical anxiety and denigration when it is falsely assumed to posit a naïve belief in a simple “return to nature” in the form of a wholesale abdication of the entire historically developed apparatus of civilization. But Marcuse instead draws our attention to perhaps the central contradiction of this nostalgia: speculations on the deep *past* of human history invert dialectically into speculations about the possibility of a non-repressive Utopian future, or what Marcuse calls “cultural maturity” (*EC*, 160).<sup>143</sup> Marcuse states that “such a hypothetical state [a non-repressive society]

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<sup>142</sup> Adorno offers another perspective from the Frankfurt School in *Aesthetic Theory* that seeks to retrieve the phantasy content of art from such defamatory charges of “escapism”:

Part of the responsibility for this philistinism is the devotion of psychoanalysis to the reality principle: Whatever refuses to obey this principle is always merely “escape”; adaptation to reality becomes the *summum bonum*. Yet reality provides too many legitimate reasons for fleeing it for the impulse to be met by the indignation of an ideology sworn to harmony: on psychological grounds alone, art is more legitimate than psychology acknowledges. True, imagination is escape, but not exclusively so: What transcends the reality principle toward something superior is always also part of what is beneath it; to point a taunting finger at it is malicious. (11)

<sup>143</sup> In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson finds this logic at work also in Althusser’s interpretation of eighteenth century intellectual history:

could be reasonably assumed at two points, which lie at the opposite poles of the vicissitudes of the instincts: one would be located at the primitive beginnings of history, the other at its most mature stage" (EC, 151). This offers an explanation for the scholarly defamation of so-called "neo-primitivism" in which the positing of alternate ethnological orders is dismissed as mere wish-fulfillment, unrealistic, fanciful, fantastic, infantile and the like. Marcuse's linkage of cultural maturity with philosophical meditations on an archaic past offers us a way of grasping this vocabulary as a truly Utopian one, but which nevertheless must appear in a disguised or distorted form. It is a vision that tries to grasp fleetingly that state Marcuse calls the "logos of gratification" (EC, 112-115). This is that historical state in which the "opposition between man and nature, subject and object, is overcome. Being is experienced as gratification, which unites man and nature so that the fulfillment of man is at the same time the fulfillment, without violence, of nature" (EC, 166). Thus speculations that were already implicit in Rousseau's historical anthropology find an extraordinary re-affirmation in Marcuse's Utopian project.

### 1.9 Lévi-Strauss and Derrida: The Structuralist Turn

The final zone of theory that I wish to survey is that of structuralism and its critics. The significance of Rousseau for Lévi-Strauss' project is well known.<sup>144</sup> Lévi-Strauss states in *Totemism* that "the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [the *Second Discourse*] is without doubt the first anthropological treatise in French literature. In almost modern terms, Rousseau poses the central problem of anthropology, viz., the passage from nature to

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Louis Althusser comments thus upon the various seventeenth and eighteenth century hypotheses about the origins of society: "The various characteristics of the state of nature serve alternately to account for man's reasons for evolving out of it, and to hint at the features of the society of the future and ideal human relations in general. Paradoxically it is this state, bereft of any type of social relationship whatsoever, which contains within itself and figures forth in advance the ideal of a society yet to be achieved. The end of history is inscribed in its very origins." (87)

<sup>144</sup> See Luhrmann, "Our Master, Our Brother: Lévi-Strauss's Debt to Rousseau."

culture.”<sup>145</sup> But the affinity runs deeper than this theoretical premise, as Lévi-Strauss makes clear in *Tristes Tropiques*<sup>146</sup> and “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man.”<sup>147</sup> In an extraordinary passage of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss gives his qualified approval to Rousseau’s essential argument that it is towards the state of savagery (that “happy mean” in human history which is both linguistic and historical, and which Lévi-Strauss recodes as “neolithic”) that we should look to in order to conceive of a Utopian society.<sup>148</sup> He argues that the neolithic period is “most instructive” for building a “theoretical model”<sup>149</sup> of a “society fit to live”<sup>150</sup> (which has not yet occurred and remains “outside time and place”<sup>151</sup>). It is in this passage that Lévi-Strauss gives us a more complex way of grasping ethnological observation as a Utopian enterprise. Lévi-Strauss insists that Rousseau “never fell into Diderot’s error of idealizing natural man”<sup>152</sup> (recalling that natural man is the prelinguistic and prehistoric being in the

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<sup>145</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin Press, 1964), 99.

<sup>146</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1976), 511-515.

<sup>147</sup> See note 83 above.

<sup>148</sup> See Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*:

Rousseau never fell into Diderot’s error of idealizing natural man. He is never in any danger of confusing the natural state with the social state; he knows that the latter is inherent in man, but that it leads to evils; the only problem is to discover whether these evils are themselves inherent in the social state. This means looking beyond abuses and crimes to find the unshakable basis of human society.

To this quest, anthropological comparison can contribute in two ways. It shows that the basis is not to be discovered in our civilization: of all known societies ours is no doubt the one most remote from it. At the same time, by bringing out the characteristics common to a majority of human societies, it helps us to postulate a type, of which no society is a faithful realization, but which indicates the direction the investigation ought to follow. Rousseau thought that the way of life now known as the neolithic offered the nearest approach to an experimental representation of the type. One may, or may not, agree with him. I am rather inclined to believe he was right. (512).

<sup>149</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 513.

<sup>150</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 515.

<sup>151</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 514.

<sup>152</sup> See note 148 above.



speculative historical anthropology). His vision was not the simple “revelation of a Utopian state of nature or the discovery of the perfect society in the depths of the forest.”<sup>153</sup> It was rather the expansion and enhancement of our ability to imaginatively conceive of such a “theoretical model” *through ethnology* that is of essential import. In other words, the imagined life world of the ethnological Other may function as a distorted and figurative vision of a Utopian existence which cannot be grasped or imagined directly. It is in this affirmation that Lévi-Strauss appears most strongly the “heir” to Rousseau’s “theoretical affect.”<sup>154</sup>

For Jacques Derrida, however, such an exercise is mired in grave error. The correction that he proposes is to sever European thought from the intellectual moorings provided by Rousseau in the turn towards post-structuralism. In “Sign, Structure and Play, in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,”<sup>155</sup> Derrida begins by identifying the locus of his attack: the structuralist project, he argues, aims to stabilize two of the most fundamental categories of thought— “nature” and “culture.”<sup>156</sup> But the category of nature appears, for Derrida, as yet another mystifying link in a historical sequence of categories which serve as the transcendental polarity opposed to everything which emanates from man as

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<sup>153</sup> See Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*: “The study of these savages leads to something other than the revelation of a Utopian state of nature or the discovery of the perfect society in the depths of the forest; it helps us to build a theoretical model of human society, which does not correspond to any observable reality, but with the aid of which we may succeed in distinguishing between ‘what is primordial and what is artificial in man’s present nature and in obtaining a good knowledge of a state which no longer exists, which has perhaps never existed, and which will probably never exist in the future, but of which it is nevertheless essential to have a sound conception in order to pass valid judgement on our present state’” (513-514).

<sup>154</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 105.

<sup>155</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278-293

<sup>156</sup> Derrida observes in “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” that in the oeuvres of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss “that belongs to nature which is universal and spontaneous, not depending on any particular culture or on any determinate norm. That belongs to culture, on the other hand, which depends on a system of norms regulating society and is therefore capable of varying from one social structure to another. These two definitions are of the traditional type” (283).

provisional, compromised, always-already fragmented and alienated.<sup>157</sup> Rousseau's conception of nature now finds its place in the "history of metaphysics" and unconsciously perpetuates a philosophical model of being which designates a transcendent "centre" as a "constant of presence"<sup>158</sup> (I follow Jameson here who parses Derrida's use of the term "metaphysics" as the philosophical attempt to discern "some basic identity of being which can serve as a grounding or foundational reassurance for thought"<sup>159</sup>). By isolating this "metaphysic," Derrida crystalizes the unique charge that Rousseau's thought carries and which I have tried to illustrate here: Rousseau comes to stand for the search for a lost originary unity, a fullness of human existence that is somehow precluded to us in our own fragmented, historical and partial lives (a state famously glimpsed only momentarily by Rousseau and which he described as the sheer *sentiment d'existence* in the Second Walk of the *Reveries*<sup>160</sup>). For Derrida, it

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<sup>157</sup> Derrida argues in "Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" that this conceptuality "has been passed on to us by a whole historical chain which opposes 'nature' to the law, to education, to art, to technics, and also to liberty, to the arbitrary, to history, to society, to the mind, and so on" (283).

<sup>158</sup> Derrida, "Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences," 279.

<sup>159</sup> Jameson notes in *Valences of the Dialectic* that "Derrida's reserves about Marx, and even more strongly about the various Marxisms, all turn very specifically on this point, namely the illicit development of this or that Marxism, or even this or that argument of Marx himself, in the direction of what he calls ontology, that is to say, a form of the philosophical system (or of metaphysics) specifically oriented around some basic identity of being which can serve as a grounding or foundational reassurance for thought" (141).

<sup>160</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Russell Goulbourne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14. Lévi-Strauss parses the issue in these terms:

We know of a minute in the life of Rousseau— a second, perhaps— whose significance in his eyes, in spite of its tenuousness, orders all the rest. It explains why at the end of his life it is that moment which obsesses him, which he lingers to describe in his last work, and to which, in his random walks, he comes back constantly. What is it, though, but a commonplace recovery of consciousness after a fall and a fainting spell? But the feeling of existing is "precious" beyond all others, undoubtedly because it is so rare and debatable. "I felt as if I was filling with my light existence all the objects which I perceived... I had no distinct notion of my person... I felt in my being a ravishing calm to which, every time I recall it, I find nothing comparable in the whole experience of known pleasures." This famous text of the Second Walk is echoed in a passage from the Seventh Walk,

is then this metaphysic that, for better or worse, “encourages the subject...in the belief that, no matter what his own fragmentary experience, somewhere absolute plenitude exists.”<sup>161</sup>

Ethnology is deeply implicated in this substitution as, according to Derrida, it enjoys a “privileged place” in the history of development of the human sciences.<sup>162</sup> It tries to project just such a metaphysical vision chronologically into human history, in the form of an “ethnographer’s nostalgia.” But Derrida wishes to point out that Lévi-Strauss’ ethnology remains a “science” or “discourse” which necessarily employs “traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them.”<sup>163</sup> Thus it fails to grasp that it is not until alienated, encultured consciousness comes into being that the conceptual category of “nature” may be constructed as the antimony that defines and gives meaning to the category of “culture.” Nature is then misconceived as some stable ontological category that could be grasped independently of language and consciousness. Instead it is brought into being *with* language and cannot exist except as what Derrida calls “freeplay.”<sup>164</sup> For Derrida, Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss’ respective projects share the common feature of seeking strategies of stabilization (“alibis”) which are required to prevent the ultimate impossibility of reconciling these categories

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where he gives the reason for it: “I feel ecstasies, inexpressible ravishings to melt myself, as it were, into the system of beings, to identify myself with all of nature.” (*JF*, 42)

Thus for Derrida, Rousseau inaugurates a “new model of presence: the subject’s self-presence within *consciousness* or *feeling*.” (*OG*, 98)

<sup>161</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 172.

<sup>162</sup> Derrida argues in “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” that “one can in fact assume that ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture— and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts— had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference” (282).

<sup>163</sup> Derrida, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 282.

<sup>164</sup> Derrida, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 292.

(nature and culture) from coming into view. Upon this reasoning, Derrida claims to expose “ethnographic nostalgia” as a fundamental liability of thought:

If Lévi-Strauss, better than any other, has brought to light the freeplay of repetition and the repetition of freeplay, one no less perceives in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia, and even remorse with which he often presents the motivation of the ethnological project when he moves toward archaic societies— exemplary societies in his eyes. As a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay of which the Nietzschean affirmation— the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation— would be the other side.<sup>165</sup>

In this passage, Derrida advances the hypothesis that any attempt to project an original metaphysical unity of human existence is a mystification and that it is Nietzsche who first bravely conjectures this possibility.<sup>166</sup> Derrida’s critique

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<sup>165</sup> Derrida, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 292.

<sup>166</sup> It is also productive to refer here to Michel Foucault for whom Nietzsche represents the resolute rejection of any form of metaphysics based upon “originary” identities. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 139-164. Foucault asks:

Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*), at least on those occasions when he is truly a genealogist? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to “that which was already there,” the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity. However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their

deeply problematizes what Jameson calls the “prestige of a ‘myth of origins.’”<sup>167</sup> Critical thought will no longer be able to posit in any simple fashion a “dream” of a zone of “full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.”<sup>168</sup> However, it is not Derrida’s ultimate stance towards this philosophical principle that is relevant to the current project. It is his sensitive elucidation of the vocabulary and principles of Rousseau’s philosophy that yields valuable insights for the following analyses.

Derrida traces the patterns of Rousseau’s philosophical vocabulary meticulously in *Of Grammatology*. He advances a more complex scheme of conceptual strategies characterized by “supplementarity,” “differance,”<sup>169</sup> and the “trace”<sup>170</sup>

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essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms...What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity. (142)

<sup>167</sup> Jameson, *The Prison House of Language*, 174.

<sup>168</sup> Derrida, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 292.

<sup>169</sup> Jameson offers this characterization of differance in *The Prison-House of Language*:

Hence the recourse to a kind of violence done to language by which Derrida (like Heidegger, and both of them following the Platonic example of etymological argumentation) attempts to hold open a special place within his words in such a way that his terminology cannot settle back down into the illusory order of nouns and substances. It is also the notion of difference and differance, by which Derrida means to stress the profound identity between what would in English be distinguished as to differ and to defer, Difference (which is, as we have seen, the very basis of linguistic structure itself, and is in a sense at one with the feeling of identity as well) is a difference or deferring in its essential temporality, its structure as a sheer process, which can never be arrested into static presence; which, even as we become aware of it, glides beyond our reach in time, so that its presence is at one and the same instant an absence as well. (174)

<sup>170</sup> Jameson also offers this characterization of the “trace” in *The Prison-House of Language*:

The form which this differance takes in language is called by Derrida the “trace.” It is through the concept of the trace that Derrida annuls the false problem of words versus meanings which we evoked above. For to attempt to go back behind the sentence or the word that already exists,

as tools for transcending Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss' "metaphysical" thought. Where the latter two conceptualities pertain to Derrida's interest in the problematic of language, "supplementarity" designates that ultimate, irreconcilable point of intersection between the categories of nature and culture. Derrida claims that this point of impossible reconciliation is "a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility" (*OG*, 163).<sup>171</sup> In order to illustrate the operation of these deconstructive stratagems, Derrida inscribes them within the figurative systems that bind the oeuvres of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. The exercise, he claims, is intended to demonstrate that this subtle logic already operates unbeknown to the conscious mind of each author (as Derrida expresses it, Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss say it "without wishing to say it" (*OG*, 200)). Again, the relevance of Derrida's "deconstruction" of Rousseau for the current purposes is not to find an ultimate position on these scholarly debates, but rather that Derrida powerfully distills the symbolic vocabulary within which ethnographic nostalgia circulates.

Derrida identifies two particular motifs in this vocabulary that are symptomatic, he believes, of Rousseauist thought. These motifs will become important in my analysis of the *mise-en-scène* in a number of the following films. The first motif is the act of introducing writing into non-writing cultures in the context of colonization and exploration. According to Derrida, Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss characterize this process as the gateway to a compromised and alienated form of

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behind the thought that has already taken verbal form, is to submit to the prestige of a "myth of origins," and to attempt to re-place ourselves artificially in a past in which that living unity had not yet taken place, in which there still was such a thing as pure sound on the one hand, and pure meaning or idea on the other, as in some lumber room before the creation of the world. To say that all language is a trace is to underscore the paradox of signification: namely that in order to be aware of it at all, it must already have happened; it is an event which is always in the past, even in an immediate one. (174)

<sup>171</sup> Derrida also claims that "it is clearly confirmed that the concept of nature and the entire system it commands may not be thought except under the irreducible category of the supplement" (*OG*, 180).

historical existence. In both *Tristes Tropiques* and *The Confessions*,<sup>172</sup> Derrida argues, it is the “writing lesson” that inaugurates “the anthropological war, the essential confrontation that opens communication between peoples and cultures, even when that communication is not practiced under the banner of colonial or missionary oppression” (*OG*, 107). The writing lesson (always constructed as “intersubjective violence” (*OG*, 127)) is, for Derrida, incorrectly characterized in Rousseauist thought as the source of a fundamental rupture within human consciousness. This point of rupture generates two zones and a corresponding set of conceptual antinomies that Derrida traces in the philosophical vocabulary shared by Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. One zone and set of antinomic terms pertains to Rousseauist existence. Derrida calls this the series of “non-supplementarity” (*OG*, 241). It is characterized by “interiority,” liberty, the voice and spoken language, the “micro-community,” and a privileged experience of the “fullness” of being or “plenitude” (*OG*, 244).<sup>173</sup> The other set designates a zone of historical existence that carries a metaphysical flaw (in which being is no longer felt as “self presence”). This “supplementary” series is characterized by “exteriority,” nonliberty, lack, imagination, and desire (*OG*, 309). It culminates in the “mastername of the supplementary series: death” (*OG*, 183). Derrida goes on to collect further terms of this conceptual vocabulary, contrasting the climate of the North (which “belongs” to supplementarity) against that of the South (which “belongs” to non-supplementarity), likewise the consonant and the vowel, and the capital and the province.<sup>174</sup> Ultimately, Derrida identifies the latent Utopian claim that Rousseauist thought carries: all the terms in the privileged series of “non-supplementarity” perpetuate a mistaken belief in

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<sup>172</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953).

<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that Derrida holds the binding characteristic of all those states that have been celebrated by the various Romantic movements since the Enlightenment to be non-supplementarity: “nature, animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity” (*OG*, 244).

<sup>174</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “Almost all the significations that will constantly define the figure of evil and the process of its degeneration are recorded there [in Rousseau’s thought]: a simultaneously violent and progressive substitution of servitude for political freedom as freedom of the living word, dissolution of the small democratic and autarchic city, preponderance of articulation over accentuation, of consonant over vowel, of northern over southern, of the capital over the province” (200).

the possibility of retrieving “the spell of self-presence... [which is] tantamount to saying: utopia” (OG, 251).

In addition to the writing lesson, the second important motif is the “festival.” According to Derrida, Rousseau’s philosophy is organized around a conception of the festival as the collective ritual by which a social entity is unified in an originary, unbroken state. Through the festival, the social entity experiences a collective sense of “self presence.” The festival symbolically represents the historical moment in which the “supplement” has come into existence but has not yet come into “play.” In other words, consciousness has become linguistic, social and human but does not yet feel itself to contain a fundamental flaw or sense of lack:

Thus the original language and society, as they arose in warm countries, are absolutely pure. They are described closest to that ineffable limit where society is formed without having begun its degradation; where language is instituted but still remains pure song, a language of pure accentation, a sort of *neume*. It is no longer animal since it expresses passion, but it is not completely conventional since it evades articulation. The origin of this society is not a contract, it does not happen through treaties, conventions, laws, diplomats, and *representatives*. It is a *festival* [*fête*]. It consumes itself in presence. There is certainly an experience of time, but a time of pure presence, giving rise neither to calculation, nor reflection, nor yet comparison: “Happy age when nothing marked the hours.” It is the time of the *Reveries*. Time also without *differance*: it leaves no interval, authorizes no detour between desire and pleasure: “Pleasure and desire mingled and were felt together.” (OG, 262)

The symbolic privilege of the festival in the Rousseauist metaphysic is that it is:

already society, passion, language, time, but it is not yet servitude, preference, articulation, measure, and interval. Supplementarity is possible but nothing has yet come into play. Rousseau’s festival excludes



play. The moment of the festival is the moment of pure continuity, of indifference between the time of desire and the time of pleasure. Before the festival, in the state of pure nature, there is no *experience* of the continuous; after the festival the experience of the *discontinuous* begins; the festival is the model of the continuous experience. All that we can fix in the conceptual oppositions is therefore society formed on the morrow of the festival. And these oppositions will first suppose the fundamental opposition of the continuous and the discontinuous, of the original festival to the organization of society, of the dance to law. (OG, 263).

Social forms that retain the festival therefore know a privileged and collective sense of “self presence.” It is in tracing this vocabulary that a startling shift takes place in Derrida’s argumentation. Having advanced a systematic and devastating critique of Rousseau and Rousseauist thought, Derrida appears to momentarily (and somewhat paradoxically) admit the very limited *possibility* that human consciousness perhaps did indeed pass through such a point of original unity, even if only for a mere moment, as a “limit.”<sup>175</sup> It is a brief lapse in Derrida’s implacable denunciations of Rousseauist thought. At this point he suggests that it is not the entire conceptuality of this ethnographer’s nostalgia to which he objects, but rather Rousseau’s misguided attempt to render it as a static philosophical vision, to “stabilize” it as an “image” (OG, 279). Derrida’s final position is not that self-presence is some kind of absolute ontological mirage, but rather that for all human existence after that infinitesimally brief period of delicate equilibrium, self-presence is subject to a kind of entropic disintegration and is able to be recuperated only momentarily (in such “moments” as the *sentiment d’existence* returns) before lapsing into freeplay. It is therefore the

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<sup>175</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “This *birth of society* is therefore not a passage, it is a point, a pure, fictive and unstable, ungraspable limit. One crosses it in attaining it. In it society is broached and is deferred from itself. Beginning, it begins to decay. The South passes into its own North. Transcending need, passion engenders new need which in turn corrupt it” (267). The point is recapitulated later: “They speak [the pages of the *Reveries*] the sorrow of time torn in its presence by memory and anticipation. The pleasure [*jouissance*] of a continuous and inarticulate presence is a *nearly* impossible experience...” (OG, 249).

structure of seasonality— the lapse into the imagination, futurity and death of winter only to be followed by re-emergence into the fullness, the present and the life of summer— that allows Derrida to come to a position on Rousseau’s metaphysics. For Derrida, our experience of presence must always therefore be grasped in the form of a recuperation (*OG*, 309). Despite his vehement rejection of Rousseau’s dream of recuperating a sense of originary plenitude, Derrida is undoubtedly one of Rousseau’s most sensitive and perceptive readers.

### **1.10 Baudrillard and Lyotard: Post-Structuralist Debates**

Derrida’s turn towards post-structuralism therefore proceeds according to a stark refusal of any such Utopian role for ethnological observation (save for those brief moments of hesitation towards the conclusion of *Of Grammatology*). It is against this backdrop that Jean Baudrillard’s work offers a fascinating moment in which critical theory continues to employ standards revealed by ethnological observation in order to indict the present. The work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins becomes crucial to Baudrillard’s extremely influential diagnosis of the *société de consommation*.<sup>176</sup> In this passage, Baudrillard claims to dialectically unmask our own “affluent” society as profoundly immiserated, and “primitive” society to be the “only” historical form of affluent society. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

We must abandon the received idea we have of an affluent society as a society in which all material (and cultural) needs are easily met, for that leaves all social logic out of account. We should rather espouse the notion, recently propounded by Marshall Sahlins in his article on the first affluent society, that it is our industrial and productivist societies which, unlike certain primitive societies, are dominated by scarcity, by the obsession with scarcity characteristic of the market economy. The more one produces, the more clearly does one show up, amidst plenty, how

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<sup>176</sup> For a discussion of Baudrillard’s “neo-primitivism” see Victor Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 46-86.

irremediably far off is that final point which affluence would represent, defined as an equilibrium between human production and human goals. Since what is satisfied in a growth society, and increasingly satisfied as productivity grows, are the very needs of the order of production, not the “needs” of man (the whole system depends indeed on these being misrecognized), it is clear that affluence recedes indefinitely: more precisely, it is irrevocably rejected and the organized reign of scarcity (structural penury) preferred.

For Sahlins, it was the hunter-gatherers (the primitive nomadic tribes of Australia, the Kalahari, etc.) who, in spite of their absolute “poverty,” knew true affluence. The primitive people of those societies have no personal possessions; they are not obsessed by their objects, which they throw away as and when they need to in order to be able to move about more easily. They have no apparatus of production, or “work”: they hunt and gather “at their leisure,” as we might say, and share everything within the group. They are entirely prodigal: they consume everything immediately, make no economic calculations and amass no stores. The hunter-gatherer has nothing of that bourgeois invention, economic man, about him. He is ignorant of the basic principles of Political Economy. And indeed, he never exploits human energies, natural resources or the effective economic possibilities to the full. He sleeps a lot. He has a trust—and this is what characterizes his economic system—in the wealth of natural resources, whereas our system is characterized (ever more so with technical advance) by despair at the insufficiency of human means, by a radical, catastrophic anxiety which is the deep effect of the market economy and generalized competition.

The collective “improvidence” and “prodigality” characteristic of primitive societies are the sign of real affluence. We have only the signs of affluence. Beneath a gigantic apparatus of production, we anxiously eye the signs of poverty and scarcity. But poverty consists, says Sahlins, neither in a small quantity of goods, nor simply in a relation between ends

and means: it is, above all, a relation between human beings. The basis for the confidence of primitive peoples and for the fact that, within hunger, they live a life of plenty, is ultimately the transparency and reciprocity of social relations. It is the fact that no monopolization whatever of nature, the soil, the instruments or products of "labour" intervenes to obstruct exchange and institute scarcity. There is among them no accumulation, which is always the source of power. In the economy of the gift and symbolic exchange, a small and always finite quantity of goods is sufficient to create general wealth since those goods pass constantly from one person to the other. Wealth has its basis not in unlimited goods, but in the concrete exchange between persons. It is, therefore, unlimited since the cycle of exchange is endless, even among a limited number of individuals, with each moment in the exchange cycle adding to the value of the object exchanged. It is this concrete and relational dialectic which we find inverted, as a dialectic of penury and unlimited need, in the process of competition and differentiation characteristic of our civilized, industrial societies. Where, in primitive exchange, every relationship adds to the social wealth, in our "differential" societies every social relationship adds to individual lack, since every thing possessed is relativized in relation to others (in primitive exchange, it is valorized by the very relationship with others).

It is not, therefore, paradoxical to argue that in our "affluent" societies abundance is lost and that it will not be restored by an interminable increase in productivity, by unleashing new productive forces. Since the structural definition of abundance and wealth lies in social organization, only a revolution of the social organization and of social relations could bring those things about. Will we return, one day, beyond the market economy, to prodigality? Instead of prodigality, we have "consumption," forced consumption in perpetuity, twin sister to scarcity. It was social logic which brought primitive peoples the "first" (and only) affluent

society. It is our social logic which condemns us to luxurious and spectacular penury.<sup>177</sup>

In this passage it is possible to hear the echoes of those first great economic and social *scandalon* outlined by Rousseau speaking to us through Baudrillard's Marxian intellectual heritage; the monopolization of soil, the radical restructuring of the system of needs and desires, the installation of an inescapable capitalist, productivist ideology that alienates the Self from the Other, and the Self from the collective. But the thematic upon which I would like to place the accent here is how Baudrillard draws a contrast between our own sense of "radical, catastrophic anxiety" and an entirely different social climate characterized by "transparency and reciprocity," as this inversion will be dramatized repeatedly in the ensuing narratives.

Baudrillard's fundamental theoretical gesture—the conceptual development of ethnographic nostalgia as a postulate which anchors his analysis—drew the ire of Jean-François Lyotard who offers in *Libidinal Economy* an aggressive rejection of the ethnographic nostalgia as I have surveyed it here.<sup>178</sup> Lyotard repudiates such a critical position and any associated emancipatory project.<sup>179</sup> This rejection is encapsulated in Lyotard's repeated refrain: "there is no primitive society."<sup>180</sup> Lyotard adopts the radical position that the Marxian tradition is animated by the chimera of a body as yet unalienated by labour. Where for Derrida the linguistic slippage required to conceive of nature is always supplementary, for Lyotard, desire is always operating in and through a body alienated in the process of economic production. Lyotard identifies this intellectual axis that runs from Rousseau, through Marx to Baudrillard as the locus of his attack:

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<sup>177</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 66.

<sup>178</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>179</sup> Lyotard aggressively denounces Marcuse's "humanist protests" in *Libidinal Economy* as firmly within this tradition (120).

<sup>180</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 108.

For what happens to whomever does not want to recognize that political economy is libidinal, is that he reproduces in other terms the same phantasy of an externalized region where desire would be sheltered from every treacherous transcription into production, labour and the law of value... For, in this text of 1843, which intends to start something else, a politics which would be non-philosophical, that is to say, religious, Marx allows his thoroughly religious love for a lost consubstantiality of men amongst themselves and with nature to show through: it is there in particular that his desire for return, so similar to that of Rousseau, gives itself free rein...<sup>181</sup>

Once again, for Lyotard as for Derrida, it is that “phantasy” region of ethnology that perpetuates the illusory vision of a state of non-alienation:

Ethnology in its entirety, Lévi-Strauss’s as much as Jaulin’s, emanates from this phantasy [of a “non-alienated region”] (which is in its turn only one case amongst many of the representationalization [*mise-en représentation*] proper to the West, proceeding from its logophilia). We will show this in Marx, not in order to convince that this is the case, rather through a species of pleasure, through affection for the young girl that he is, dreaming of reconciliation and believing that this had taken place in the past, somewhere else, and that she and her lover, the proletariat, had been deprived of it. We will show that, speaking of the archaic labourer, this feminine Marx has some resonances not unrelated in general to those of Baudrillard forging his myth of symbolic exchange.<sup>182</sup>

Lyotard continues with an aggressive, new vision of historical and libidinal existence as always-already-alienated. In Lyotard’s formulation, the libidinal generation of text is a function of the “scrambling” of political economy and Desire. It is in this formulation that Lyotard’s project shows an affinity with Derrida’s schema of differance, supplementarity and the trace. It amounts to a

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<sup>181</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 106.

<sup>182</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 106.

celebration of the productive power of psychic and corporeal fragmentation. Any erotics, Lyotard suggests, requires that labour resists Desire and functions as a surface upon which it may inscribe itself:

Fragmentation can be invested as such, and this is not an alienation. It is a phantasy, not simply reactionary, but constitutive of Western theatricality, to believe that there were societies where the body was not fragmented. There is no organic body for libidinal economy; and no more is there a libidinal body, a strange compromise of a concept from Western medicine and physiology with the idea of the libido as energy subject to the indiscernible regimes of Eros and death.<sup>183</sup>

However, the central question regarding the philosophical “truth” of these various theoretical propositions is moot. It is rather through the vocabulary that they generate that I will seek to read the films that follow. Thus when Lyotard insists that “there are no primitive societies,” I would counter that this may be so— *except*, as we shall see, in the “irrational” realm of art, imagination, myth, narrative and fantasy. Lyotard offers a final conceptual tool for performing the following analysis. He argues that the libidinal fantasy of a body “bound up in its unity and identity” has taken various forms of corporeal figuration, including the ancient Greek body which is “erotic” and “hygienic,” and the Christian body which is “erotic” and “supernatural.”<sup>184</sup> I wish to posit a third model for such a fantasy: the body of the “primitive” or “savage” will be imagined as concurrently “erotic” and “aesthetic” in the sense that its surface will be subjected to the aesthetic ur-act of totemic patterning, either in paint or scarification. It will become a site of an *originary* form of aesthetic expression which is also *erotic* as it is linked to the biological surfaces by which the organism receives pleasure.

### **1.11 Conclusion: An Erotics of the West**

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<sup>183</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 120.

<sup>184</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 112.

These speculations lead me to posit a final model for apprehending the ensuing narratives— one that is by turns “dialectical” on the one hand and “erotogenic” on the other. It is by this theoretical mastercode (as a sequence of related innovations in critical thought ultimately deriving from Rousseau) that I will seek to read the following cinematic narratives and hope to overcome the limitations of persistent, unhistoricized and “common sense” interpretive categories. The centerpiece of this mastercode will be the Lévi-Strausseau ethnological encounter, which first emerges with Rousseau and which is now grasped as a privileged space in which to witness a dialectical phenomenon: these narratives will increasingly stage the ethnological encounter as an occasion for unmasking the Self as an alienated, historical form of Other, and the Other as a new form of “authentic” Self. By containing each within the other, the Self and the Other appear to obey Engels second law of socio-historic being which stipulates the “interpenetration of opposites.”<sup>185</sup> The first method of grasping the current project is therefore as a dialectic of the Frontier such that it is understood simultaneously as a contradiction in the Marxian sense, an antimony in the structuralist sense, and an archaic desire for return in the Freudian sense.

But this project will be “dialectical” in another way. Jameson (to whose Marxist literary criticism I will have recourse as a master methodology throughout this project) offers us in *Marxism and Form* the notion of a “dialectical criticism,” by which the text is subject (like the mind) to a kind of internal tension between a drive towards fantasies organized around specific forms of “symbolic gratification” and forms of resistance that distort, deflect and divest those fantasies such that they cannot emerge into clear view. The impulse towards symbolic gratification is thus answered by a kind of internal censorship. In this view:

...the process of criticism is not so much an interpretation of content as it is a revealing of it, a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience, beneath the distortions of the various kinds of censorship that have been at work upon it; and this revelation takes the

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<sup>185</sup> See note 37 above.



form of an explanation of why the content was so distorted and is thus inseparable from a description of the mechanisms of this censorship itself.<sup>186</sup>

Such fantasy content must then be understood in relation to a specific historical or sociological ground, such that its visions are specifically articulated to “address” that lived reality;<sup>187</sup> Jameson offers the striking example of Sontag’s thesis on science fiction.<sup>188</sup> On the basis of this model I intend to propose that the

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<sup>186</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 404.

<sup>187</sup> Jameson argues in *Marxism and Form* that “in the realm of literary criticism the sociological approach necessarily juxtaposes the individual work of art with some vaster form of social reality which is seen in one way or another as its source or ontological ground, its Gestalt field, and of which the work itself comes to be thought of as a *reflection* or a *symptom*, a characteristic *manifestation* or a simple *by-product*, a *coming to consciousness* or an imaginary or symbolic *resolution*, to mention only a few of the ways in which this problematic central relationship has been conceived” (4).

<sup>188</sup> This passage from Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* is worth quoting at some length:

...let me take as a demonstration of this process her remarkable essay on science fiction, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in which she reconstructs the basic paradigm of the science fiction movie, seeing in it an expression of “the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence... about physical disaster, the prospect of universal mutilation and even annihilation...[but more particularly] about the condition of the individual psyche.” [*Against Interpretation*, p. 220] All of this is so, and her essay provides a thorough working through of the materials of science fiction taken on its own terms. But what if those terms were themselves but a disguise, but the “manifest content” that served to distract us from some more basic satisfaction at work in the form?

For beneath the surface diversion of these entertainments, beneath the surface preoccupation of our minds as we watch them, introspection reveals a secondary motivation quite different from the one described above. For one thing, these works particularly during the period of their heyday after the war and in the 1950s, rather openly express the mystique of the scientist: and by that I refer not so much to external prestige or social function as rather to a kind of collective folk-dream about the life-style of the scientist himself: he doesn’t do real work (yet power is his and social status as well), his remuneration is not monetary or at the very least money seems no object, there is something fascinating about his laboratory (the home workshop magnified to institutional dimensions, a combination of factory and clinic), about the way he works

wish-fulfillment or indeed Utopian content of this ethnographic nostalgia (the longing for a certain “primitive” mode of existence) will meet just such an ideology of resistance or censorship and therefore have to be managed, negotiated or even repressed in the following cultural narratives. But I will seek to show that in a case of the “return of the repressed,” such narratives draw their force by that very repression.

Secondly, in my view the broad political ramifications of Jameson’s dialectical criticism, which seeks to uncover a Utopian drive towards imagining alternate forms of human existence, joins forces with a more local theory of narrative as a structure for symbolic gratification. Peter Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot*<sup>189</sup> offers a Freudian model for decoding the structure of narrative according to psychic dynamics or, as he terms it, a “textual energetics” in which “wish fulfillment,”

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nights (he isn’t bound by routine or the eight-hour day), his very intellectual operations themselves are caricatures of what the non-intellectual imagines brainwork and book-knowledge to be. There is, moreover, the suggestion of a return to older modes of work organization: to the more personal and psychologically satisfying world of the guilds, in which the older scientist is the master and the younger one the apprentice, in which the daughter of the older man becomes naturally enough the symbol of the transfer of functions. And so forth: these traits may be indefinitely enumerated and elaborated. What I want to convey is that ultimately none of this has anything to do with science itself, but is rather a distorted reflection of our own feelings and dreams about work alienated and nonalienated: it is a wish-fulfillment that takes as its object a vision of ideal or what Marcuse would call “libidinally gratifying” work. But it is of course a wish-fulfillment of a peculiar type, and it is this structure that is important to analyze... Rather it is a symbolic gratification that wishes to conceal its own presence: thus the identification with the scientist is not here the mainspring of the plot, but rather its precondition only, and it is as though, in a rather Kantian way, symbolic gratification attached itself not to the events of the story but to that framework (the universe of science, the splitting of the atom, the astronomer’s gaze into outer space) without which the story could not have come into being in the first place. In this perspective all the cataclysmic violence of the science fiction narrative— the toppling buildings, the state of siege, the monsters riding out of Tokyo bay— is nothing but a pretext, serving both to divert the mind from its deepest operations and fantasies, and to motivate those fantasies as well. (404)

<sup>189</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

recoded as *Desire* itself is the ultimate generating force behind the text.<sup>190</sup> The ultimate forces of the Freudian metaphysic, desire and death, Eros and Thanatos, can be perceived, he argues, animating and structuring narrativity. Narrative, as the fundamental urge to tell, reveal, or show, remains uncatalyzed until Desire, as excitation, *jouissance* or arousal, stimulates it into action. The text thereby functions in this model as a kind of circuitry for Desire: the structures of narrative are grasped as the “detour” or the “*arabesque*” by which an incendiary form of stimulation is temporally extended and delayed on its way to gratification, fulfillment and ultimate extinguishment. The experience of narrative is now, for Brooks, a kind of privileged laboratory for rehearsing the Freudian journey of the organism in which the twin forces of the libido and the death drive lead it into a state of arousal tending toward death. This reduction of tension (as the result of stimulation and the condition of organic existence) is now experienced by the organism as pleasure.

What I am proposing therefore, in essence, is that we require something like a Utopian “textual erotics,”<sup>191</sup> in addition to the existing “mythic” and political readings, of the American West in order to account for its sheer persistence in

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<sup>190</sup> In an extraordinary passage in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks lays out this fundamental scheme for a “textual erotics”:

We can, then, conceive of the readings of plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. Narratives both tell of desire— typically present some story of desire— and arouse and make use of desire as a dynamic of signification. Desire is in this view like Freud’s notion of Eros, a force including sexual desire but larger and more polymorphous, which (he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) seeks “to combine organic substances into ever greater unities.” Desire as Eros, desire in its plastic and totalizing function, appears to me central to our experience of reading narrative, and if in what follows I evoke Freud— and, as a gloss on Freud, Jacques Lacan— it is because I find in Freud’s work the best model for a “textual erotics.” I am aware that “desire” is a concept too broad, too fundamental, almost too banal to be defined. Yet perhaps it can be described: we can say something about the forms that it takes in narrative, how it represents itself, the dynamics it generates. (37)

<sup>191</sup> See note 190 above. I also intend to riff explicitly here on Sontag’s call for an “erotics” of art as a substitution for “hermeneutics.” See Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation, and other essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 14.

our cultural lives. Conceived in this way, I will argue that the way in which we imagine the American West increasingly functions to throw into high relief the unerotic experience of capitalism, so often euphemistically grasped as “modernity” or “civilization.” It will function as a form of fantasy impelled by Desire on the individual level as well as the collective, political and Utopian level. Thus the American West comes to designate not so much that actually existing historical corridor of narrow space and time in which an advancing civilization sought to extinguish a retreating savagery, but a collectively-constructed narrative realm of national (and now global) wish-fulfillment around which American historicity and subjectivity has been conceptually organized.

## 2. The Western: Contradiction at the Frontier

*For, if it is true that nature has rejected man and that society persists in oppressing him, man can at least reverse the poles of the dilemma to his benefit and seek the society of nature to meditate there on the nature of society.*

—Claude Lévi-Strauss,  
*Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Founder of the Sciences of Man*

### 2.1 Introduction

The name “Rousseau” now comes to stand as a shorthand for this “ethnographer’s nostalgia,” this longing which projects philosophically a fantasy of “secret identities” and “repressed origins,” a point at which an experience of “self presence,” “plenitude” or some earlier and more satisfying historical relation between the subject and object is hypothesized. So with this in mind it is possible to pivot to a survey of the narrative forms this fantasy will take in American cinema. Where many have found the “wish fulfillment” function of these narratives to be a cause for embarrassment, the methodological principles for narrative analysis expounded by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* suggest that it is precisely towards this function that attention should be directed. Jameson argues that the “fantasy level” of a text constitutes “something like the primal motor force which gives any cultural artifact its resonance....” (*PU*, 129). The next task then is to locate the forms in which ethnographic nostalgia serves as a content that provides such a “resonance.” However, Jameson qualifies this principle by asserting that “such forms can never be imagined as emerging in any pure state, but must always pass through a determinate social and historical situation, in which it is both universalized and reappropriated by ‘adult ideology’” (*PU*, 129). In other words, the critic’s mission consists of decoding how this fantasy register is “diverted” to “other ideological functions,” and how this content is “reinvested” through the structures of what Jameson calls the

“political unconscious.”<sup>1</sup> The result is that the practice of interpreting a cultural object must not merely limit itself to the pure exercise of “demystification” or “unmasking” ideology. It must scan the object at one and the same time for the structurally co-existing “twin negative and positive features of a given phenomenon,” the former in a negative *ideological* moment and the latter in a positive *Utopian* moment.<sup>2</sup> My contention in this chapter will be that ethnographic nostalgia first emerges as a cinematic fantasy content or “motor force” in Hollywood cinema through that greatest of American cultural inventions, the Western.

It is a commonplace in the scholarly literature that the Western offers certain cinematic pleasures that carry a special “symbolic charge.” Leo Braudy frames the Western in these terms:

The western is a prime frontrunner for the nature film’s renovation of tradition because hankering for the past is one of its central themes. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the western frequently was set at the origins of social institutions and principles— the law, justice, religion, and the community... Its revival in the 1990s, I would argue, occurs because the

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<sup>1</sup> See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*: “the archaic fantasy material that psychoanalytic criticism feels able to detect in such forms can never be imagined as emerging in any pure state, but must always pass through a determinate social and historical situation, in which it is both universalized and reappropriated by ‘adult’ ideology. The fantasy level of a text would then be something like the primal motor force which gives any cultural artifact its resonance, but which must always find itself diverted to the service of other, ideological functions, and reinvested by what we have called the political unconscious” (129).

<sup>2</sup> See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*: “In the present context of cultural analysis, I would propose to identify these twin negative and positive features of a given phenomenon—what in the realm of political forces Marxism traditionally terms reactionary and progressive— by the terms ‘ideological’ and ‘Utopian,’ it being understood that the word ‘ideology’ is here being used in its most restricted and pejorative sense (it can have others), while the term ‘utopian’ is intended in Ernst Bloch’s fashion to resonate a Marxist perspective on the future rather than the pre-Marxian one denounced by Engels and Marx in so-called Utopian socialism” (223).

nostalgic motifs and preoccupations of the genre of nature gave the western a revived symbolic charge.<sup>3</sup>

This symbolic charge appears to be associated with an overarching nostalgia, a “hankering for the past.” Elsewhere, scholarly attempts to define this “symbolic charge” take the form of a rhetoric of the “real.” For example, Tompkins offers this report:

...[the West] seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice... The desert light and the desert space, the creak of saddle leather and the sun beating down, the horse’s energy and force— these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real.<sup>4</sup>

This sentiment is echoed by Gaines who detects in the Western a “fantasy of authenticity” and the tantalizing “impossibility of ever knowing but all-the-while-reaching for the ‘real’ West.”<sup>5</sup> I read this not as the “Real” in the Bazinian sense of a cinematic ontology,<sup>6</sup> but rather in terms of a more immediate or personal form of ontology in which the Western envisions a recuperation of some elemental experience of subjectivity which can only be retrieved in the extreme and unique historical circumstances of the Frontier. Yet so often the critic is brought up short when called upon to provide an adequate explanation for this phenomenon and the terms of analysis become nebulous and vague. By

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Braudy, “The Genre of Nature: Ceremonies of Innocence,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 289.

<sup>4</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” 29.

<sup>6</sup> For this influential formulation of the Realism of the photographic image see André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 9-16. For an exploration of the implications of this theory see Bruce Isaacs, “A Notion of Film Aesthetics,” in *Toward a New Film Aesthetic* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 1-43.

re-writing what I will call the “classical conceptuality” of the Western— the narrative structure of the Frontier as the historical interface between “civilization” and “savagery”— according to the mastercode assembled above, I believe it will be possible to overcome certain conceptual impasses in the scholarly record and discern something of the “dimly vibrating meaning”<sup>7</sup> that animates this genre as a persistent form in the American cultural imaginary. It is towards this question that the current project is directed: what is this ill-defined “translation of the self” that occurs in the figure of the Westerner? Furthermore, if I am correct in arguing that ethnographic nostalgia can be characterized as an “ideologeme,” it must display that degree of “autonomy” from any individual texts in which it can be discovered.<sup>8</sup> One way to ratify this principle and answer this question will be to locate the ideologeme in a generic contradiction.

In order to trace these patterns I will first engage a “classical” body of scholarship that defined the reception of the genre during the 1960s and 1970s<sup>9</sup> (as Schatz argues, “to discuss the Western genre is to address neither a single Western film nor even all Westerns but rather that system of conventions which identifies Western films as such”<sup>10</sup>) prior to the later revisionist critiques with their interrogation of the representation of history, race, and gender. But the Frontier of course knows a much older history as a literary rather than cinematic phenomenon. For this reason it is important to absorb the resources of the “Myth and Symbol”<sup>11</sup> school of American Studies for its analysis of the nineteenth

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<sup>7</sup> See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*: “Thus for Bloch the world is an immense storehouse of figures, and the task of philosopher or critic becomes a hermeneutic one to the degree that he is called upon to pierce this ‘incognito of every lived instant,’ and to decipher the dimly vibrating meaning beneath the fables and the works, the experiences and the objects, which surrounding us seem to solicit our attention in some peculiarly personal fashion” (145).

<sup>8</sup> See note 51, chapter 1 above.

<sup>9</sup> The genre studies that did much to define the terms of debate in the late 1960s and 1970s include Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (hereafter cited in text as *SM*); Kitses, “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” 57-68 (originally published in 1969); Wright, *Sixguns and Society* (hereafter cited in text as *SS*).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 691.

<sup>11</sup> For rich discussions of the historical and institutional import of these figures within the “Myth and Symbol School” of American Studies see “The Fourth



century literary Western. I will take two such seminal studies: *Virgin Land*, by Henry Nash Smith, which examines the West in the “mass” or low literary tradition,<sup>12</sup> and *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx, which limits itself to a “high” tradition.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I will identify the presence of this content in two of the most iconic classical Westerns, George Steven’s *Shane* (1953) and John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). A comparison of these “ur-texts” of the genre illustrates the degree to which ethnographic nostalgia manifests in divergent ways in the narrative *combinatoire*<sup>14</sup> of the classical Western.

## 2.2 Civilization and Savagery

The central structural device (or dialectical “chiasmus”) of the Western form lies in what I have called its “classical conceptuality”: narratives generated at the historical interface between savagery and civilization.<sup>15</sup> Cawelti’s influential analysis of the genre, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, offers a simple and influential starting point for demarcating the boundaries of the Western:

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Frontier of Henry Nash Smith” (213-229) and “Culture versus Art: Leo Marx” (229-238) in Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America 1890-1990*.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950).

<sup>13</sup> See note 14, chapter 1 above.

<sup>14</sup> See Fredric Jameson, “Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture,” *Theory and Society* 4, no. 4 (1977): “*Sixguns and Society* proposes what is currently known as a *combinatoire* or permutation scheme, as opposed to the more static typological scheme of Propp” (551).

<sup>15</sup> Fiedler corroborates this definition of the Western in *The Return of the Vanishing American* arguing that:

*The heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape (by itself this produces the only the Northern), but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home... No grandchild of Noah, he escapes completely the mythologies we brought with us from Europe, demands a new one of his own. (21)*

A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontier, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and that does not involve some sort of pursuit, is simply not a Western. (*SM*, 31)

But already this starting point yields a productive problem. This principle appears unproblematic except when the narrative takes place in the “East,” as it once did. This qualification is routinely made by critics when observing that the first text in which the “protoplot” of the Western can be detected is James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Saga* (published between 1827 and 1841), which takes place in upstate New York in the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Yet Cooper’s saga is, according to Cawelti, “really” a Western in the sense that the Frontier as a scene of imagined ethnological encounter had already crystalized by the 1820s in the tales of Natty Bumppo’s encounters with the Mohicans.

The identification of the *Leatherstocking Saga* as the source of the Western protoplot invites an engagement with a significant critical precedent within Marxian literary theory that is rarely cited in Western genre theory. György Lukács argues in *The Historical Novel* that the novel emerges in its modern form only with the new sense of collective, historical consciousness that attends the French Revolution. This sense of historical consciousness is characterized by the ability of the reader to imagine themselves into a dynamic order of conflict and change, transformation and revolution.<sup>17</sup> It is against this background that Lukács reads the development of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He nominates Sir Walter Scott as the historical novelist whose oeuvre most authentically expresses a nostalgia for the lost collectivity of

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 35; Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, “Introduction: The West, Westerns, and American Character,” in *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 2; Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 9; Kitses, “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” 61.

<sup>17</sup> György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 19-30. See also Fredric Jameson’s discussion of this thesis in *Archaeologies of the Future*, 284-286.

European feudal society.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Scott is decidedly *not* a figure of social or political progressivism, but rather a political reactionary with deep Royalist sympathies. Lukács' thesis thereby suggests that the political orientation of a given text is not necessarily to be determined by its overt progressive or reactionary sympathies. The significance of Scott's literature lies instead for Lukács in its ability to expand the reader's historical imagination, enhancing their ability to grasp alternative forms of existence vastly removed from their own empirical reality. Such texts can be seen to reveal the contingency of one's own historical circumstances, from the suprapersonal organization of society right down to, as Jameson later argues in a similar vein, "the historicity of structures of feeling and perception and ultimately of bodily experience, the constitution of the psyche or subject, and the dynamics and specific temporal rhythms of historicity" (*PU*, 133).

Following his discussion of Scott, Lukács reorients his analysis to the literature of the nineteenth century and nominates Cooper's *Leatherstocking Saga* as the "only worthy successor" to the literature of Scott (Cooper was also a noted political reactionary who advocated the institution of a landholding, essentially aristocratic, class in the social relations of North America).<sup>19</sup> Lukács builds his model of American historicity now according to the Marxian mastercode of the passage from one mode of production, from the savage order (akin to "primitive communism") to capitalism. He notes that it is indeed a "heightened" passage when compared to the European transition from feudalism to capitalism and is therefore an even greater stimulant to detecting historicity:

Corresponding to the historical development of North America, this theme acquires an entirely new complexion. In Scott, it is a case of a centuries long, conflict-ridden development of the various ways in which the survivals of gentile society are accommodated in the feudal system and later to rising capitalism, of the slow, crisis-ridden decline of this gentile formation. In America the contrast was posed far more brutally

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<sup>18</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 30-63.

<sup>19</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 64.

and directly by history itself; the colonizing capitalism of France and England destroys physically and morally the gentile society of the Indians which had flourished almost unchanged for thousands of years.

Cooper's concentration on this problem, on the physical decline and moral disruption of the Indian tribe gives his novels a large and broad historical perspective...<sup>20</sup>

Lukács continues:

In this simple, popular figure (Natty Bumppo) who can only experience his tragedy emotionally, but not understand it, Cooper portrays the enormous historical tragedy of those early colonizers who emigrated from England in order to preserve their freedom, but who themselves destroy this freedom by their own deeds in America. Maxim Gorky expressed this tragedy very well: "As an explorer of the forests and prairies of the 'New World' he blazes trails in them for people who later condemn him as a criminal because he has infringed their mercenary and, to his sense of freedom, unintelligible laws. All his life he has unconsciously served the great cause of the geographical expansion of material culture in a country of uncivilized people and— found himself incapable of living in the conditions of this culture for which he had struck the first paths." Gorky shows here very finely how a great historical, indeed world-historical tragedy could be portrayed through the destiny of a mediocre man of the people. Cooper shows that such a tragedy is rendered much more artistically moving if portrayed in a milieu where the immediate economic contrasts and the moral ones arising from them grow organically out of everyday problems. The tragedy of the pioneers is linked superbly here with the tragic decline of gentile society, and one of the great contradictions of mankind's journey of progress therewith acquires a wonderful and tragic embodiment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 65.

Lukács offers a number of important lessons in this passage. Firstly, that the Frontier must be read according to the historical passage from one mode of production to another (a colonial process) which thereby envisages certain privileged individuals who enjoy the unique experience of feeling, inhabiting and living, in a single biological lifetime, two alternate modes of production and two corresponding experiences of social life or even of subjectivity. Secondly, this narrative configuration is a point at which “one of the great contradictions of mankind’s journey of progress” crystalizes, and this contradiction will increasingly take the form of the trading of “valences” or symbolic charges between the realms of savagery and civilization in the history of the Western form.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the realm of savagery that initially appeared as a form of immiseration will increasingly come to be *preferred* by the colonial emissary or “Westerner.” But Lukács alerts us to the fact that this contradiction was already fully present in the earliest protoplot of the Western. It is this fundamental contradiction that non-Marxian scholarship (with its belief in the “historical law of non-contradiction” that characterizes non-dialectical or “*verständlich*” thought according to Jameson<sup>23</sup>) strives to contain, neutralize or even efface as a mere “paradox” or “irony.”<sup>24</sup>

Returning then to Cawelti’s theory of the Frontier as the interface between two cultural households, the order of “civilization” must now be rewritten under the rubric of capitalism as a mode of production. Very often this critical characterization occurs euphemistically according to a broad sense of

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<sup>22</sup> Jameson suggests in *Valences of the Dialectic* that historical phenomena can be grasped as dialectical when they appear to “trade valences” or charges as a kind of *peripeteia* (508).

<sup>23</sup> In *Valences of the Dialectic* Jameson characterizes Hegel’s concept of *Verstand* or “non-dialectical” thought as the “local law of our everyday life in a physical world of objects and extension” (16) or “simple externalizing thought” (17) in which “the categories of Being are those of common sense or a daily life among objects, in which the law of non-contradiction holds sway” (76).

<sup>24</sup> Lukács now offers the current study a strong precedent for articulating the central contradiction of the cultural figuration under examination, which is for Jameson of deep importance as “the methodological requirement to articulate a text’s fundamental contradiction may then be seen as a test of the completeness of the analysis” (*PU*, 66).

“modernity” or is only half articulated. Cawelti, for example, says little about the realm of the “townspeople” (*SM*, 40). Wright continues in a similar vein, arguing that “[civilization] is the bourgeois ideal of a society based on interaction and communication as well as the concepts and actions of market individualism.”<sup>25</sup> Postcolonial literature appears often marked by the same reticence.<sup>26</sup> Pippin comes closer to accurately diagnosing “civilization” without employing the term “capitalism”:

For many great Westerns are indeed about the founding of the early, struggling stages of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property-owning, market-economy, technologically advanced societies in transition from, mostly, lawlessness (or corrupt and ineffective law) and war that border on classic state-of-nature thought experiments (or mythic pictures of origins).<sup>27</sup>

The regimes that govern civilization coalesce around two impetuses: that of rationalizing production and instituting a market economy (the planting of monoculture crops, the legal and geographical parceling of land under regimes of private ownership, the establishment of nodal structures of commercial transportation etc.) as well as securing the ethical and legal regimes that will manage interpersonal conduct in the marketplace. These appear as “commerce” and “justice” in their shorthand, heuristic forms and the Western commonly

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<sup>25</sup> Wright continues in *Six Guns and Society*: “The kind of society ‘validated by the Western’: it is a society that stresses the value of the family, seeks the rule of law, and trusts in the legal structure of American democracy. Its members believe in the institutions of the market economy; they respect hard work and business, even though they recognize that business is often corrupt. They respect religious beliefs, without giving them great stress; they recognize that violence is sometimes necessary, but do not accept it is a way of life, and desire a peaceful community where violence is the exception. Above all, it is an egalitarian society where no one, except a villain, sets himself apart from others. All are legally and morally equal, and though abilities differ everyone is assumed to be decent and kind” (152).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Huhndorf suggests in *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, rather vaguely, that narratives of “going native” “attempt to resolve anxieties about history and modernity” (9).

<sup>27</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 223-246 (hereafter cited in text as *PS*).

functioned as a theatre for celebrating an ideology of “law and order,” where its drama neutralized or annulled pathological forms of behavior that threaten the reproduction of these regimes. Bazin offers an early reading of the genre as a ratification of these historical regimes in celebratory terms:

The white Christian on the contrary is truly the conqueror of a new world. The grass sprouts where his horse has passed. He imposes simultaneously his moral and technical order, the one linked to the other and the former guaranteeing the latter.<sup>28</sup>

The thrust of much early scholarship on the Western appears to be in complicit agreement with this ideological impetus, conferring a general climate of legitimacy upon the regimes of the colonial Self. The greatest historical expression of this ideology was the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” in which it was the unique vocation of the American collective entity to unfurl from coast to coast and thereby remake the New World according to God’s will.<sup>29</sup> This doctrine is of course rarely brought into serious question in the classical Western.

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<sup>28</sup> André Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 145.

<sup>29</sup> Pearce describes the doctrine in these terms in *Savagism and Civilization*:

The American solution was worked out as an element in an idea of progress, American progress. Cultures are good, it was held, as they allow for a full realization of man’s essential and absolute moral nature; and man realizes this nature as he progresses historically from a lesser to a greater good, from the simple to the complex, from savagism to civilization. Westward American progress would, in fact, be understood to be reproducing this historical progression; and the savage would be understood as one who had not and somehow could not progress into the civilized, who would inevitably be destroyed by the civilized, the lesser good necessarily giving way to the greater. Civilized men who gave in to the temptations of savagism and its simplicities would likewise be destroyed. For the Indian was the remnant of a savage past away from which civilized men had struggled to grow. To study him was to study the past. To kill him was to kill the past. History would thus be the key to the moral worth of cultures; the history of American civilization would thus be conceived of as three-dimensional, progressing from past to present, from east to west, from higher to lower. (48)

The oppositional force that stood in the way of this historical progression was the “Red Man.” There is a long prehistory of the colonial or popular imagination of the Native American from the earliest days of colonization.<sup>30</sup> From the earliest days of colonization, the realm beyond the Frontier was grasped as peopled with another form of indigenous “civilization.” It is then the Indian’s “savagery” that becomes the corresponding negative term in the classical conceptual schema as, according to Bazin, Native American societies appeared “incapable of imposing on [the land] man’s order”<sup>31</sup> (an erroneous argument challenged and overturned by subsequent anthropological learning). However even in the early scholarly reception of the Western (beginning at least with Cawelti’s *The Six-Gun Mystique*) there was a suspicion that this oppositional form of subjectivity on the other side of the colonial interface was no simple form of negation. There was rather a sense that this alternate form of existence beyond the Frontier inflects, shapes and superintends the dynamics of the genre in a profound way. Thus Cawelti argues:

The second major character role in the Western is that of the savage. In his simplest form the savage is the bloodthirsty Indian or lawless outlaw who is the irreconcilable adversary of hero and townspeople. (*SM*, 52)

Leaving to one side the “lawless outlaw” for the moment, the social construction of the figure of the savage was a deeply conflicted exercise and displayed a structural bifurcation. There is on the one hand the savagery that appears to be grafted onto the older European ideologeme of the “evil” Other, dedicated to a ritual regime or cult of “Thanatos.”<sup>32</sup> It has been persuasively shown that this is the lingering afterimage of the earlier seventeenth century Protestant conception of the wilderness as the Godless void inhabited by demonic entities

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<sup>30</sup> See note 4, chapter 1 above.

<sup>31</sup> Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” 145.

<sup>32</sup> “Thanatos” is the figurative name given to death in post-Freudian thought as a quasi-metaphysical force (the “death drive”) in the Freudian metapsychology. See Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 614-616.



through which the ethical category of “evil” would appear to move.<sup>33</sup> Pearce argues, for example, that to the Puritans it appeared certain that “Satanism... was at the core of savage life.”<sup>34</sup> This image of the savage, grasped as “symbolizing” the “violence, brutality, and ignorance which civilized society seeks to control and eliminate”<sup>35</sup> (the domination of inner “passions” always legitimized by reference to a Hobbesian vision of *bellum omnium contra omnes*<sup>36</sup>) ideologically furnished a justification for colonial domination as “enlightenment.” Furthermore, this image provided the Western with the raw materials to build a structural vision of the Frontier as an *ethical* theatre, in which an oppositional form of being across the Frontier operates as a kind of evil Other or “villainy.” As we will come to see, it is the infamous pseudo-ethnographic practice of scalping that comes to serve as the telltale signature of the older satanic-thanatic figure within narratives of colonial domination and resistance.

The second class of figuration representing the ethnological Other corresponds to that pattern of ethnographic nostalgia that I have traced as it emerges in the eighteenth century with Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*. Cawelti again employs the telltale rhetorical signs:

While some Westerns do not get much beyond the simple opposition of good hero and evil savages, the relationship is rather more complex in most examples of the formula. The savages are, not invariably villains, for, beginning with Cooper the idea of the noble savage played an important role in the tradition of the Western manifesting itself variously in virtuous Indians and “good” outlaws who exist in complex counterpoint with the

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<sup>33</sup> This ideologeme remains current in our more recent cultural vocabularies. Consider for example David Lynch’s reworking of the motif in the villain character of “Bob” and the black and white “lodges” in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). For discussions of this essentially Protestant conception of Indian life see “The Antipodes of Paradise: William Bradford and the Hatred of Wilderness” (42-54) and “Reinventing the Indian: The Red Devil” (135-143) in Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America’s Obsession with the Untamed West*; Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*.

<sup>34</sup> Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> See note 60, chapter 1 above.

evil savages. This double view of the savage mirrors the double meaning of wilderness on which I have already commented. The presence of both noble and diabolical manifestations of savagery reflects the same kind of ambiguity about progress of civilization which I noted in discussing the townspeople. (*SM*, 52)

This second class of figuration is associated with “certain positive values which are restricted or destroyed by advancing civilization: the freedom and spontaneity of wilderness life, the sense of personal honor and individual mastery, the deep camaraderie of men untrammelled by domestic duties...” (*SM*, 52). The result is that, at least as early as Cooper, Cawelti points out, the two are sedimented into the imaginary of the Western in two alternate symbolic factions: “The forest... is the locus of the bloodthirsty and savage ‘Mingos’ but also of the noble and heroic Delawares” (*SM*, 42). This bifurcation corresponds to the basic distinction between Hobbesian and Rousseauist discourses.<sup>37</sup> A theory of this classically bifurcated “savagery” is therefore integral in any attempt to schematize the genre.

Roughly contemporaneous with Cawelti’s schema, Kitses elaborates upon this classical conceptuality of the Frontier, extrapolating its derivatives into a matrix of conceptual antagonisms that the genre has traditionally negotiated or “managed”<sup>38</sup>:

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Raymond Durgnat and Scott Simmon, “Six Creeds that Won the Western,” in *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998) 59-84. Durgnat and Simmon argue that “just beyond the sagebrush, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrangle for a grasp on the Western” and add that “westerns have their idyllic side, the wilderness turning into a Rousseauvian pastoral garden where men dwell in harmony” (72); Mitchell also detects in the genre an inquiry as to whether “in this conflict of Hobbes with Rousseau, are men evil because of nature or nurture?” (251). See Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Kitses, “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” 59.

<b>THE WILDERNESS</b>	<b>CIVILIZATION</b>
<b>The Individual</b>	<b>The Community</b>
freedom	restriction
honour	institutions
self-knowledge	illusion
integrity	compromise
self-interest	social responsibility
solipsism	democracy
<b>Nature</b>	<b>Culture</b>
purity	corruption
experience	knowledge
empiricism	legalism
pragmatism	idealism
brutalization	refinement
savagery	humanity
<b>The West</b>	<b>The East</b>
America	Europe
The frontier	America
equality	class
agrarianism	industrialism
tradition	change
the past	the future

What in Cawelti is a fairly simple and singular master antimony unfolds into a cascading schemata of the different forms of subjectivity projected on either side of the Frontier. But it also admits the difficulty of any simple valorization of civilization. What we can immediately observe in this conceptual schema is the degree to which it concurs with, or unconsciously replicates, the conceptual schema of the Rousseauist ethos that extols the virtues of a “solitary and

wounded" individual in its struggles against "a society hostile to man" (*JF*, 40). In other words, Kitses's schemata reveal the degree to which this image of American historicity is projected according to the philosophical categories I delineated in the previous chapter. The Wilderness or the realm of the savage beyond the Frontier opens on to an inner, "natural" form of being (grasped in notions of "freedom," "self-knowledge" and "integrity") that is archaic ("the past") but potentially recuperable. The reference to "self interest" is interesting here (Wright will add that the Westerner hero's "self-interest is an aspect of his being alone and self-reliant" (*SS*, 142)) as it contains echoes of Rousseau's doctrine of *amour de soi*, that psychic state of undivided and "natural" care for the preservation of the Self that precedes its historical deformation into *amour propre* (the form of inauthentic self-regard that occurs through the eyes of the Other)<sup>39</sup>. Civilization, on the other hand, is governed by the "rational" productive regimes of capitalist political economy but now begins to register as a climate of extorted social and economic performances and alienating socialities grasped in notions of "class," "restriction," "illusion," "compromise" and "corruption."

The coding of the civilization polarity begins to invert but only in relation to its Other, the negative term of savagery. Only at the historical interface of the Frontier, at which alternate forms of historical being can be imagined, can the historicity of the Self be detected. This is the point then to return to my contention that the Frontier is profoundly a narrative structure of imagined ethnological encounter and observation, with all the cascading effects on the colonial imagination that entails. It is at this historically determinate point, at which two profoundly different modes of human existence meet and attempt, in however degraded and distorted a fashion, to grasp the being of the Other that a certain transformation of consciousness occurs. From Natty Bumppo onwards, narratives of the West stage the quest of an emissary figure of colonial contact (variously the fur trapper, the mountain man, the cowboy, or indeed the outlaw) who moves *beyond* the Frontier and whose being, in its multifarious psychic, sensory and bodily capacities, is thereby "remade" under the new conditions encountered.

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<sup>39</sup> See note 74, chapter 1 above.

Thus, I would contend, Kitses and Cawelti have not gone far enough in terms of grasping the *historical* emergence of this system of narrative coding. It is important to re-iterate at this point, as Jameson reminds us, that this narrative or conceptual category of “nature” found beyond the Frontier is not in any sense “natural” (*PU*, 98). Returning to Baudrillard briefly, it is possible to find a historical explanation for the emergence of such a symbolic system of “nature”. Baudrillard argues in *The Mirror of Production* that:

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the simultaneous emergence of labor as the source of wealth and needs as the finality of produced wealth is captured at the zenith of Enlightenment philosophy in the appearance of the concept of Nature, around which the entire rationality of the system of political economy turns.

As late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nature signified only the totality of laws founding the world’s intelligibility: the guarantee of an order where men and things could exchange their meanings [significations]. In the end, this is God (Spinoza’s “Deus sive natura”). Subject and world already have respective positions (as they had since the great Judeo-Christian rupture, to which we will return), but not in the sense of a mastery or exploitation of Nature, or conversely as the exaltation of an original myth. The rule for the autonomous subject confronting Nature is to form his practice so as to achieve an equilibrium of significations.

All this is shattered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the rise and “discovery” of Nature as a potentiality of powers (no longer a totality of laws); as a primordial source of life and reality lost and recovered, repressed and liberated; and as a deed projected into an atemporal past and an ideal future. This rise is only the obverse of an event: Nature’s entry into the era of its technical domination.... Nature appeared truly as an essence in all its glory but under the sign of the principle of production.... Under the objective stamp of Science, Technology, and Production, Nature becomes

the great Signified, the great Referent. It is ideally charged with “reality”; it becomes the Reality, expressible by a process that is always somehow a process of labor, at once transformation and transcription.<sup>40</sup>

This historical emergence of this “sign” of Nature, an entire symbolic apparatus, is dialectically related to its historical domination:

... it is by being sublimated and repressed that Nature becomes a metaphor of freedom and totality. Everything that speaks in terms of totality (and/or “alienation”) under the sign of a Nature or a recovered essence speaks in terms of repression and separation. Everything that invokes Nature invokes the domination of Nature.<sup>41</sup>

The emergence of the Western plot, beginning with Cooper, can now be grasped as part of larger phenomenon: the production of narrative forms within a new historical fantasy system that invests the imagined life of the savage with a symbolic, even libidinal charge. The rhetorical tropes that Baudrillard highlights— such as a “primordial source of life” and a “reality lost and recovered, repressed and liberated”— indeed directly evoke the more colourful attempts of Western genre theory to grasp this “symbolic charge.” The fantasy of the savage envisions a mode of subjectivity still “connected” to that lost practice of “exchanging significations” with nature that is increasingly lost under the history of capitalism. The conception of Rousseau as the “patron of Romanticism” is to some degree correct,<sup>42</sup> as his philosophy is the first characterized by “a figurative system in which nature stands for “freedom” and “totality,” protesting “repression” and “alienation” (this would then be the origin of Jameson’s “naturistic strategy”). It is possible to further suggest, following Baudrillard’s observation, that the historical relationship between the solidification of capitalism on American soil and its collective identity as “Nature’s nation” is less

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 53-54.

<sup>41</sup> Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 55-56.

<sup>42</sup> For an influential conservative discussion of this relation see Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919).

an irony than the dialectical expression of the same phenomenon (and it is surely upon this basis that this common dictum regains something of its original freshness<sup>43</sup>). It can be characterized instead as a historical process by which the intensification of the technological and capitalist domination of Nature elicits increasingly insistent cultural and philosophical resistance or protestation.

Baudrillard's thesis offers a common historical point of origin for the twin arms of the ideologeme as it is expressed in both philosophy and narrative. It is now possible to offer a hypothesis for the conceptual difficulty ("paradoxes," "ironies" and "ambiguities") that has plagued the standard formulations of the Frontier discussed earlier. In an era in which one of the strongest ideological impulses is to heroicize and valorize the domination of nature— "modernity"— the apparent inversion of "nature's" ideological coding appears as a troubling and vexing phenomenon that requires the appropriate "diversion" or "divestment." I now want to turn to two patterns of critical observation leading to the more compromising speculations that are implicit in and "scramble" the classical logic of the Western. It is at these moments that the many theorists suspect, fleetingly, that the Western threatens to open up (and is conscientiously re-routed from opening up) onto a panoramic vista of subversive possibilities. On this basis, it is impossible to agree with the common but radically reductive proposition that the "central purport of the frontier in most Westerns has simply been its potential as a setting for exciting, epic conflicts" (*SM*, 35). What I hope to illustrate is that the Frontier offers the Western a unique set of narrative possibilities that are specifically encoded with forms of symbolic gratification oriented towards our own lived experience under capitalism.

### **2.3 Contradictions of Desire, Labour and Self-Presence**

The first narrative possibility is that life beyond the Frontier looks more erotic than life under "civilization" in the sense that lived experience maintains an expressive relationship to Desire. The Westerner is freed from the "bad

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<sup>43</sup> For a historical account of the ideologies behind this dictum see Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1967).

consciousness” instilled by the compulsory regimes of procreative and monogamous heterosexuality sanctioned by Christian ethics because the regimes of bodily self-supervision that would manage desire “inwards” are yet to form.<sup>44</sup> This is grasped by the apparent “sexual license” of savage life. Smith’s analysis of popular nineteenth century literature is particularly helpful in this regard. Discussing representations of “wilderness life,” Smith notes that “life in the mountains is especially attractive because of its unrestricted love and licensed polygamy. All the trappers have ‘an instinctive fondness for the reckless savage life, alternately indolent and laborious, full and fasting, occupied in hunting, fighting, feasting, intriguing, and amours, interdicted by no laws, or difficult morals, or any restraints, but the invisible ones of Indian habit and opinion.’”<sup>45</sup> Some critics go further to suggest an implicit erotic bond between the ethnological Other and the colonial emissary.<sup>46</sup>

Smith’s observation also flags the second of the two recurring thematics that emerge at this time—the problematization of the nature of labour. The apparent absence of immiserated labour in the savage order assaulted European colonial consciousness from early colonial times (recalling that to Beverly the indigenous peoples “seem’d to have escaped, or rather not to have been concern’d in the first Curse, Of getting their Bread by the Sweat of their Brows”<sup>47</sup>). Smith’s visions of the Westerner’s love of the “reckless savage life, alternately indolent and laborious, full and fasting, occupied in hunting, fighting, feasting” contains strong

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<sup>44</sup> Marcuse suggests that “historically, the reduction of Eros to procreative-monogamic sexuality (which completes the subjection of the pleasure principle to the reality principle) is consummated only when the individual has become a subject-object of labor in the apparatus of his society...” (*EC*, 90).

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Fiedler for example repeatedly invokes the idea of a repressed erotic bond in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, arguing that “the Real West, the West of the West...[is] a place to which White male Americans flee from their own women into the arms of Indian males, but which those White women, in their inexorable advance from coast to coast, destroy” (50); Williams agrees with Fiedler in this regard. See Doug William, “Pilgrims and the Promised Land: A Genealogy of the Western,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses, Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 93-114. He argues that “the frontier in the Western has a tradition of same-sex couples” (108).

<sup>47</sup> See note 63, chapter 1 above.



echoes of Baudrillard and Sahlins' theory of "primitive affluence."<sup>48</sup> Something like a pre-capitalist, pre-rationalized division of labour emerges in the West when the subject escapes the gravitational field of the efficient but complex division of labour that characterizes "civilization."<sup>49</sup> This thematic registers in two forms. The first is an apparent liberation from labour. Warshow notes that the "Western hero, by contrast [to the gangster], is a figure of repose." He expounds upon his apparent indifference to the economic regimes of capitalism:

The Westerner is par excellence a man of leisure. Even when he wears the badge of a marshal or, more rarely, owns a ranch, he appears to be unemployed... If he does own a ranch, it is in the background; we are not actually aware that he owns anything except his horse, his guns, and the one worn suit of clothing which is likely to remain unchanged all through the movie... Employment of some kind— usually unproductive— is always open to the Westerner, but when he accepts it, it is not because he needs to make a living, much less from any idea of "getting ahead." Where could he want to "get ahead" to? By the time we see him, he is already "there" ...<sup>50</sup>

The Westerner appears released from the anxieties of social differentiation, economic mobility and social flux that characterize the "freedom" of the individual in the capitalist marketplace. Warshow's heuristic of "getting ahead" can be rewritten in a stronger form as the bourgeois psychological climate of advancement and ambition that attends the emergence of capitalism. Cawelti cites Warshow approvingly and continues in a similar vein:

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<sup>48</sup> See note 177, chapter 1 above.

<sup>49</sup> This thematic is characteristically associated with Durkheim's theory of "organic solidarity." See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1933), 111-132). It is also associated with Tönnies' theory of the "*Gesellschaft*" or "society" which is opposed to the "*Gemeinschaft*" or "community." See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. Jose Harris, trans. Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 52-91.

<sup>50</sup> See Robert Warshow, "The Westerner," in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 37.

The cowboy hero is far from a hero of work and enterprise. Indeed, he is rarely represented as working at all. Nonetheless, the form requires that the hero somehow possess the necessary funds to maintain himself in horses, food, ammunition and elegant costumes, though it is rarely clear just where or how he gets his money.... Thus, in many respects the cowboy hero represents an image of man directly opposed to the official American pioneer of progress, success and domesticity. In place of “getting ahead” he pursues the ideal of honor which he shares with his masculine comrades. (*SM*, 64)

One is struck by the apparent conflict between the Westerner and that complex of heroic cultural figures dedicated to exalting capitalist production and glorifying the deferment of pleasure which Marcuse characterizes as “the Promethean culture hero of toil, productivity, and progress through repression” (*EC*, 161). The Westerner appears to be at least partially excused from the regimes of labour (that arrive with the yeomanry and later, the ranch empire) that would constitute the material basis of an American civilization. To be sure, the cowboy-westerner and yeoman share a certain delicate civic fraternity (as we will see in *Shane*), but display quite distinct identities in relation to production: the Westerner exists at a certain remove from Promethean labour, the yeoman homesteader that breaks ground in the West is its first great heroic form.

The corollary of this observation is that subjectivity at the Frontier appears to entail an intensification or even qualitative transformation of labour. The Western figures a climate of existence in which it is radically more difficult to sustain human life in the absence of technological capital. But the “harshness” of the environment offers its own transformative moment. Tompkins argues that “...hard work is transformed [in the West] from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of human endeavours: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the body and mind, and directs

one's life to the service of an unquestioned goal."<sup>51</sup> Recalling that the symbolic gratifications of the genre must operate in relation to our own sociological reality, it is interesting to note that Tompkins reads the representation of labour in the Western in relation to consumer society: "Ordinary work— in fact, ordinary life— is too much like shopping. It never embodies what the hero's struggle to get out of the blizzard fully embodies: the fully saturated moment...."<sup>52</sup> Tompkins' argument is predicated upon the perception of a historical gap between the alienated or "reified" labour of modernity and a return to an earlier conception of labour as a sensuous interaction with an order of objects to which the mind and body is, on some level, inherently "suited" by its innate ability to perform mechanical and cognitive tasks of a transformative nature.<sup>53</sup> Such a vision of labour links the genre with a dual Utopian conception of labour: a liberation from its alienated form and a return of its elemental pleasures and necessities as the very essence of human existence. These observations suggest that the representation of life at the Frontier functions as a fantasy coded with symbolic gratifications that protest those alienating regimes that the Frankfurt School, and Marcuse especially, diagnose in our own capitalist "civilization."

However something much larger appears repeatedly in the literature and spans these smaller thematics. The Westerner cannot be "fixed" in society as whatever "resource" is available to him appears to dissolve once engulfed in the new climate of advancing civilization. The most common rhetorical trope by which authors have attempted to grasp this contradiction is "honour." In Western genre theory, Warshow is an early proponent of this vocabulary. In the canonical statement, he claims that what the Westerner "defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image— in fact, his honour. This is what makes him invulnerable."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> I refer to the positive understanding of labour as essential to man's "species being" in Marx's discussion of estranged labour in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 106-119.

<sup>54</sup> Warshow, "The Westerner," 38. See also Cawelti *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 78; Kitses, *Horizons West*, 18; Kitses, "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western," 59.

This “honour,” we have been told by Cawelti, Wright and Kitses, is in fact bequeathed to the Westerner by the Native American who, like the Westerner, is “aligned” with the wilderness, and embodies a more “natural” subjectivity.

Wright expands upon this point:

As we have seen, the land is the hero’s source of strength, both physical and moral; he is an independent and autonomous individual because he is part of the land. The strength that makes him unique and necessary to society and the beauty that makes him desirable to the girl are human counterparts to the strength and beauty of the wilderness. Moreover, the weakness of society and the villainy of the villains stem from their ignorance of the wilderness and their identification with the trappings of civilization. Thus, the man who accepts the wilderness, believes in it, and communes with it is stronger than civilization and capable of making it into something worthwhile. In the professional plot these meanings are simplified and enhanced. All the characters outside society, good and bad, are identified with the land. Here is where freedom, independence, and strength lie as opposed to the cowardice, stupidity, greed and conformity of society. Respect, friendship, and love are available to people who associate with the land, who may work in or for society (*Rio Bravo*, *The Professionals*, *True Grit*, *The War Wagon*) but whose understanding and comfort derive from the wilderness. (*SS*, 189)

Some now read this “honour” in ethical terms— as the outward manifestation of an inner “goodness” or sense of moral election. Bazin belongs to the scholarly tradition of reading the Western in ethical terms when he suggests that the genre constitutes a rewriting of the “great epic Manichaeism which sets the forces of evil over against the knights of the true cause” and that “it is the morality of a world in which social good and evil, in their simplicity and necessity, exist like two primary and basic elements.”<sup>55</sup> This “basic moral opposition,” for Cawelti, is a sign of the “simplest” Westerns (*SM*, 54). This approach culminates in a reading of the West as an enactment of the triumph of Christian ethics of self-regulation

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<sup>55</sup> Bazin, “The Western; Or the American Film Par Excellence,” 147.

or self-mastery over “temptations” or conflicts between the pleasure principle and the introjected superego.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, Smith speculates that life in the West revives an “intuitive ethics of the wilderness” which is to be contrasted with the “bigotry of urban society.” This “intuitive ethics,” we are told, is a result of the restored relationship of direct sensuality between subject and object, once the “pernicious veil” of “artificiality” that is interposed by civilization is lifted and the individual once again encounters the “natural objects of experience.”<sup>57</sup> These early mountain men of American literature “arrive at truth by much the same processes; they equally scorn all shackles but those of the God-imposed senses, whether corporeal or spiritual and, like with self-reliance, rule all precedents by the Gospel as revealed within themselves.”<sup>58</sup> Ethical awareness in this hypothesis comes not from restraint, resistance or transcendence, but from a restoration of the proper relation between sense experience and consciousness, and the restitution of a climate that frees the subject from the divided duties of Christian theological categories such as “soul” and “flesh.”

However, the argument that it is an ethics that is revealed by the Western ultimately brings the critic up short. If the Western merely functioned as a theatre of moral drama, securing the sovereignty of “good” over “evil,” what is to account for the contradictions that mount unabated in the literature whilst these arguments are being made? Bazin, for example, senses that this relationship is

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<sup>56</sup> See Cawelti’s reference to Homans’ thesis in *The Six-Gun Mystique*:

The basic pattern of the Western is a plot “in which evil appears as a series of temptations to be resisted by the hero— most of which he succeeds in avoiding through inner control. When faced with the embodiment of these temptations, his mode of control changes, and he destroys the threat. But the story is so structured that the responsibility for this act falls upon the adversary, permitting the hero to destroy while appearing to save.” This pattern, Mr Homans feels, is related to the cultural influence of “Puritanism” because it has the same emphasis on the necessity for inner control and repression of “the spontaneous, vital aspects of life. (SM, 22)

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 81.

problematic and inadequate. He observes that “there is often little moral difference between the outlaw and the man who operates within the law.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, were the Western animated purely by an ethical conception of being, there would be no need for its steadily increasing adoption of an elegiac or nostalgic register at the arrival of civilization. After all, in this period the genre does not seem to entertain any real anxiety that civilization might lose its historical mandate to extinguish savagery as an alternate historical mode of being. If anything, surely the legitimating ideological vision must be maintained that advancing civilization strengthens, codifies and ratifies such ethical frameworks.

In each case the categories of analysis appear to offer little purchase on the precise concept. The most indicative pattern in the scholarship is the moment in which this ineffable resource seems to slip from analytical grasp. For example, in his thesis that American “high” literary culture of the nineteenth century borrowed from the model of Virgilian pastoralism, Leo Marx theorizes a “quasi-religious experience”:

The echo, a recurrent device in pastoral, is another metaphor of reciprocity. It evokes that *sense of relatedness between man and not-man which lends a metaphysical aspect to the mode*; it is a hint of the quasi-religious experience to be developed in the romantic pastoralism of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau. Hence the pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy calls “semi-primitivism”; it is located in a middle ground somewhere “between,” yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature.<sup>60</sup>

Returning to Cawelti who theorizes:

...the [Western] hero is a more complex figure because he has internalised the conflict between savagery and civilization. His inner conflict with the

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<sup>59</sup> Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” 146.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 23 (emphasis added).

new values of civilization and the personal heroism and honor of the old wilderness tends to overshadow the clash between savages and townspeople. While he undertakes to protect and save the pioneers, this type of hero also senses that his own feelings and his special quality as a hero are bound up in the wilderness life. The outcome of Westerns which present this version of the hero are invariably more ambiguous and tragic. (*SM*, 54).

This “special quality” is echoed by Kitses who points out that Peckinpah “was wont to talk of the mystical communion between the hunter and the deer.”<sup>61</sup> Pippin also adopts language that appears to fit this pattern. Developing an extended reading of *The Searchers*, he posits a “state of the soul”:

The doomed fate of both the Indians and the heroic cowboys is often treated mythically as the doomed fate of these very traits [“Indian virtues of honor, loyalty and courage”] in the modern world, a world now complex enough to require a level of cooperation, compromise, prudence bet-hedging, and repression that is inimical to such states of the soul. (*PS*, 105)

What is “lost” in each case is relegated to an ahistorical and quasi-spiritual zone of the “soul,” a category thoroughly degraded and defunct in our epoch. The point here is to note that the language employed becomes sufficiently vague as to avoid responsibility for the dogged pursuit of the quality under examination. These rhetorics open up a profound issue that vexes the scholarship as to whether it is satisfactory to assimilate the category of “honour” to some variant on the moral or the good. My contention is that we cannot, and that the attempt to do so, to code the genre in purely ethical terms, has impeded much of the classical scholarship. The crux of the matter is the confusion of the *ethical* with the *metaphysical*, a confusion we have already seen crystallized in the distinction between the barbarian and the savage. This confusion is then both perpetuated and problematized in the competition between the distinct seventeenth and

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<sup>61</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, 6.

eighteenth century ideologemes of the savage that we touched upon earlier. The preponderance of the term “honour” can then be grasped as a scrambling of the language of ethics and metaphysics which plagues the scholarly record.

I would suggest then that these authors are attempting to grasp a metaphysical, rather than an ethical, fantasy or vision and that the ethnographic nostalgia I traced earlier can be seen to assume its full import in the narrative system underpinning this metaphysical fantasy. The genre contains the fantasy of an imagined return to that fresh sensorium of the life world of the savage with all its symbolic gratifications as hypothesized by Rousseau and his followers: a reduced antagonism between psyche and body, a transparent and cohesive social structure, a release from repressive regimes patrolling desire and a release from regimes of alienating labour, an altogether different historical organization of the relationship between the subject and the object displaying a Utopian quality. It is now possible to recode these speculations about the Westerner’s “soul” as a recuperated sense of “self presence,” or “plenitude,” an alternate ontological climate belonging to an archaic, Rousseauist form of historicity. It is a fantasy that may indeed be characterized as a “metaphysical nostalgia,”<sup>62</sup> but it is a nostalgia that now finds its expression in a persistent form of collective figuration. This is the ultimate source, I would suggest, of the genre’s common and much discussed elegiac “tone” as the precious retrieval of an alternate form of ontology is the first casualty of the arrival of civilization. Thus what I propose is that the metaphysical mode I have traced superintends the genre in a somewhat covert manner and exists in a conflictual and obscured relationship with the ethical mastercode of “good” and “evil.”

It is here that Wright’s work becomes valuable to the present inquiry as a kind of meta-analysis of the development of the classical Western, which he splits into four more precise phases: the “Classical” plot (SS, 32-58), the “Vengeance” variation (SS, 59-73), the “Transition” theme (SS, 64-84) and the “Professional” plot (SS, 85-123). Cawelti and Kitses’ earlier and more impressionistic schemes

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<sup>62</sup> See note 96, chapter 1 above.



give way to a more systematic and rigorous narrative analysis of the most iconic Westerns into so many “narrative functions” in the structuralist manner.<sup>63</sup> But Wright’s analysis offers a “structural grid through which conceptual meaning” is organized and communicated (SS, 122) and reveals the interaction between the ethical and metaphysical mastercodes proposed above. The historical development of the genre is tracked according to the following antimonies (SS, 49):

1. good/bad
2. strong/weak
3. inside society/outside society
4. wilderness/civilization

The first antimony now functions as a heuristic for the ethical code, the second for the metaphysical. These polarities allow Wright to distill out of the genre’s narrative *combinatoire* the form of character coding inflected by ethnographic nostalgia as *strong: outside society: wilderness*.

When associated with the Westerner-hero, the coding is completed ethically as *good: strong: outside society: wilderness*. Wright explains this particular configuration:

The hero is the only character who is both good and strong, and this fourth opposition [wilderness/civilization] explains how he alone can be this way. It is because he is associated with the wilderness, while all the other characters—good or bad, weak or strong, inside or outside society— are associated with civilization. This identification can be established in various ways, through purely visual imagery or an explanation of his background— his life as a trapper or association with the Indians— or through the dramatization of his knowledge of the land and the wildlife; the minimal requirement for the hero is that he belongs

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<sup>63</sup> Wright cites the work of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss as precedents when outlining his methodology (SS, 16-28).

to the West and has no association with the East, with education and culture. The East is always associated with weakness, cowardice, selfishness, or arrogance. The Western hero is felt to be good and strong because he is involved with the pure and noble wilderness, not the contaminating civilization of the East. (SS, 57).

However, when it is associated with the Westerner outlaw it is completed as *bad: strong: outside society: wilderness*. This crystallization of a more complex system of generic coding allows Wright to engage some of the apparent contradictions that I have already suggested vex the earlier scholarship. For example, the “location” of the Westerner on the ethical “good/bad opposition” is still an “interesting problem,” for how can Ringo be “good” if he has rejected civilization in *Stagecoach* (1939) (SS, 71)? In the Professional Plot it is “perfectly possible for the thieves to be the good guys” and “in fact, the villains are no longer necessarily bad” (SS, 119). The result is that Wright reveals the degree to which the Western as a theatre of self-ratification steadily breaks down in its historical development through this late classical period. For Wright, the resultant change in the ideological coding of “society” or “civilization” from the “good” to “bad” that occurs in the Transition and Professional Plots is “the most fundamental transition” apparent in the historical trajectory of the genre, and re-organizes the other codes.<sup>64</sup> This shift from an ratification to an interrogation of the culture of the Self, of “civilization,” in the historical development of the genre allows the Rousseauist task of outlining the “degradation” (OG, 114) of the culture of reference to come to the fore.

## 2.4 The Classical Hybrid Westerner: *Shane* (1953)

This “special status” of the Westerner, born in the preference for life across the Frontier, now presents a contradiction that must be negotiated or even

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<sup>64</sup> See Wright, *Sixguns and Society*: “The most fundamental transition is probably the change of society, as a moral sign, from the ‘good’ pole to the opposition of the ‘bad.’ As a result, the same opposition of images that represent ‘good’ and ‘bad’— hero and society— can also now represent ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ society as well as ‘wilderness’ and ‘civilization’” (84).

repressed by the genre. Tompkins crystalizes this contradiction when she argues that “logic would suggest that in his flight from women and children, family life, triviality, and tameness, the Western hero would run straight into the arms of the Indian, wild blood brother of his soul, but it doesn’t happen.”<sup>65</sup> The sheer fact that it does not happen (at least in this period) points to the fact that this Utopian impulse meets a kind of ideological resistance or censorship. Returning to the principles of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson suggests that:

Faced with a contradiction of this kind— which it cannot think except in terms of a stark antimony, an insoluble logical paradox— the historical *pensée sauvage*, or what we have called the political unconscious, nonetheless seeks by logical permutations and combinations to find a way out of its intolerable closure and to produce a “solution” .... (*PU*, 153).

The Westerner as a character system comes to function as a “solution” that “embodies “ or “manifests” this contradiction.<sup>66</sup> As I suggested above, various conceptual models of this new form of distinctly American subjectivity generated by the Frontier have been theorized. But in the case of the Western, the Westerner figure is defined by that “hybrid” quality that allows him to act as an intermediary between and synthesis of these cultural households. Cawelti offers the canonical statement to this effect:

As already indicated, there are three central roles in the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are above all “men in the middle,” that is, they possess many qualities and skills of the savages, but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople. (*SM*, 46)

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<sup>65</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> See also Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*: “The place of characters and of a character system is opened up only at the point at which the mind seeks further release from its ideological closure by projecting combinations of these various semes: to work through the various possible combinations is then concretely to imagine life forms, or the characterological types, than can embody and manifest such contradictions, which otherwise remain abstract and repressed” (244).

Or equally:

In most examples of the formula, however, the opposition is a more complex one, a dialectic of contrasting ways of life or psychic states. The resolution of this opposition is the work of the hero. Thus, the most basic definition of the hero role in the Western is as the figure who resolves the conflict between pioneers and savages... (SM, 54)

Let us take as an example the iconic classical Western *Shane* (1953) as a case study for demonstrating this logic of character “hybridity.” Seen from this perspective, Shane (Alan Ladd) represents a Westerner figure whose symbolic fusion of nature and culture, savagery and civilization is constructed with a unique degree of clarity, or even simplicity. In the opening scene the eponymous hero descends from the higher realm of the Wyoming mountains to the valley plain where the Starretts, amongst other settlers from Old Europe, are seeking to solidify their tenuous grasp upon a new basis for material existence: the homestead (see fig. 4). The ideological significance of the Starretts as homesteaders (see fig. 5) cannot be overstated. Henry Nash Smith develops this thematic in *Virgin Land*, arguing that the ideological charge emitted by the figure of the homesteader, as the native, free western yeoman emanates from the Lockean “freehold concept:”

...that agriculture is the only source of real wealth, that every man has a natural right to land, that labour expended in cultivating the earth confers a valid title to it, and that the ownership of land, by making the farmer independent, gives him social status and dignity, while constant contact with nature in the course of his labours makes virtuous and happy; that America offers a unique example of a society embodying these traits; and, as a general inference from all these propositions, that the government should be dedicated to the interests of the freehold farmer.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 141.

The result is that any representation of the homestead in the Western is implicated in a “far-reaching social theory” that “one of the most tangible things we mean when we speak of the development of democratic ideas in the United States.”<sup>68</sup> The figuration of the Starrett’s homestead at the centre of the plain then accords with an observation of Mottett that “from Thomas Cole to Walt Whitman, American artists have given much importance to the homestead as the spiritual and symbolic centre from which to organize the landscape...”<sup>69</sup>

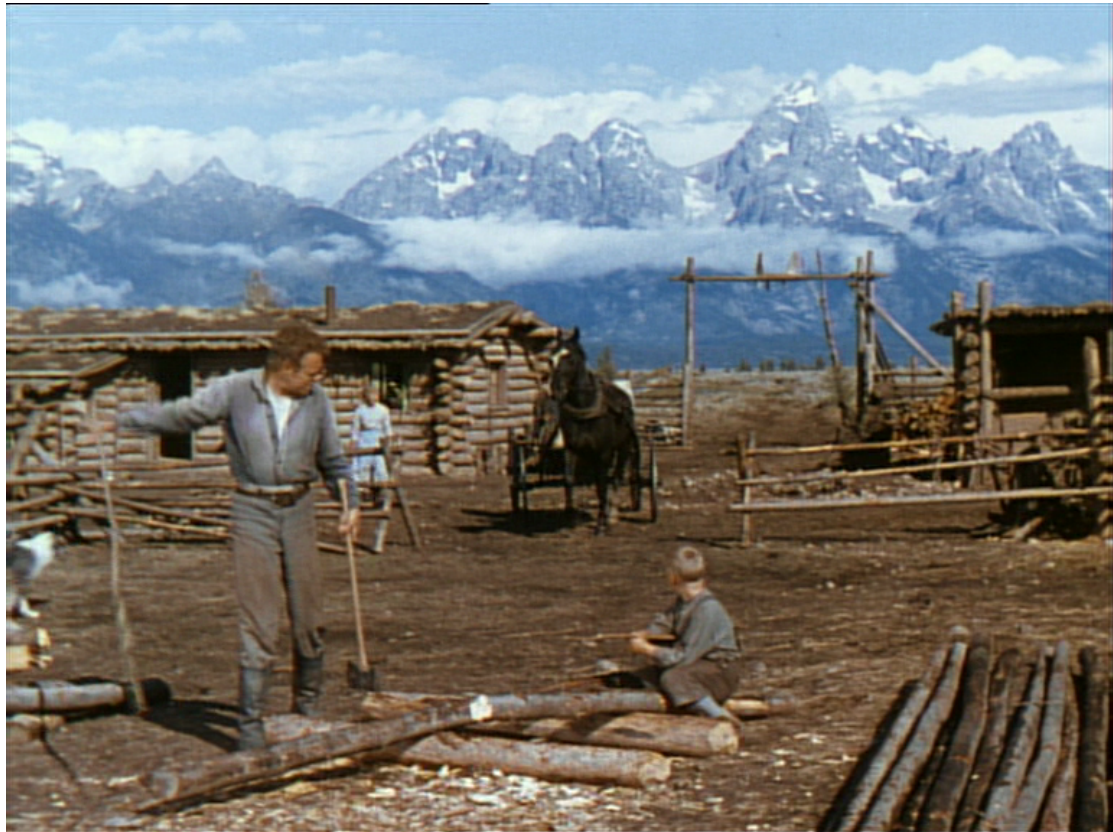


Figure 4 *Shane*: Shane descends from a higher world into the valley

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<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 154. See also Durgnat and Simmon, “Six Creeds that Won the Western,” for a discussion of the ideological significance of the yeoman and Jeffersonian democracy (73).

<sup>69</sup> Jean Mottett, “Toward a Genealogy of the American Landscape: Notes on Landscape in D.W. Griffith,” in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin LeFebvre, trans. Martin Lefebvre and Brian Crane (New York: Routledge, 2006), 62.



**Figure 5** *Shane*: The Starrett Homestead

Shane descends into this arrangement in order to mediate an increasingly violent economic struggle between two parties: the free settlers who appropriate the results of their own labour and the open-ranging Rykers who seek to drive the settlers off their homesteads. Shane is himself a notably underdeveloped or “mysterious” figure— he is an example of a kind of “spectral” Westerner whose past is mysterious and who moves through time and space with a kind of superhuman fluidity and ease. The precise events that formed him are never revealed though the fact that they involved violence is never in doubt. The narrative has something of an alibi in the child’s perspective of Joey (Brandon deWilde), for whom the “adult world” remains partially obscured, as if the film’s ideological self-censorship precludes the investigation of any compromising speculation into Shane’s past or present being. But there is no doubt that Shane is a canonical Westerner in that his subjectivity hovers in that indeterminate and ambiguous space designated as “honour” or “nobility” between ethics and

metaphysics that I have suggested above.<sup>70</sup> As much is made clear by his costume: the fringed buckskin which always implies the incorporation of the ethnological encounter.

*Shane* now provides the opportunity to briefly sketch the role of costume in signaling ethnographic nostalgia in the cinematic image. It is often observed that having crossed the Frontier, the eponymous hero conspicuously adopts the lace-up, fringed buckskin shirt which emits the signals of the material practices of the (invisible) Native American.<sup>71</sup> *Shane* is but one example of the Westerner figure whose material life is “remade” under the conditions of the Wilderness (Slotkin notes that this was Stevens’ invention rather than the original Jack Schaefer novel<sup>72</sup>). Like so many of the tropic patterns that shape the figuration of the Westerner, the significance of costume is established by Cooper in *Natty Bumppo*, upon whom Cooper bestows the sobriquet “Leatherstocking”:

Cooper’s Leatherstocking even gained his name from his costume, suggesting the extent to which this particular kind of dress excited Cooper’s imagination. Like later cowboys, Leatherstocking’s costume combined nature and artifice. His dress was largely made of the skins of animals and it was particularly adapted to the needs of wilderness life. Yet at the same time it was subtly ornamented with buckskin fringes and porcupine quills “after the manner of the Indians.” Still, it is important to note that Leatherstocking’s costume is not that of the Indians, but rather a more utilitarian wilderness version of the settler’s dress. Thus, costume exemplified the mediating role of the hero between civilization and savagery. (*SM*, 45)

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Slotkin describes the character as displaying a certain “nobility” and an “aristocratic nature” (397) in his reading of *Shane* in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, 81.

<sup>72</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 397.

The aesthetic practices that are vital to Native American indigenous cultures now flow into the hybrid material culture of the Westerner hero. But this occurs against the backdrop of what Jameson describes as the general “repression of the aesthetic in the industrializing United States,” as the result of a new historical “division of labour at work within the psyche” that attends the emergence of capitalism and as the resulting dominance of quantifying and rationalizing functions in the psyche (*PU*, 215). The aesthetics of the nineteenth century West valorize the utilitarian, the “rustic” and the “hand hewn.” The log cabin is the very emblem of this form of national stylistics which eschews decoration in favour of the instrumental and functional (see fig. 7). However within this climate the Westerner’s costume shows a tendency towards ornamentation. Cawelti further details how this apparent paradox of “dandyism” in the wilderness flows from the “native” dress of Leatherstocking into the figure of the cowboy himself:

The costumes associated with heroes and outlaws or savages are more striking. Paradoxically, they are both more utilitarian and more artificial than those of the townspeople. The cowboy’s boots, tight-fitting pants or chaps, his heavy shirt and bandana, his gun and finally his ten-gallon hat all symbolize his adaptation to the wilderness. But utility is only one of the principles of the hero-outlaw’s dress. The other is dandyism, that highly artificial love of elegance for its own sake. In the Western, dandyism sometimes takes the overt and obvious form of elaborate costumes overlaid with fringes, tassels, and scrollwork like a rococo drawing room. But it is more powerfully exemplified in the elegance of those beautifully tailored cowboy uniforms which John Wayne so magnificently fills out in the Westerns of John Ford or Howard Hawks. (*SM*, 45)

Based on these observations I would posit that these images display the operation of something like a “sartorial libido,”<sup>73</sup> in which the costume of the

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<sup>73</sup> I am here proposing a notion akin to Jameson’s “gastronomical libido” in which the potential for sensory pleasure derived from gustation undergoes a process of



Westerner subtly recalls the life world and body of the ethnological Other which is imagined as both erotic and aesthetic (a process Huhndorf calls “going native”<sup>74</sup>). As we move forward to the revisionist Western and the figuration of more overt ethnological encounters in films such as *Dances with Wolves*, it will be increasingly apparent that this appropriation of Native American costume by the Westerner signals visually the preference for the life world of the Ethnological Other over the unerotic and repressive climate of civilization. I want to suggest that this is a symptom of the larger nostalgia for the mode of production that characterizes the savage life world, which projects in its cultural and material forms an aesthetics which retain something of their original function—embellishing the material world of objects with collective sign systems that unite the social group. The ornamentation of the savage appears as the graphic delight to be found in the expression of a collective mythology which accounts both for the origin of the individual and the social collective (such a conception of aesthetics surely forces us to reconsider our own reified and historical categories of aesthetic production such as “craft” and “art”). But in the case of *Shane*, it cannot be the wholesale adoption of Native American dress. It must be a hybrid form of costume that indicates that whilst *Shane* has encountered life across the Frontier, his ultimate ideological allegiance still remains with the culture of the Self (see fig. 6).

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historical repression in essentially Protestant cultures such as those of “Britain and the United States” (*PU*, 215).

<sup>74</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, 1-18; see also Robert Baird, “Going Indian: Discovery, Adoption and Renaming Toward a “True American,” from *Deerslayer* to *Dances with Wolves*,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 277-292.



Figure 6 *Shane*: The iconic visage



Figure 7 *Shane*: The ethics and aesthetics of the hand-hewn log cabin

Returning to the film's narrative, the *denouement* accords with the scheme advanced so far. Shane's narrative *raison d'être* is his classical ability to retain that metaphysical self presence (coded strong: outside society: wilderness: good) whilst he engages and negates the Rykers as "villains" (coded strong: outside society: bad) on their own terms (in martial gun violence) but most critically without sacrificing his ethical coding as "good" (Slotkins reads the film according to the aphorism of "A Good Man with a Gun").<sup>75</sup> It is in this way that Shane can be seen to secure the ideological foundation of the emergent nation state in the virtuous and ethnically nourished image of the Starretts<sup>76</sup> (with Joey as the avatar of all the future Americans who will come to populate the "civilization" that has been secured, including, indeed, the cinematic spectators themselves). The "price" Shane must pay for this ability to perform this paradoxical function is the inability to "fix" his subjectivity permanently in the social collective. So the spectral and ephemeral quality of the character's construction culminates in the self-willed exile from the Wyoming valley where he found his temporary refuge and function. This form of Westerner is always in the process of "vanishing" (just as in Rousseau's *Confessions* the threat of impending coerced and compromising sociality always precipitates movement in haste). The symbolic stabilization of his privileged form of subjectivity within the cultural household of civilization is temporary and untenable (see fig. 8). This conclusion affirms a central Western trope which Gallagher reads in another iconic example of the genre:

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<sup>75</sup> Here the film appears to accord with Slotkin's thesis of a national ideology of "regeneration through violence." For this influential reading of the film see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 396-400.

<sup>76</sup> Alexandra Keller agrees with the ideological function of Shane, arguing that "Before 1980, a Western could be 'affirmative' like *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Red River* (1947), or *Shane* (1952), lauding 'regeneration through violence' (cf. Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*), the centrality of the individual, the inevitability of progress, the virtues of capitalism, the necessity of force and law, as well as the primacy of a community of men," in "Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns since the Reagan Era" in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, eds., *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television and History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 240.

As a hero, *Stagecoach*'s Ringo implies no solutions, no syntheses. He ignores society rather than confronting it; he is less an outlaw than oblivious, unconscious god... But who of us resembles Ringo? How is his solution reason for optimism for us? We are neither outlaws, never-never land's gods, nor detachable from civilization.<sup>77</sup>

Like Ringo, Shane must light out again for the Frontier. The imagined "solution" to the contradiction between savagery and civilization is tenuous and its stabilization the specific function of the Westerner. In this way the classical Western develops its own paradoxical ethos in which the greatest blessing it may bestow (as Ford does upon Ringo and Dallas) is to be "saved from the blessings of civilization."



Figure 8 *Shane*: Joey watches as Shane vanishes into the night

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<sup>77</sup> Gallagher, "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western," 256.

## 2.5 *Ressentiment and Madness: The Searchers (1956)*

If the Western is animated at least to a certain extent by the dialectical conception between savagery and civilization that I have sketched, then one must admit that the tenuous efforts of films like *Shane* to stabilize an American subjectivity within this contradiction are always only partly effective. They remain subject to certain internal strains as they seek “solutions” to this problem. Therefore other generic solutions have had to be mapped and articulated. An alternative formulation appears in the trope of madness in the Western. Cawelti tentatively identifies the link between madness and savagery:

The symbolic role of madness has flickered in and out of the Western throughout its history attaching itself to such varied figures as the nineteenth century “Indian-hater” and the psychotic outlaw of the recent adult Western. In general, its function seems to be one of distinguishing between the hero’s disciplined and moral use of violence and the uncontrollable aggression, which marks the “bad” savage. It is also likely that there is some relation between the interest in madness and the recurrent fascination with the idea of savagery that marks the Westerns. For both madness and savagery are forms of reaction against the lawful order of the town. (*SM*, 54).

This diagnosis contains overtones of the “discontent” with civilization that pervades the oeuvres of Rousseau, Freud and Marcuse. It is perhaps from the greatest of all Westerns (certainly the apotheosis of the Fordian wing of the genre<sup>78</sup>) that the strongest emanation of “Indian hating” madness resounds.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Examples of the many accounts of John Ford’s importance for the Western genre include Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: A Life* (London: Faber, 2003); Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, eds., *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979); Lindsay Anderson, *About John Ford* (London: Plexus, 1981); John Baxter, *The Cinema of John Ford* (New York: A. Zwemmer, 1971); Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (London: Studio Vista, 1968); Ronald L. Davis, *John Ford:*

Whilst the literature on *The Searchers* is extensive,<sup>80</sup> I will primarily have recourse to a recent extended reading of the film advanced by Robert Pippin in order to demonstrate how a conception of ethnographic nostalgia already subtly operates within the existing literature.<sup>81</sup> The foundations of Pippin's argument in "What is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*" broadly concurs with the classical conceptuality that I have parsed thus far: the Native American Other is characterized by a "devotion to honor" and "willingness to risk life" that is "contrasted" with the capitalist order of the "shopkeeper" and the "craven mentality of the invading whites" (*PS*, 227) and the Westerner hero is aligned with those outward manifestations of self presence, which Pippin calls "the Indian virtues of honor, loyalty and courage" (*PS*, 227).

However, Pippin places the accent on the older Hobbesian (rather than Rousseauist) ideological conception of nature, as the "greatest enemy" of "human civilization" (*PS*, 229) which must be conquered by Promethean "labor, persistence, violence and technology" (*PS*, 228). Despite this subtle appeal to the theoretical tendencies of British political philosophy, Pippin appears to intuitively grasp Baudrillard's alternate conception of nature as a figurative sign system that "speaks in terms of repression and separation" (or equally, alienation).<sup>82</sup> Where Baudrillard suggested that everything that invokes nature concurrently invokes the domination of nature, this relation is reversed in Pippin's reading whereby the Western's ideology of the domination of nature

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*Hollywood's Old Master* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1995); Janey Ann Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Seacaucus: Citadel Press, 1974).

<sup>79</sup> Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation* that the figure of the classic "Indian-hater" first originated "in popular literature in James Hall's historical sketch of the life of Colonel John Moredock (1835) and portrayed most notably in Robert M. Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837) and Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857)" (462).

<sup>80</sup> For other accounts of this iconic film see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 461-473; Michael Budd, "A Home in the Wilderness: Visual Imagery in John Ford's Westerns" in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses, Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998) 133-147; Joan Dagle, "Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters in the Ford Western" in *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era*, eds. Gaylan Studlar and Matthew Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 102-131;

<sup>81</sup> See note 27, chapter 2 above.

<sup>82</sup> See notes 40 and 41, chapter 1 above.

(which is both the personal conquest of an “inner nature,” or the “suppression of passions” as well as the domination of “natural” peoples in the form of the Native American) invokes the return of the repressed which is now “released in the lawless situation of the West.”<sup>83</sup> The “outlaw” and the “savage” now speak of certain discontent with the requirement of civilization to dominate an “inner nature.” The startling feature of *The Searchers*, however, is that it is also possible to detect a certain discontent or protest against civilization’s requirement of “conquering” (or censoring) one’s own “inner nature” (*PS*, 228) in the hero figure of Ethan (John Wayne) (which might equally be grasped as the failed introjection of what Marcuse would call “surplus repression” (*EC*, 88)). Ethan comes to represent an unusual rupture in the ideological coding of the genre—the character stands for the incomplete dominance of civilization over savagery— which then precipitates the plot of *The Searchers*.

It is difficult to disagree with Pippin’s argument that Ethan is the enigma around which the textual dynamics of *The Searchers* revolve. The precise “motivation” for Ethan’s epic quest to locate Debbie is the drive that calls out for explanation (*PS*, 229). Pippin begins by arguing, in line with a fairly uncontentious critical tradition, that we must read Ethan as animated by racial or ethnic “hatred” (*PS*, 231). Therefore, the ultimate terrain of the film is, for Pippin, to be viewed from the standpoint of “political philosophy.” In other words, the way in which the film offers a vision of:

...the origin and meaning of racial and ethnic hatred, the effect of such hatred on the possibility of communal life, the role played by racial identification in forging the social bonds necessary for political life, and,

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<sup>83</sup> See Pippin, “What is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford’s *The Searchers*”: “A third narrative element concerns what could be called the conquest of inner nature, the need to establish a stable political order and so some strategy for the suppression of those passions both hostile to and yet often central in politics that are released in the lawless situation of the West and the suppression (and yet use) of those individuals— outlaws— given to those passions. These are all obviously also linked because, given the stereotypical way Indians are presented, all three ‘enemies’ are at bottom the same enemy: *nature*” (228).

especially, the prospects of overcoming political passions, both racial passions and the passions inflamed by any war, especially a fratricidal war like our Civil War. (PS, 228)

But in positing that the interpretive “key” to the film is the political-psychological construction of the “enemy,” Pippin strays unreflectively into the ethical territory of the “evil Other” that will distract and serve as an alibi from a precise reading of that macabre *pas de deux* which Ethan performs with Scar. This character is now the first example of an ethnological Other in a properly “twin” or “mirror image” form (see fig.9 and fig. 10). Once again, vexing and alarming contradictions in the dynamic between the Self and the Other start to mount. Pippin notes that Ethan “experiences” a sense of “belonging more with Indians than with whites” which is a “source of great discomfort” (PS, 238). Like almost all classical Western heroes, he displays a “natural sympathy for the martial, wandering, and heroic culture of Indians, even as he realizes (thinks he realizes) how unacceptable and ‘barbaric’ this is...” (PS, 240). Ethan’s deep ethnographic knowledge and observation makes him a precursor to the figure of the Westerner as ethnologist. Like the ethnologist, Ethan’s project entails the risk and anxiety that the boundary between the Other and Self will ineluctably dissolve.<sup>84</sup> *The Searchers* therefore stages an alternate solution to the dialectical relation between the Self and the Other that characterizes the ethnological encounter at the Frontier: the repression of inter-ethnic identification and ensuing madness.

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<sup>84</sup> Examples of this interpretation include Slotkin’s argument in *Gunfighter Nation* that Ethan’s “knowledge also includes an intimate acquaintance, even an identification, with stereotypically ‘savage’ qualities” (465); Tag Gallagher argues that “the Comanche Scar is the ‘Other’ that [Ethan] can stare at but not cannot see. Worse, he is Ethan’s doppelganger, everything in himself that he despises” (272) in “Angels Gambol Where They Will: John Ford’s Indians” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, 269-276 (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998); Dagle concurs in *Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters* that the two are “ideological mirrors of each other’s racial hatred seeking only bloody vengeance...” (122); Buscombe notes “Scar and Ethan are mirror-images” (21). See Edward Buscombe, *The Searchers* (London: British Film Institute, 2000).





Figure 9 *The Searchers*: Ethan, emissary of the culture of the Self



Figure 10 *The Searchers*: Scar, emissary of the culture of the Other

Indeed the thoroughly neurotic nature of Ethan's revenge quest (firmly anchored in Wright's "vengeance variation" (*SS*, 59-73)) means that it cannot be reduced to an apparently "simple" or unambiguous "genocidal" hatred (this is merely the "self-understanding of the characters" (*PS*, 229)). Ethan's sense of alienation from and failure to master an "inner" Self that involuntarily identifies with the object of collective hatred (the "enemy") is distorted, divested or displaced by the narrative. Pippin crystalizes the oft-noted trading of signs and meanings between villain and hero, Ethan and Scar, in this way:

We are close to the issue noted by many film critics: the chief Indian character, Scar (the one who steals Debbie), sometimes seems another part of Ethan's character—his alter ego, that part of him we need to understand to understand him. It's as if Ethan has projected an emanation (in the Blakean sense) of himself, everything illicit that he nevertheless devoutly wants, such that, by killing Scar, Ethan will prove that those desires were never a part of himself. They are in fact mirror or twinned characters in many ways.... They both seem hybrid characters, as revealed in the scene near the end of the movie in which Scar reveals he is as knowledgeable about Anglo language and ways as Ethan is about Comanche. (*PS*, 235)

Pippin's speculation returns us to Lévi-Strauss' observation that the ethnological encounter ruptures the integrity of the unified subject or "cogito," introducing the ethnologist to the essential opacity of the Self and its desires (that "there exists a 'he' who 'thinks' through me and who first causes me to doubt whether it is I who am thinking"). Ethan is now introduced to the disturbing fact there exists a "he" who desires through the "me" causing Ethan to doubt that it is Ethan who is indeed desiring. It is often noted that just as there is the suggestion of extramonogamous erotic relation between Shane and Marian in *Shane*, so too are glances exchanged between Ethan and his brother's wife (*PS*, 231).<sup>85</sup> Pippin

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<sup>85</sup> Ethan is conventionally read to "covet" his brother's wife. Slotkin agrees in *Gunfighter Nation* arguing that "Ford tells us that Ethan is in love with his brother Aaron's wife Martha, that she is aware of his love and returns it, but that

therefore suggests that Ethan's neurotic, murderous desires are a "projection of... self-hatred for all these feelings onto Indians and so he desires to kills them... as proof to himself that all these desires are not truly his..." (PS, 240). In other words, his "racism" is animated by his "guilt and self-hatred about this lust" (PS, 231). The ethnological Other is now the site for the projection of an erotic *ressentiment*.<sup>86</sup> Genocidal hatred or "racism" is rewritten not as an ethical attempt to efface or purge "evil" from the Christian world but as a protestation of those weakened by the oppressive regimes of civilization against those that flourish in the absence of such regimes, in a form of social existence that appears decidedly less repressive, at least as perceived from the outside.

Furthermore, in the figure of Scar it is possible to detect a high-water mark in the classical Western's inflection of the savage Other with motifs of skin incision as the hallmark of an erotic form of being (the very name of this totemic character suggests he is the direct embodiment of the colonial anxieties about "savagery"). The overt racism that will come to be denounced by critics in such representations cannot be denied, but does not prevent us from reading the figure in other symbolic ways. If on the one hand, the savage order is imagined as a re-eroticization of embodiment, the motif of scalping looks very much like the inverse. Marcuse reminds us that erotic reconciliation of man with nature would appear as re-dedication of the psychic and somatic structures of embodiment to their "original" purpose—the registration of pleasure (EC, 201). In this climate, erotic embodiment as an ontological condition (as the flourishing of Eros) would escape its confinement within "mature" genital supremacy (EC, 201). Scalping appears as the act in which such surface structures are inversely dedicated to

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neither will ever speak or act upon these powerful feelings because to do so would violate the most fundamental obligations of kinship and conscience" (464); Tag Gallagher argues in *John Ford* that Ford subtly links Ethan's illicit Desire with the architectural *mise-en-scène*, noting "doorways, then, are linked to sex [for Ethan], and usually with a degree of shock, for sex is another feeling Ethan cannot control" (334).

<sup>86</sup> I employ this term following Nietzsche for whom it describes the sense of frustration resulting from blocked or suppressed desires which manifests as a displaced and distorted hostility towards the perceived source of frustration, thereby avoiding a sense of culpability. See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 25.

*Thanatos*, a peculiar and provocative enlivening of the body that maintains a distant and weak resonance with its erotic opposite. Thus the fear of the Native American in the classic Western as it exists in its “demonic” form is not unrelated to ethnographic nostalgia. The demonic, as much as the “noble,” ethnological Other is an erotic being, and this is surely distantly related to the ritual human sacrifice practices of Meso-American societies.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Baudrillard offers a similar thesis with his speculations on the significance of the bodily incision in “savage” cultures. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Fraser Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994):

... the scarifications of savages... are always a vehement response to the absence of the body. Only the wounded body exists symbolically— for itself and for others— “sexual desire” is never anything but the possibility bodies have of combining and exchanging their signs. Now, the few natural orifices to which one usually attaches sex and sexual activities are nothing next to all the possible wounds, all the artificial orifices (but why “artificial”?), all the breaches through which the body is reversibilized and, like certain topological spaces, no longer knows either interior nor exterior. Sex as we know it is nothing but a minute and specialized definition of all the symbolic and sacrificial practices to which a body can open itself, no longer through nature, but through artifice, through the simulacrum, through the accident. Sex is nothing but this rarefaction of a drive called desire on previously prepared zones...The savages knew how to use the whole body to this end, in tattooing, torture, initiation— sexuality was only one of the possible metaphors of symbolic exchange, neither the most significant, nor the most prestigious, as it has become for us in its obsessional and realistic reference, thanks to its organic and functional character (including in orgasm). (114)



**Figure 11** *The Searchers*: The scalping of Scar

Finally, Pippin partially uncovers the way in which ethnological consciousness implicates the culture of the Self in terms that could be drawn from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Caught in the contradiction between repressed desires and a disturbing sympathy for the object of *ressentiment*, Ethan is:

...a kind of walking manifestation of the costs incurred by the repression necessary for civilized life, and his eruptions of hatred, revenge, racism, and [his] blind fury are tied to these inner dynamics as much as they are to the external threats and projects of the "official" or conscious civilized world. (*PS*, 233)

This is a frank admission of the degree to which the figure of the Westerner is constructed in complex ways in relation to an ethnological Other. Pippin admits the necessity of reading Ethan as a parable of American national historicity with all the compromising speculations that flow from the historical encounter with another radically different form of human society. The life world across the Frontier suggests that the repressive apparatus of civilization and its "bad consciousness" are historically contingent. But it is, of course, the fear of miscegenation as the "worst human sin" that serves as the fulcrum point for the narrative's compromising speculations. Debbie's sexual agency is the object of

the quest and must be saved from despoilment by Ethan as chivalric knight.<sup>88</sup> Thus the final gesture of lifting Debbie overhead and the recession of the threat of a “mercy killing” necessitated by complete ethnological transformation signals the abatement of collective mid-century colonial fears. But the retrieval of Debbie’s Self from the false consciousness of her “abductors” entails an “unexpected return to recognizable humanity” in Ethan, read as a return to “sanity” (PS, 238). With the retrieval of Debbie’s sexual being, the film is able to retreat from the Comanche camp and the ethnological encounter, thereby putting to bed those speculations surrounding miscegenation that it has aroused.<sup>89</sup> It is this moment that will be rewritten by Costner in *Dances with Wolves*.

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<sup>88</sup> Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation* along these lines that “Ethan’s dream of absolution is viable only so long as Debbie remains a little girl, untainted by the sexuality that ‘darkened’ Ethan’s relationship to his brother” (466). See also Buscombe, *The Searchers*, 20.

<sup>89</sup> This is a common thesis concerning the “salvation” of Debbie. See Sue Matheson, *The Westerns and War Films of John Ford* (Lanham MD and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 207; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 156.



Figure 12 *The Searchers*: The abduction of Debbie



Figure 13 *The Searchers*: The salvation of Debbie

Ethan and his neurotic quest, his concurrent hatred and sympathy for the Comanche, then represent a unique and provocative “character solution” to the contradictions of the Frontier. Pippin admits that he represents some “hidden mindedness in his community” (*PS*, 230) expressed in his inability to cross the threshold of the homestead door.<sup>90</sup> From this perspective, Pippin entertains a far-reaching conclusion that Jameson’s methodology has inculcated in the present analysis from the beginning— a doubt as to “whether the self-knowledge called for in political life, something like a community’s self-knowledge, is ever possible” (*PS*, 230). It is in his reading of the precise function of Ethan that Pippin transcends a simpler orthodox interpretation as that advanced by Gallagher, for whom Ethan represents “not wilderness but the purity of civilized values: he values home and family, loathes Indians, and execrates miscegenation.”<sup>91</sup> Gallagher’s unproblematic reading of Ethan glosses over the startling aspects of *The Searchers* that bring us up short. *The Searchers*’ critical reputation rests largely on the audacity of Ford in allowing the implications of collective anxieties to rise dangerously close to the textual surface.<sup>92</sup> As Pippin expresses it, “Ethan is not the crazy outside or the dark and repressed side of this white American society. He is its representative” (*PS*, 234). It will shortly be seen that it is the task of the revisionist Western to make clear that like Ethan, the Western “did not know [its] own mind well.”<sup>93</sup> It will shortly be seen that madness was but the symptom that concealed a repressed and conflicted inner orientation towards the ethnological Other.

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<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of architectural iconography in Ford’s *mise-en-scène* see Michael Budd, “A Home in the Wilderness,” 142-147.

<sup>91</sup> Gallagher, “Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the ‘Evolution’ of the Western,” 254.

<sup>92</sup> Lehman argues that “Ford has let ‘too much’ into the film— that is, there is too much dangerous, repressed, sensitive material being dealt with” (264). See Peter Lehman, “Looking at Look’s Missing Reverse Shot: Psychoanalysis and Style in John Ford’s *The Searchers*,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses, Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 259-268.

<sup>93</sup> Dagle similarly points out in “Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters” that the film’s ability to “think” the implications of the ethnological encounter is deeply impaired, arguing that “*The Searchers* is a powerful text because it confronts the racism underlying the Western paradigm, but it is also a text that cannot completely resolve the issues it raises” (126).



## 2.6 Epic, Romance and Utopian Meditations

*The Searchers* and *Shane* constitute but two infamous solutions to the “intolerable closure” of the conceptual terrain of the Western, the contradiction between savagery and civilization. But before laying the matter of the generic foundations of the Western to rest, I wish to introduce a final set of theoretical polarities into the hypothesis advanced so far. If it is the case that the Western displays an internal antagonism between Utopian speculations (“state of nature” experiments) and ideological diversions (the ultimate subsumption of all such speculations under the inexorable historical advance of civilization), it is possible to suggest that these twin impulses can be grasped as speaking through two distinct textual moments. It is possible to detect on the one hand what Northrop Frye terms the “mythos of romance”<sup>94</sup> servicing the collective fantasy of ethnographic nostalgia, which is then censored or divested by the “adult ideologies” serviced by the textual register of the “epic.” My contention is then that the Western displays something of the formal disunity that Pierre Macherey identifies in the novel.<sup>95</sup> The genre’s attempt to unify or stabilize these internally

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<sup>94</sup> See Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Summer: Romance,” in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 186-206; Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>95</sup> Jameson argues that “in the case of Althusserian literary criticism proper, then, the appropriate object of study emerges only when the appearance of *formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage*. The authentic function of the cultural text is then staged rather as an interference between levels, as a subversion of one level by another; and for Althusser and Pierre Macherey the privileged form of this disunity or dissonance is the objectification of the ideological by the work of aesthetic production” (*PU*, 41, emphasis added). See also Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*: “There is another rationale to this procedure, which lies in the premise that novels are combinations of heterogenous kinds of raw material. The novel is an omnibus form in which various types of generic discourse are amalgamated, their seams or geological layers then effaced in an act of attempted synthesis which purports to unify the generically disparate and most often at least serves to conceal the variety of the novel’s sources. To be sure, one can also insist on the creative power of this act of unification, even if it does not succeed. I take it that it was Macherey’s lesson that *the deeper significance of a given work lay precisely in the contradiction between the various types of generic raw material*” (364, emphasis added). Macherey himself states that “the important thing [in literary interpretation] is not a confused perception of the unity of the work, but a recognition of its

conflictual registers in the face of their fundamental contradiction or disunity, can be revealed by tracking their polyphonic, dialectical interplay in the following films.

There has been a longstanding tendency to casually note the apparent relationship between the Western and older forms of European Romance. Bazin refers to the cowboy as a “knight-at-arms.”<sup>96</sup> Cawelti refers to Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* as fashioned “at least partly in the model of the chivalric knight of the Middle Ages” and extrapolates that:

No doubt Sir Lancelot bore himself with a grace and breeding of which our unpolished fellow of the cattle trail has only the latent possibility; but in personal daring and in skill as to the horse, the knight and the cowboy are nothing but the same Saxon of different environments, the polished man in London and the man unpolished in Texas; and no hoof in Sir Thomas Malory shakes the crumbling plains with quadruped sounds more valiant than he galloping that has echoed from the Rio Grande to Big Horn Mountains.  
(*SM*, 70).

Here it is helpful to turn to Northrop Frye’s seminal analysis of this mythos in *The Secular Scripture*.<sup>97</sup> For Frye, romance is the “structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale”<sup>98</sup> and its primacy derives from an identity between its narrative structure and lived experience as the “quest” of the “desiring libido.”<sup>99</sup> Its hallmark tropes are mysterious births, oracular

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transformations (its contradictions, as long as contradiction is not reduced to merely a new type of unity) (42). See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>96</sup> Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” 147.

<sup>97</sup> See note 94, chapter 2 above.

<sup>98</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 15. See also Cawelti who makes this connection explicitly in reference to Frye: “The Western is a fine example of what Frye calls the mythos of romance, a narrative and dramatic structure which he characterizes as one of the four central myths or story forms in literature, the other three being the comedy, tragedy and irony. As Frye defines it, ‘the essential

prophecies, capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, dramatic revelations of occult “true” identities, and a general terrain that extends the everyday world upwards to “higher” and downwards to “lower” worlds.<sup>100</sup> Borges similarly emphasizes the role of shipwrecks, pirates, enchanted islands, magic and recognition upon the loss and regaining of identity.<sup>101</sup> The central plot “element” is “adventure.”<sup>102</sup> But clearly the textual form of the romance as it emanated from the feudal history of Europe was unable to be simply grafted onto lived historical experience in America. It required a process of “transcoding,” drawing upon “substitute codes and raw materials.”<sup>103</sup> Moving forward into the revisionist Western, it will be increasingly apparent that the ethnological encounter serves as a new form of historical “raw material” that is “ready at hand” for this national narrative tradition. The transition between the life worlds of the colonizer and the colonized can be recoded in the Western-romance as a descending or ascending movement into higher or lower, Utopian (idyllic) or demonic worlds.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the life world of the savage begins to look

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element of plot in romance is adventure,’ and the major adventure which gives form to the romance is the quest. Thus, ‘the complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero.’” (SM, 68)

<sup>100</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 15.

<sup>102</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 186.

<sup>103</sup> See Jameson who argues in *The Political Unconscious* that “a history of romance as a mode becomes possible, in other words, when we explore the substitute codes and raw materials, which, in the increasingly secularized and rationalized world that emerges from the collapse of feudalism, are pressed into service to replace the older magical categories of Otherness which have now become so many dead languages” (117).

<sup>104</sup> Frye gives this evocative account of the essentially psychic import that geographical terrain takes on in the romance mythos in *The Secular Scripture*:

The characterization of romance is really a feature of its mental landscape. Its heroes and villains exist primarily to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it. There is, first, a world associated with happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood or on an “innocent” or pre-genital period of youth, and the images are those of spring and summer, flowers and sunshine. I shall call this world the idyllic world. The other is a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve

increasingly “enchanted”<sup>105</sup> as a realm of “magic” precisely because the anthropological structure of Otherness serves as an alibi, inoculating it against the Enlightenment’s systematic proscription and defamation of “mythic” belief as error and superstition. This appears then as a replacement for the “older magical categories of Otherness,” which Jameson suggests have become “so many dead languages” in our own time (*PU*, 117). The nomadic and marauding movements of the Native American tribe or collective social entity (at times occult in the landscape, and at other times dramatically visible) contain echoes of the older brigands or pirate collectives. Lastly, the imagination of the savage order as displaying a dual nature divided between erotic and thanatic forces corresponds to Frye’s observation that in romance, “violence and sexuality are used as rocket

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separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain. I shall call this world the demonic or night world. Because of the powerful polarizing tendency in romance, we are usually carried directly from one to the other.

It looks, therefore, as though romance were simply replacing the world of ordinary experience by a dream world, in which the narrative movement keeps rising into wish fulfillment or sinking into anxiety and nightmare. To some extent this is true. The realistic tendency seeks for its material, or more accurately, for analogies to its material, in the world of waking consciousness; the up-and-down movement of romance is an indication that the romancer is finding analogies to his material also in a world where we “fall” asleep and wake “up.” In many works of fiction reality is equated with the waking world and illusion with dreaming or madness or excessive subjectivity....The romancer, qua romancer, does not accept these categories of reality and illusion. Both his idyllic and his demonic worlds are a mixture of the two, and no commonsense assumptions that waking is real and dreaming unreal will work for romance. (53)

<sup>105</sup> Weber’s canonical diagnosis of our capitalist modernity as disenchanting is made repeatedly through out his work. For example: “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (30). See Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004). See also (13). Disenchantment and rationalization for Weber thus carry what Alvin Gouldner has termed a “metaphysical pathos” as a result of the “eradication of mystery, emotion, tradition and affectivity,” quoted in *A Dictionary of Sociology*, eds. John Scott and Gordon Marshall, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 548.

propulsion, so to speak, in an ascending movement”<sup>106</sup> by the narrative as a structure of arousal.

Perhaps at the core of these transcriptions is the “captivity narrative” which emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the seventeenth century and therefore significantly preceded the literature of Cooper.<sup>107</sup> The tales of abduction (normally of women) at the hands of Native Americans under the banner of colonial resistance already appear to have carried a certain erotic *frisson* for readers upon their emergence. And these narratives appeared to have a “real” historical material to process as it has been noted, most famously by Benjamin Franklin, that one of the most unsettling historical phenomena encountered by early American colonial consciousness was not only that abductees from the colonial society more often than not refused to return upon their “salvation” from captivity, but that Native American children reared in civilization defected almost immediately.<sup>108</sup> This phenomenon is at the core of *The Searchers*. The historical legacy of the captivity narrative will subtend the set of films to which I will turn in the final chapter. From *The Searchers* through to *Avatar*, the abduction episode and resulting ethnographic encounter will serve as the narrative structure by which the dialectical “trading of valences” between savagery and civilization will take place.

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<sup>106</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 183.

<sup>107</sup> For published anthologies of these captivity narratives see Frederick Drimmer, *Captured by the Indians: 15 Firsthand Accounts, 1750-1870* (New York: Dover, 1985); Richard Van Der Beets, *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973); for critical accounts of their literary history see Pauline Turner Strong, “Captivity, Adoption, and the American Imaginary,” in *American Indians and the American Imaginary: Cultural Representation Across the Centuries* (Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013), 67-124; Roy Harvey Pearce, “The Significances of the Captivity Narrative,” in *American Literature* 19, no. 1 (1947): 1-20; Tara Fitzpatrick, “The Figure of Captivity: The Cultural Work of the Puritan Captivity Narrative,” in *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (1991): 1-26; Janet Walker, “Captive Images in the Traumatic Westerns: *The Searchers*, *Pursued*, *Once Upon A Time in the West*, and *Lone Star*,” in *Westerns: Films Through History*, ed. Janet Walker (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 219-254.

<sup>108</sup> For a recent account of this phenomenon in the popular sociological literature see Sebastien Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (New York and Boston: Twelve, 2016), 2-15.

The other paradigmatic romance trope that has a significant claim on our attention is the revelation of inner, “secret” and “true” identities (now re-coded as “natural” and “authentic,” following the example of Rousseau, and thereby protesting social alienation). But here we can note a significant shift in the precise nature of identity revelation from *The Searchers* to *Avatar*. Whereas the romance paradigm in its earlier European feudal context played upon the revelation of identity in relation to birth (the illegitimate child smuggled into a foster family, the rightful heir claiming the inheritance under primogeniture etc.) the American romance will increasingly affirm a cross-ethnic identity created by a shared commitment to an ontological mode of being which becomes the basis for kinship (the colonial emissary and the ethnological Other will shortly proclaim themselves to be “brothers”). This aspect of ethnological fantasy appears with *Leatherstocking* and continues throughout the development of the Western in various forms and guises. We will increasingly find in later epochs that the psychic repression of transcultural identity radically shifts from censorship and divestment towards outright celebration and becomes the very emblem of the ascent to the higher life world of the savage and the recuperation of self-presence. These observations will become vital to appreciating the broader historical trajectory of the romance mode within the Western plot as it makes its way through the changing “force fields” of history.

Furthermore, whilst Frye establishes the foundational role of the romance paradigm in the historical development of Western literature, it is Jameson who allows us to grasp the historical significance of its *psychic* dynamic for our own historical moment in late capitalism. Jameson offers us a striking proposition that will allow us to retrieve the texts under examination from the kind of scholarly denigration that characterizes “primitivist fantasies” as “infantile”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> I have already noted the tendency of Leo Marx towards this criticism in *The Machine in the Garden* (11). But the phenomenon has a much broader basis. Frye notes in *The Secular Scripture* that the scholarly reception of the romance mythos has generally been somewhat hostile, arguing: “Any serious discussion of romance has to take into account its curiously proletarian status as a form generally disapproved of, in most ages, by the guardians of taste and learning,

(understood as the failure of the ego to “mature” and successfully accommodate itself to the reality principle). For Jameson, romance now bears a claim to a certain privileged status under late capitalism:

It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place; and Frye is surely not wrong to assimilate the salvational perspective of romance to a reexpression of Utopian longings, a renewed meditation on the Utopian community, a reconquest (but at what price?) of some feeling for a salvational future. (*PU*, 91)

It is now possible to draw a connection between the Utopian longings inherent in the mythos of romance and its new raw materials of ethnological encounter: from Rousseau onwards and most obviously in Marcuse, ethnological observation allowed the archaic origins of human history to be rewritten as an image vocabulary used to meditate upon the ultimate destiny of the human community, reconceived as a *return* that ultimately “squares the circle” of historical alienation. As Marcuse suggested in *Eros and Civilization*, the long hoped-for arrival of the “logos of gratification” would resemble a return to that first moment of emergence into history.<sup>110</sup> The ontological climate of the savage

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except when they use it for their own purposes. The close connection of the romantic and the popular runs all through literature” (23).

<sup>110</sup> This logic is employed by Marcuse throughout *Eros and Civilization*, for example: “The philosophy which epitomizes the antagonistic relation between subject and object also retains the image of their reconciliation. The restless labor of the transcending subject terminates in the ultimate unity of subject and object: the idea of “being-in-an-for-itself,” existing in its own fulfillment. The Logos of gratification contradicts the Logos of alienation: the effort to harmonize the two animates the inner history of Western metaphysics” (112); “The consummation of being is not the ascending curve, but the closing of the circle: the *re-turn* from alienation. Philosophy could conceive of such a state only as that of pure thought. Between the beginning and the end of the development of

appears as a kind of revived sensorium when seen from the increasingly desiccated and stultified realm of lived experience under the regimes of capitalist civilization characterized by the “the new and unglamorous social institutions emerging from the political triumph of the bourgeoisie and the setting in place of the market system” (*PU*, 135). The Western will reveal in violent juxtaposition how a significant degree of sensory de-vivification in everyday lived experience is part of the “price” paid under the new social arrangements of civilization. The wilderness of the savage offers, from the beginning, a zone of heightened intensity and sensory perception, a climate in which it would appear the senses are returned to their original and full capacities, felt as if “for the first time.” Under these conditions it will be possible to fleetingly imagine and grasp a sense of being that has regained its original fullness or some genuine “at-one-ment”<sup>111</sup> with the world.

Moreover, that transfiguration operates upon the already existent world rather than “some more ideal realm” as per the old transcendent Garden of Eden in Christian theology. This fact is of deep significance for Frye and Jameson:

Romance is for Frye, a wish-fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced.

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reason and the logic of domination— progress through alienation. The repressed liberation is upheld: in the idea and the ideal” (118); “The only pertinent question is whether a state of civilization can be reasonably envisaged in which human needs are fulfilled in such a manner and to such an extent that surplus-repression can be eliminated. Such a hypothetical state could be reasonably assumed at two points, which lie at the opposite poles of the vicissitudes of the instincts: one would be located at the primitive beginnings of history, the other at its most mature stage” (151).

<sup>111</sup> See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*: “And insofar as modern sensibility, incapable of any genuine concrete reunification or at-one-ment with the world, still finds in itself to dream of such a state of plenitude, attempts to project forth an impoverished vision of what such a state might look like, there is room for yet a third logical possibility, namely the *idyll*, whose irreality is inscribed in the very thinness of its poetic realization itself” (92-93).



Romance, therefore, does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality (as in mystical experience, or as might be suggested by the partial segments of the romance paradigm to be found in the idyll or the pastoral), but rather a process of transforming ordinary reality: “the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality.” (*PU*, 96)

But it is precisely the resonance of the Western with the “partial segments” of the pastoral and idyll that suggests the romance content of the Western cannot speak in a *pure* form. It is alloyed in an internally antagonistic fashion with other narrative modes. In Jameson’s consideration of the Utopian vocation of the romance paradigm it is the tradition of realism (valorized as a “high” cultural register) that would stand against such collective wish-fulfillment fantasies (*PU*, 138). But it is apparent that it is not this classical form of realism, with its appeals to “things as they stand” (for Frye, realism is characterized by a “strongly conservative element” and an “an acceptance of society in its present structure”<sup>112</sup>) that performs this function in the Western. It is not the stifling and definitive weight of empirical being as experienced by the early-to-mid twentieth century cinematic (or televisual) spectator in the *société de consommation* that censors the Utopian wanderings of the Westerner hero. I suggest it is rather the Western’s claim to map an actually existing historical reality of colonial domination and national foundation (the “winning of the West,” the “Indian Wars” etc.) that constitutes the dialectical counterforce to the romance content. This content displays an inherently conservative and ideological function because it affirms a vision of the national *past* that attempts to account for the *present* in its binding empirical form— the entrenchment of a capitalist civilization from coast to coast that circumscribes subjectivity in modernity. This can be grasped as the Western’s “epic” moment.

Corresponding references to epic narrativity similarly abound in the scholarly literature. Cawelti characterizes the Frontier structure as “the epic moment

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<sup>112</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 146.

when the values and disciplines of American society stand balanced against the savage wilderness" (*SM*, 66). Other authorities relate the Western to the epic poetry of the classical world, the Sagas of the Norse, and the like.<sup>113</sup> But in order to rewrite these casual observations on a stronger footing, it is helpful to appeal to a formal theory of the epic. Although a number of such theories are available,<sup>114</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin's influential version suits the current purposes. He offers a formulation of the epic "genre" as a collective representation of origins but in an altogether different sense than that discussed so far.<sup>115</sup> The epic form must display "three constitutive features:"

- (1) a national epic past— in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past"— serves as the subject for the epic;
- (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic;
- (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (*EN*, 13)

The diegetic world of the heroic West of the nineteenth century now appears to accord with this vision of the past as "walled off from all subsequent times by an

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<sup>113</sup> See for example Kitses, *Horizons West*, 19; Bazin, "The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence," 142; Pippin suggests "the Greeks had their Iliad; the Jews the Hebrew Bible; the Romans the Aeneid; the Germans the Nibelungenlied, the Scandinavians their Sagas; the Spanish the Cid; the British the Arthurian legends. The Americans have John Ford" (18-19). See Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); Doug Williams states "the Western is the American epic," in "Pilgrims and the Promised Land: A Genealogy of the Western," in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 93.

<sup>114</sup> For a broader discussion of the relationship between the epic and film see Joanna Paul, "Surveying the Epic Tradition in Literature and Film," in *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-36; James Russell, *The Historical Epic & Contemporary Hollywood* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>115</sup> Mikhail M. Bahktin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3-40 (here after cited in text as *EN*).

impenetrable boundary... preserved and revealed only in the form of national tradition" (*EN*, 16). The epic-Western takes as its "raw materials" and "historical content" the Promethean process of installing and securing the regimes of capitalist colonial "civilization" and enshrines them within an "national heroic" past, a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times,' a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'" (*EN*, 13). Moreover, the conventional classical Western more often than not demands that each spectator respect its "impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view— which excludes any possibility of another approach— and therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition" (*EN*, 16). It will be objected that there are of course Westerns that prize open spaces for other more subversive forms of spectatorship (*Johnny Guitar's* (1954) sense of camp for example<sup>116</sup>), but broadly speaking the Western is often understood as a genre which displays a high degree of ideological uniformity in its classical incarnation.<sup>117</sup>

This collective vision of a national past that concurrently functions as an ideological legitimation of rights and duties in the present is then valorized ethically:

In the past, everything is good: all the really good things (i.e. the "first" things) occur only in this past. The epic absolute past is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well. (*EN*, 15)

As I previously noted, it was common for the narrative coding to split between an ethical sense of inexorable progress (Manifest Destiny) as heroic or "good" and a metaphysical conception of progress incurring loss precipitating nostalgia. In this condition of ethical ratification, the epic content of the genre censors and divests the Utopian dynamics of romance that would seek to open up a space for

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<sup>116</sup> See Jennifer Peterson, "The Competing Tunes of *Johnny Guitar*: Liberalism, Sexuality and Masquerade," in *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 321-340.

<sup>117</sup> Wright argues that the Western as "myth depends on simple and recognizable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding" (*SS*, 23);

sensing alternate forms of historicity outside their present empirical form, or trying to think adequately the radical historical contingency of being under capitalism in “modernity.” In Bakhtin’s view, “there is no plane... for any open-endedness, indecision, indeterminacy...” in the epic and it “does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation” (EN, 16). Here then it becomes possible to advance a theory about the Western’s internal structural and ideological contradiction between “savagery” and “civilization” that is anchored in its very form: the genre displays an internal dissonance between two distinct textual moments that “interfere” with or “subvert” one another. When the epic content dominates and masters the romance content, as in the classical Western (defined as it was for Wright by a narrative insistence upon the sacrifice of the Westerner to the demands of encroaching civilization (SS, 47-48)), it displayed an ideological charge that was ultimately reactionary and traditionalist.<sup>118</sup> The canonical moment for this dynamic is that scene in *The Searchers* when Martha stands on the homestead porch looking out over the buttes and exclaims, “Some day this country’s gonna be a fine, good place to live.” After this period, however, the centre of gravity in the genre will shift and the romance content will come to dominate the epic.

## 2.7 Conclusion

What I have tried to show here is that the traditional scholarship on both the Western as a cinematic genre, as well as the Myth and Symbol School of American Studies, have labored consistently under a longstanding conceptuality: that the American nation is symbolically born at the interface between the cultural households of civilization and savagery. But this scholarship, mired as it has tended to be within the ideological field of its own capitalist historical moment, has failed to grasp the significance of, nor properly articulate, this underlying conceptuality. In order to bring it to light, I have rewritten this confrontation as an imagined ethnological encounter with the Native American,

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<sup>118</sup> Durnat and Simmon argue in “Six Creeds that Won the Western” that “the conflicts in every classic Western are validated in retrospect by Progress, by America’s fated Westward drive” (80).

in which the observation of the savage order brings the entire ideological infrastructure legitimating civilization into question. It is through this confrontation that the fundamental and striking contradiction at the heart of American historicity is brought into being, the paradox of the poetic preference for the savage.

In broaching and apprehending the savage order, in suspecting that it represents the immanent form of a hitherto purely speculative and transcendental order of human existence in which consciousness retains a certain integrity and is felt as *self presence*, the American national *pensée sauvage* must engage in a centuries-long process of cultural negotiation and censorship. This process is characterized by holding at bay the persistent threat of the implications of ethnological observation which threatens ideological conceptions of the Self. This threat appears as much in the scholarly record as it does in the textual. In order to prevent such a force of destabilization, such visions must be continually diffused, divested, deflected and diverted in order to avoid the apprehension of the unimaginable: that it is the very order of civilization that is itself the source of psychic, bodily and social alienation in modernity. In Pippin's reading of Ethan it has been possible to detect a growing schism in the construction of the Western hero, prefiguring the dawning realization that the American national *pensée sauvage* did not "know its own mind well." Moving forward into the new historical force field of the later twentieth century, it is only in the radically transformed political climate of the 1960s and beyond that the Western genre can announce, with a new and previously unimaginable degree of clarity, its longstanding ideological and metaphysical underpinnings.

### 3. The “Post-Western”: Taking the Measure of America’s Libidinal Economy

*What generally passes for nature in the bourgeois context of delusion is merely the scar tissue of mutilation.*

— Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

#### 3.1 Introduction: The Resistance of the Real

So far I have argued that a certain Ricoeurian “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>1</sup> must be applied to the Western. In other words, that the Western, like Ethan in *The Searchers*, has not known its own “mind” well, its hidden orientation to a latent historical content. I have read the classical Western as wanting to speak openly of ethnographic nostalgia but divesting its Utopian impulses to other ideological ends. I have argued that the cinematic genre (and by implication its literary antecedents) was underpinned by an ideological regime that functioned as a kind of censorship over the compromising speculations that emerged from its fantasy content. These speculations centred around the repressive and alienating function of civilization, its implacable demands of libidinal sacrifice and the submission to the “performance principle.” It therefore operated around a structural contradiction that could never be “resolved.” In fact it was the “mission” of the figuration to try to think imagistically this contradiction (that could not be brought into adequate abstract conceptualities by the society trying to think it) in the first place. The genre’s various canonical incarnations therefore

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (Yale: Yale University Press, 1970). Ricoeur famously states: “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience” (27). For a discussion of Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” see David Stewart, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3, no. 3 (1989): 296-307. Stewart argues that for Ricoeur, “interpretation is occasioned by a gap between the real meaning of a text and its apparent meaning, and in the act of interpretation suspicion plays a pivotal role” (296).

displayed a coordinated dynamic between these Utopian (romance) and ideological (epic) functions.

What we will find from the era of the New Hollywood<sup>2</sup> onwards is that the ideological opprobrium attached to the poetic preference for the savage order wanes. In this climate, the task of uncovering such content will shift from detecting the repressive function of an ideology of civilization and its future promises to measuring them in relation to the empirical character of the present. Critical attention must therefore be directed not so much towards the epic moment of the classical Western but rather towards other textual registers which are equally opposed in the American *pensée sauvage* to the “liberation” of ethnographic nostalgia as Utopian desire. I wish to suggest that this textual register is governed by what Jameson calls the “Real” (*PU*, 171).

This shift is part of a larger process by which the Western appears to undergo a significant historical transformation as it interacts with other genres and textual modes in the 1960s. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson offers a set of principles for grasping such shifts in genre. He suggests that:

...the deviation of the individual text from some deeper narrative structure directs our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication of the structure on a discursive level. On the other hand, the failure of particular generic structure, such as the epic, to reproduce itself not only encourages a search for those substitute textual formations that appear in its wake, but more particularly alerts us to the historical ground, now no longer existent, in which the original structure was meaningful. (*PU*, 113)

What we can observe is that in the era of the New Hollywood, the narrative structure of the Western in its classical form is “blocked” on some historical level. The “ground” upon which it originally stood is no longer “existent” and the genre’s former cultural prestige and ubiquity wanes. Instead, the narratives that

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<sup>2</sup> See note 56, chapter 1 above.

engage the codes of the Western and “appear in its wake” deviate towards new genre structures and registers. But observing this moment of generic failure and transformation encourages the search for the new historical ground upon which the “substitute textual formations” now rest. Conversely, it is possible to suggest that it is only with the waning of the classical Western that it becomes possible to fully detect those forms of ideological repression that made the old form “meaningful” in the first place. And so, our attention must remain alert to detecting the new conditions of historical possibility that allow for the intensification of the ideologeme of interest.

Whilst it would be possible to limit the current project to a discussion of revisionist or “post-Westerns”<sup>3</sup> that display a strong commitment to the Western genre according to its “narrow” definition (in the sense proposed by Kitses—narratives set on the Western frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth<sup>4</sup>), to do so would ignore the more interesting and productive forms of generic hybridity that characterize this period. So whilst the notion of the revisionist Western must remain the backdrop against which the following analysis will take place, I propose to find those points of intersection where the genre begins to mutate, hybridize, and enter into productive exchanges with other zones of Hollywood cinema.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than begin at the chronological inception of the New Hollywood in the 1960s, it will be productive to take Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971) as the point of departure for this survey. If the revisionist Western was characterized by the progressive emptying out of the old ideological infrastructure that served the classical form (the “debunking” of a national “mythology”), then I would suggest that this process reaches its zenith in Bogdanovich’s portrait of the fictional town of Anarene, Texas. It is here that the

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<sup>3</sup> Kitses goes further to propose in *Horizons West* the category of the “nouveau Western” (4).

<sup>4</sup> Kitses, “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” 57.

<sup>5</sup> McCracken nominates *Easy Rider* as the film that founds a tradition of “Non-Westerns of the New West” (82). See Janet McCracken, “The Non-Western of the New West, 1973-1975,” *Film & History* 44, no. 2 (2014): 82-97. This is an apt description for this generic zone,



codes of the Western appear in their most degraded and ironized forms. The film is surely amongst the sternest rebukes to the national project and seeks to take the measure of the national “libidinal economy,”<sup>6</sup> the historical constitution of which was the very subject of the Western itself. Bogdanovich’s vision is structured around a threefold collapse: the failure or blockage of Desire in the individual subject and the desiccation of the local economy, which are then mediated by the withering of the cinematic form of the Western itself. Yet, at the core of this fallen world, it is still possible to detect the weak but unmistakable signal of the ideologeme at hand. I have chosen *The Last Picture Show* as the starting point for this chapter as it refreshes the sense in which the current project constitutes an “erotics” of the West. However in the post-Western, Utopian desire will instead be registered negatively by narratives of failure, collapse, decay and disappointment.

Following *The Last Picture Show*, it is necessary to return in the historical record to one of the earliest and most iconic examples of the New Hollywood ethos, Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969). Retaining the notion of the West as a vision of a national libidinal economy, it will be possible to detect in this film a generic transformation by which the Western is rewritten according to the codes of the “road narrative.” *Easy Rider* embeds in the New Hollywood, from the very outset, a sense that the structures of mobility (the horse, the wagon, the train, the automobile, the motorcycle) open out onto a vista of diverse socio-historical life worlds that structurally co-exist and heterogeneously animate the American national project. Hopper thereby seeks to take the measure of the success or failure of each of these libidinal economies according to their ability to revive an alternate ontological climate.

Whilst the sociological vista of *Easy Rider* opens up to a distinctly American national project, yet another canonical New Hollywood film— Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*— shifts its vision to an intermediary historical state between the

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<sup>6</sup> I take Lyotard’s argument in *Libidinal Economy* to be that regimes of Desire, Eros and the body are always inextricably bound up by, implicated in, and lived within political economies such that “every political economy is libidinal” (108).

countercultures of the mid-twentieth century and the Old West of the nineteenth. Malick finds in the agricultural labour migrations of the Edwardian period a nostalgia for the West that must now be read according to the categories of the European feudal order: a quasi-aristocratic lord commands a dominated labour force which is no longer indentured as a serf class, but rather released into the flux and mobility of a capitalist agricultural economy. Within a period characterized by the immiseration of an industrial working class and latter day agricultural “empires,” the protagonists of *Days of Heaven* find themselves briefly released from the bonds of their class relations into a temporary but revelatory ontological climate. In fact, it is possible to read *Days of Heaven* for the indexical motif that I would suggest undergirds Malick’s entire project as an auteur from its inception with *Badlands* (1973) through to the recent efflorescence of creative output including *Knight of Cups* (2015). Malick’s cinema seeks to recuperate and reveal a distinctly American form of sensory (ultimately erotic) being and revitalized perception.

Whilst most authorities on the subject cite the 1960s and 1970s as the revisionist period proper, few discussions of the revisionist Western end without following the textual trail into the altogether different socio-political climate of the 1980s and touching upon a film that is conventionally held to represent a hallmark moment in the historical development of the representation of the Native American Other.<sup>7</sup> Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* will be important to our discussion as not only does it reveal the ideological outline of a certain mode of Hollywood production in the 1980s (Jim Collins’ “New Sincerity”<sup>8</sup>) but also for the wholesale rehabilitation of the latent impulses I have been tracing (the culmination of a sequence of films often held to have begun with *Broken Arrow* in 1950<sup>9</sup>). It is with *Dances with Wolves* that ethnographic nostalgia assumes its

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<sup>7</sup> See Kellner, “Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns Since the Reagan Era,” 239-250; Kitses, *Horizons West*, 2; O’Connor and Rollins, “Introduction: The West, Westerns, and American Character,” 14, 29-31;

<sup>8</sup> Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 242-263.

<sup>9</sup> See Buscombe’s discussion of the “liberal western,” in Edward Buscombe, *‘Injuns!’ Native Americans in the Movies* (London, Reaktion Books, 2006), 101-

most naked form since Cooper and returns us full circle: the rewriting of the captivity narrative in terms of overt encounter with the ethnological Other.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in order to conclude this survey, I intend to move beyond the conventional boundaries of the revisionist period and examine how the codes established during this period continue to profoundly inflect our own moment in contemporary Hollywood. Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* stands in a certain vein of post-New Hollywood, post-auteurist, ostensibly "social realist" cinema whose political commitment to the "social issues of the day" is mediated by the older representational structures I have traced.<sup>11</sup> It is in *Brokeback Mountain* that the constellation of cinematic tropes, styles and ideological transformations in these preceding films finds a kind of ultimate project or terminus. It is in the libidinal economy of the West that the American *pensée sauvage* will attempt to hypothesize an origin point for the formation of homosexual desire in American society.

The picture that emerges from this constellation of films is a certain set of tropes. These tropes will be coordinated around narratives of "rebellion" or transgression from the regimes of "civilization," undertaken by characters in the name of stabilizing or uncovering "authentic" new forms of identity<sup>12</sup> in the spaces of the Old West, the same spaces that now emit the weak and largely forgotten signal of that warping of subjectivity held to occur at the liminal zone

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150; Frank Manchel, "Cultural Confusion: *Broken Arrow* (1950)," in Rollins and O'Connor, *Hollywood's Indian*, 91-106; Jim Kitses, "Introduction: Postmodernism and the Western," in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight, 1998), 17.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Baird, "'Going Indian': *Dances with Wolves* (1990)," in Rollins and O'Connor, *Hollywood's Indian*, 153-169.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Lee's status as global auteur see Whitney Crothers Dilley, "Ang Lee as Director: His Position in Chinese and World Cinema," in *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 20-50.

<sup>12</sup> See Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* for a discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* as a model of modern narrative as the attempt to stabilize identity (32-33). Brooks argues that "the question of identity, claims Rousseau— and this is what makes him at least symbolically the incipit of modern narrative— can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition" (33).

of the Frontier. This fantasy system assumes its strongest form in the revitalization of the narrative tradition that began with Cooper which turns around the colonial emissary's penetration of and ultimate statement of identity with a fantasy indigenous society.

### 3.2 The Revisionist Western

Firstly I will briefly sketch the backdrop against which this arc of films ascends historically. It is only with the interrogation of the various nationalist ideologies of the classical Western that the West can be "remapped" according to "outsider" positions— subaltern and historically marginalized perspectives.<sup>13</sup> Within the scholarship there has cohered a dominant narrative accounting for this generic transformation. The traditional markers by which this transition is tracked are well known: they include the shrinking box office dominance of the genre beginning in the mid-1950s,<sup>14</sup> the various tonal shifts that solidify the sense of melancholy, loss, nostalgia and elegy,<sup>15</sup> and an increasing admission that the national "mythology" functioned ideologically as a form of mass mystification.<sup>16</sup> The conventional historical explanation is of course anchored in the social and political upheavals of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This shift is read by Kitses in *Horizons West* as the "recasting of the Frontier as a border between the powerful and dispossessed, men and women, whites and people of colour [which] has unearthed other meanings for the form" (21); Rollins and O'Connor cite the New Western history of Patricia Nelson Limerick as the inspiration for rereading the Frontier for the "absent or distorted voices in a historical frontier exposition: Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, Asians and women" in *Hollywood's West* (14).

<sup>14</sup> Langford, "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western," 26;

<sup>15</sup> See Kellner's discussion of the "nostalgic, the radical and the corrective Western," in "Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns," 243-250.

<sup>16</sup> See Kellner, "Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns," 239-256.

<sup>17</sup> Rollins and O'Connor quote Michael Coyne with approval in *Hollywood's West* when arguing that "Western films of the 1960s, were centered on the estrangement and alienation of traditional heroes, 'lionized men who had outlived their time and stood poised at the edge of the sunset,' citing 'three superb elegiac Westerns of 1962': *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Lonely are the Brave*, and *Ride the High Country*. Westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s displayed an increasing cynicism and violence that reflected the national

It could be argued that this critical narrative emerged already somewhat in Wright's *Six Guns and Society*. Although Wright never phrases the matter in explicitly ideological or political terms, his characterization of the historical trajectory of the genre can be read as an early account of such a genre "crisis" or "rupture." The "Transition" phase marks the distinction between the earlier "Classical" form and the proto-revisionism of the "Professional" plot in which the once secure ideological relationship between the protagonist and the regimes of advancing civilization is radically problematized (SS, 85-88). This process is encapsulated by Langford's observation that there "is a period in the history of the Western when, to recall Habermas' terminology, the 'social integrative power' of the Western dissipates, or— which is at least as important— is widely felt to be dissipating."<sup>18</sup> More specifically, it is the year of 1962 that marks the critical watershed year in the record for Langford:

1962... was a significant year for Westerns for at least two reasons. In the first place, it saw the release of just 15 Westerns, the lowest number since the dawn of the classic Hollywood era in the early 1920s. Of those 15 Westerns, however, at least four were benchmark films that helped set the tone of growing disenchantment and cynicism for the genre over the coming two decades: John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country*, and two modern Westerns, David Miller's *Lonely are the Brave* and Martin Ritt's *Hud*. All of these films explicitly reflect in some way either on the actual closing of the historical

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experience of war, assassination, riot and Watergate" (23); Langford argues in "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western" that "the immediate political and cultural context for this crisis is plain enough: one would list the impact of civil rights struggle and of black, Hispanic, Chicano, and Native American nationalisms, the rise of the counterculture and of the New Left, and of course the Vietnam War as the crucible in which all of these elements find a volatile and combustible fusion. More abstractly, we might speak of the emergent terminal crisis of the liberal social and political settlement of the postwar era, a settlement the Western had worked hard to legitimate and a sense of whose incipient dissolution structures the Westerns of the 60s and after" (28); see also J. Hoberman, "How the Western Was Lost," in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses, Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 85-92.

<sup>18</sup> Langford, "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western," 27.

frontier or on the erosion of the values that had been associated in cultural myth with it. All are varieties of what has been called the “end-of-the-line” Western: films in which a protagonist who embodies the Old West run out of time and room in a relentlessly modernizing, rationalized contemporary reality.<sup>19</sup>

In Langford’s diagnosis it is possible to hear the traces of the historical culmination of that contradictory process Lukács read in Cooper: the ontological climate of the “Old West” that the Westerner encountered upon striking out beyond the Frontier is now destroyed upon contact with civilization and its all-pervasive forms of “rationalization.”<sup>20</sup> The result is that the figure finds himself “incapable of living in the conditions of this culture for which he had struck the first paths.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, the narrative structure of the closing of the Frontier serves as a figuration to express the genre’s awareness of its own impending historical diminution.

This historical inflection point is characterized by Cawelti as a decisive “reversal” in 1969 that echoes the significance Wright places on the “Professional” plot:

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<sup>19</sup> Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” 29

<sup>20</sup> This major sociological code is associated with Max Weber. Jameson characterizes rationalization in these terms:

The characteristic form of rationalization is indeed the reorganization of operations in terms of the binary system of means and ends; indeed, the means/ends opposition, although it seems to retain the term and to make a specific place for value, has the objective result of abolishing value as such, bracketing the “end” or drawing it back into the system of pure means in such a way that the end is merely the empty aim of realizing these particular means. This secret one-dimensionality of the apparent means/ends opposition is usefully brought out by the Frankfurt School’s alternate formulation, namely the concept of instrumentalization, which makes it clear that rationalization involves the transformation of everything into sheer means (hence the traditional formula of a Marxist humanism, that capitalism is a wholly rationalized and indeed rational system of means in the service of an irrational ends). (*PU*, 239)

Jameson notes that it is recoded as “reification” in the work of Lukács (*PU*, 214).

<sup>21</sup> See note 21, chapter 2 above.

Two of the most successful Westerns of 1969, *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* actually went so far as to reverse the usual pattern of the formula Western and to present the unregenerate, lawless outlaw as a sympathetic figure expressing a definite sense of regret at his elimination by the agents of law and order... since they represent a more spontaneous, individualistic, and free way of life, their destruction by the brutal massive and corrupt agencies of the state presented critically. Thus, it seems that we have come to a point where it is increasingly difficult to imagine a synthesis between the honor and independence of the Western hero and the imperatives of progress and success. In such a pattern, the ritual action reaffirms the inevitability of progress, but suggests increasing disillusion and uncertainty about its consequences. (*SM*, 79)

Whilst there are undoubtedly major tonal and ideological dissonances between these two examples, the essential diagnosis made by these scholars stands: an overt interrogation of the official ideology of the Western, a re-examination of the question of the sustainability of an American social and political entity, is well underway by the late 1960s. If this broad diagnosis of renewed narrative interest in the ideological contradictions of the West is correct, the question remains as to how it manifests as changes in narrative register and style. Langford and Gallagher offer two productive schemes for characterizing stylistic changes in this period. Gallagher's threefold scheme proposes:

- (1) the later western projects a less optimistic and more unflattering vision of the West's potential synthesis of nature and culture;
- (2) the western hero, once an agent of law and order, has become a renegade, a professional killer, an antihero, neurotic, psychotic, less integrable into a synthesis;
- (3) the later western is less simple, tidy, and naïve, more ambiguous, complex, and ironic, more self-critical and in the "art of telling."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gallagher, "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western," 247.

The first transformation (of which the second is but a specific characterological manifestation) suggests the breakdown in that “hybridization strategy” that I outlined in relation to *Shane*: the Westerner “embodies” an unstable and temporary “fusion” of the antagonistic categories of “nature” (or wilderness/savagery) and “culture” (or civilization). The Westerner became a “solution” to the antagonism between these conceptual categories and their ultimate conceptual irreconcilability, in the form of a character type. This diagnosis suggests that the genre’s historical and ideological “mission”, its ability to project a figurative solution to this historical contradiction has become untenable. However, the third transformation leads us onto the issue of self-reflexivity in the revisionist Western. The question is also phrased neatly by Langford, as “whether, to what degree, and how a genre becomes capable of reflecting on, explicitly or otherwise, upon the conditions of possibility of its own history-making enterprise.”<sup>23</sup> Both scholars suggest that in this period the Western appears to suspect and interrogate its own textual register: that “mythic” vision of national history that I characterized earlier as the relation between the older forms of the romance and epic. In suspecting that the genre’s spectacles are illusory in a negative sense, the genre appears to admit a new register: realism.

This becomes apparent in Langford’s scheme for the revisionist Western:

1. One option is an aggressive reversal of the genre’s traditional (white supremacist) narrative subjective position, fostering an identification with Native American culture and demining white settler culture as genocidal, corrupt and mutilated...
2. Another model is the “mud and rags” Western... [which] portray[s] the West as a verminous, barbarous melee in which the notion of a Western “code” or value system is a bleak joke.
3. And then there are films that attempt simply to “tell it as it was”— to offer an unvarnished, unillusioned account of the daily realities of Western life... all of which emphasize the unromantic hardness of working life on

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<sup>23</sup> Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” 27.



the range, but without the compulsive unpleasantness of the “mud and rags” school.<sup>24</sup>

The first transformation is of course that overt expression of ethnographic nostalgia that I will return to shortly. However, the second and third transformations now reveal a more intimate connection between ideology and style mediated by the emergence of a form of realism in the genre. The new focus on the “less flattering” or “unvarnished” vision of the material and social conditions of the historical West is the common ground between these schemata. I contend that the classical Western, whilst it claimed to map an actually existing historical reality, had little in the way of explicitly realist content (following Jameson’s thesis that narrative realism emerges in the nineteenth century firstly in the novel as an attempt to map an emergent historical world of capitalist bourgeois subjectivity<sup>25</sup>). But the new availability of a mode of cinematic realism<sup>26</sup> then transforms the bipolar model of the genre I have offered above

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<sup>24</sup> Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” 32.

<sup>25</sup> See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*:

Indeed, as any number of “definitions” of realism assert, and as the totemic ancestor of the novel, Don Quixote, emblematically demonstrates, that processing operation variously called narrative mimesis or realistic representation has as its historic function the systematic undermining and demystification, the secular “decoding,” of those preexisting inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms which are its initial givens. In this sense, the novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution— that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. The “objective” function of the novel is thereby also implied: to its subjective and critical, analytic, corrosive mission must now be added the task of producing as though for the first time that very life world, that very “referent”— the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and “disenchanted” object world of the commodity system, with its post-traditional daily life and its bewilderingly empirical, “meaningless,” and contingent Umwelt— of which this new narrative discourse will then claim to be the “realistic” reflection. (*PU*, 138)

<sup>26</sup> The new historical availability of realism as a mode can of course be explained by reference to a number of related stylistic and political developments in mid-

into a tripolar field. Each of the following films will need to position itself between the romantic, epic and realist registers, a process that will deeply inflect the ideological charge of each film.

For these purposes, I want to take this form of cinematic “realism” as characterized by what Jameson calls the “order of the Real”:

It then sometimes happens [in the unfolding of the dynamics of a text] that the objectifications are irrefutable, and that the wish-fulfilling imagination does its preparatory work so well that the wish, and desire itself, are confounded by the unanswerable resistance of the Real... The Real is thus— virtually by definition in the fallen world of capitalism— that which resists desire, that bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breakup of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfillment. Yet it also follows that this Real— this absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable only in its effects— can be disclosed only by Desire itself, whose wish-fulfilling mechanisms are the instruments through which this resistant surface must be scanned. (*PU*, 171).

It is in this sense that these products of New Hollywood might be said to display a more “literary” sensibility than their classical forebears, for it is ultimately from the novelistic tradition that they inherit this mode. What I will suggest in

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century European film that flowed into Hollywood filmmaking in the 1960s: for example, the stylistic innovations of Italian Neo-Realism with its sense of deep political commitment, and of course the French Nouvelle Vague. For three discussions of the influence of these movements on American filmmakers of the time see Alexander Horwath, “The Impure Cinema: New Hollywood 1967-1976,” in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 9-18; Noel King, “‘The Last Good Time We Ever Had’: Remembering the New Hollywood Cinema,” in Elsaesser, Horwath and King, *The Last Great American Picture Show*, 19-36; Thomas Elsaesser, “American Auteur Cinema: The Last— or First— Great Picture Show,” in Elsaesser, Horwath and King, *The Last Great American Picture Show*, 37-74. For an extended discussion of the issue see Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

the analyses to come is that it is the narrative and imagistic trace of the Real which floods into the *mise-en-scène* of the genre. It fills the void left by the emptying out of the older epic register and overt celebrations of the ideology of civilization will cease. Instead, the historical sovereignty of civilization will become increasingly a cause for doubt and lament. But the repressive effects of civilization are only revealed by the scanning function of a “desiring Self.” The following sequence of films all follow characters that traverse the West on a form of libidinal quest, seeking to escape the regimes of civilization. Each film continues to figure the West as a “world-historical” space in which we are asked to witness a profound synchronic encounter between two qualitatively different forms of historical being: one remade at or across the Frontier, the other firmly embedded in the regimes of civilization. It is through this dynamic of Desire and resistance that the Westerner’s privileged sense of historicity itself (of human life as subject to profound and radical change) continues to be kindled at the Frontier. In Jameson’s canonical formulation, history is that which “refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention” (*PU*, 87). Each Utopian libidinal quest will come to know the “resistance of the Real” as the form taken by history’s constraints on being in one way or another: either as the opprobrium civilization attaches to Desire’s drive towards new, erotic forms of being, or as the empirical history of the closing of the West and the extermination of the life world of the Native American Other. Each quest will dramatize vividly that “history is what hurts” (*PU*, 88).

### **3.3 Decommissioning the Western: *The Last Picture Show* (1971)**

There is a moment in Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* which ushers this ideologeme out of its classical past and re-articulates it for this new era. Amidst the collapse of the metanarratives of American historicity (the possibility of escaping “history,” of the liberating power of unfettered capitalism, of the possibility of nourishing a new mode of national subjectivity), amidst the astringent pleasures of an anachronistic black and white cinematography (having emptied the colour out of the old lush Technicolor panoramas),

Bogdanovich alerts us to the fact that even in this revisionist period, the old erotics of the West remain subtly available to a masculine, colonial subjectivity, now wholly severed from the connection to the life world of the Native American. The analysis so far has traced certain features of the way ethnological contact has been imagined by the *pensée sauvage* of American popular culture. The climate that formed the Westerner hero was always in direct and overt reference to the ethnological Other of the savage. What we can see in these post-Westerns is that the nostalgia for this climate lingers, despite the near completion of the task of eradicating the life world of the Native American peoples. Mapping the Otherness of the indigenous societies of the American continent is no longer a task for these narratives to perform. In these diegetic narrative worlds, indigenous populations have been putatively removed to the reserve, their social, economic and cultural structures broken up under the banner of assimilation.

However, in a pivotal scene, Sam “the Lion” (Ben Johnson) recounts to Sonny (Timothy Bottoms) and Billy (Sam Bottoms) an anecdote from his youth. The weight it carries is emphasized by the long take and slow dolly in and out that Bogdanovich lavishes upon it (see fig. 14). Sam states:



Figure 14 *The Last Picture Show*: Sam's Monologue

Sam: I just come out here to get a little scenery. Too pretty a day to spend in town. You wouldn't believe how this country's changed. First time I seen it, there wasn't a mesquite tree on it. Or a prickly pear neither. I used to own this land, you know. First time I watered a horse at this tank...was more than forty years ago. I reckon the reason I drag you out here is... I'm as sentimental as the next fellow when it comes to old times. Old times. I brought a young lady swimming out here once...more than twenty years ago. It was after my wife had lost her mind. And my boys was dead. Me and this young lady was pretty wild, I guess. In pretty deep. We used to come here on horseback and swim without no bathing suits. One day she wanted to swim the horses across this tank. Kind of a crazy thing to do, but we done it anyway. She bet me a silver dollar she could beat me across. She did. This old horse I was riding didn't want to take the water. But she was always looking for something to do like that. Something wild. I bet she's still got that silver dollar.

Sonny: Whatever happened to her?

Sam: She growed up. She was just a girl then, really. Let me help you with that.

Sonny: Why didn't you ever marry her after your wife died?

Sam: She was already married. Her and her husband was young and miserable with one another...like so many young married folks are. I thought they'd change with some age...but it didn't turn out that way.

The girl at the heart of the recollection is later revealed to be Lois (Ellen Burstyn). Her own recollection of Sam (voiced to Sonny upon Sam's death) echoes it reciprocally:

Lois: I guess if it wasn't for Sam..... I'd just about have missed it. Whatever "it" is. I'd have been one of them amity types that thinks that playing bridge is the best thing that life has to offer.

I would contend that it is this "it"— understood as the temporary return of an inner sense of a lived, erotic, bodily and psychic plenitude— around which the film's system of social portraiture turns. And in this "it" (which language itself appears incapable of grasping) the Utopian impulse of the West continues to announce itself, ever so subtly, in the context of a fallen, quasi-dystopian landscape. The sublime, vertiginous qualities of the classical Western landscape have vanished and in their place we find the unrelieved horizontal expanses of the Texas plain (newly populated by the pestilent monoculture of Mesquite trees) and the pummeled surface of the horse tank. Nevertheless, the geography itself gives off the weak signal of the Old West as a profoundly eroticized space in which desire might be felt "authentically" once again, outside the repressive regimes of civilization. It is in Sam the Lion that Bogdanovich invests the old dream of the West. He is the figure that speaks of the West as the space for the performance of a national heroism and the older dialectical relation between the romance and epic contents of the genre.

These moments, which are glimpsed only tangentially by the narrative, stand amongst not only a fallen landscape but an entire degraded society.<sup>27</sup>

Bogdanovich constructs a self-contained social universe out of the portraits of individual small town subjects who are taken, once amalgamated, to reveal and problematize the larger national project. Most obviously, Bogdanovich invites the spectator to read each according to the dynamics of a changing economic environment. He asks the spectator to read Anarene, the small Texan town in which the film takes place, against the image vocabulary of the Western. But the phenomenological climate of the Western in all its old "intensity" (Tompkins's sense of it being more *real* than Real) seems to have dialectically inverted in *The*

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the geographical inflection of Bogdanovich's imagery see Grayson Holmes, Leo Zonn and Altha J. Cravey, "Placing man in the New West: Masculinities of The Last Picture Show," *GeoJournal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 277-288.

*Last Picture Show* into its very opposite— it is a world in which some invisible force stands on the verge of completing its historical mission of totalizing desiccation.

Surfaces that speak of decay, collapse and disappointment— the physical evidence of the Real itself—now populate the *mise-en-scène* of the film. The opening shot of the film establishes this visual “braille” of the Real in which the eye reads the movement of history in the textures of the diegetic world. Bogdanovich opens with no score; rather the sound mix over the film’s title card foregrounds an incessant stream of wind that recalls European art cinema’s love of this abrasive aural texture (surely derived in part from Italian Neo-Realism and Federico Fellini’s fondness for it<sup>28</sup>). The frame that follows is Anarene’s “Main Street” (see fig. 15). It is archetypal in its architecture and axial structure, and recalls the entire history of the Western town as that geographical structure in which the economy and society of America crystallized at the old Indian trading post or at a node along the wagon trail. However, by the 1950s, the economic transformations of mid-century have rendered the structures of commercial and civic intercourse empty. The first shot of the film re-inscribes it with an entirely new visual code: a code of economic decay, collapse, degradation and “failure,” (the very worst ideological category in the ethical framework of American capitalism and a casual heuristic for a totalizing collapse in subjectivity<sup>29</sup>). This vision of the economic desiccation of the “post-industrial” West extends to the ghostly mechanical movement of unmanned oil wells, the degraded agricultural land that once promised to feed the nation, and the aforementioned mesquite tree plain and horse tank.<sup>30</sup> In Bogdanovich’s *mise-en-*

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the role of wind in Fellini’s oeuvre see Maurizio Corbella, “Notes for a Dramaturgy of Sound in Fellini’s Cinema: The Electroacoustic Sound Library of the 1960s,” *Music and the Moving Image* 4, no. 3 (2011): 15-17. Corbella argues, “from the beginning of Fellini’s career, wind is weighted with the value of indefiniteness typical of the poetic transfiguration of memory” (15).

<sup>29</sup> For an insightful historical discussion of failure as a category in American national ideology see Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> The notion of a “post-industrial society” or form of capitalism is commonly associated with Bell for whom it is transformation most obviously manifest in a

*scène*, these are available to us as “grisly” and “ironic” reversals of the symbolic vocabulary of the classical Western. The older epic, “Promethean” heroism of nation building is emptied out and the urban fabric stands as the hollowed out monument to historical forces that once passed this way.



**Figure 15** *The Last Picture Show*: Anarene’s cinema

Indeed, the “ghost town” had always been a motif of the Western, expressing the subconscious fear of the fragility of the project of constructing a properly integrated society in the West.<sup>31</sup> For Bogdanovich the ghost town becomes an emblem in his critique of modernity and interrogation of the historical forces of American ascendancy. However, Anarene is indeed inhabited by a plethora of “ghost” or spectral subjects who appear to retain the memory of Desire and yet their ability to feel any sense of plenitude is somehow inhibited. It is precisely

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shift from the goods-producing to service economy and a new focus on theoretical knowledge as a key determiner of economic success. See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 12-33. Cf. Jameson’s critique of the category and preference for Ernest Mandel’s category of “late capitalism” in *Postmodernism*, 35-57.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the “anxieties” expressed in the image of the Ghost Town see Chrys M. Poff, “The Western Ghost Town in American Culture, 1869–1950” (PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2004), ProQuest (3129332).



this memory, and the bitterness that attends it, that I have suggested is the “scanning device” without which this degraded landscape could not be read. The entire material fabric of Anarene now becomes a surface or bedrock upon which the characters, as a sequence of exquisitely desiring subjects, will know the “break up of hope.” I would suggest then that the film draws much of its force from this singular inversion in which the flooding in of the Real not only banishes the epic, but throws the old romance content of the Western into stark relief, allowing it to be felt once more but in the *negative*, by the registration of its loss.

All of this articulates itself in that striking and most insistent feature of the film: the utter failure of sexual desire. It is surely not coincidental that at the historical moment when a political rhetoric of erotic liberation takes hold in the form of the 1960s counterculture, a film that problematizes the old sense of national virility enters into historical possibility. Throughout the analysis so far, the status of male desire has been a key index of the ontological transformations wrought at the Frontier, as life beyond the Frontier appeared more erotic than life in civilization. The spectre that haunts *The Last Picture Show* from its opening moments is a collapse in that relationship between individual virility and its symbolic national projection. From the moment Sonny’s jalopy with its spluttering engine comes into view on the Main Street, the mechanics of driving as well as sexual relations are impeded. Of course, the libidinal investment of the automobile in the burgeoning consumer economy of the mid-twentieth century is a well-established phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> Bogdanovich gives the spectator a sequence of close-ups (Sonny’s foot working the accelerator, his hand manipulating a lever) all to no use. The lyrical content of the song playing on the radio (Hank William’s “Why Don’t You Love Me?”) underlines the point: “Ain’t had no lovin’

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<sup>32</sup> For discussions of this phenomenon see Daniel L. Lewis, “Sex and the Automobile,” in David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein (eds.), *Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 123-133; Jack DeWitt, “Cars and Culture: The Cars of ‘American Graffiti,’” *The American Poetry Review* 39, no. 5 (2010): 47-50.

and a-huggin' and a-kissin' in a long, long while...Why won't you spark me like you used to do...." (see fig. 16).



Figure 16 *The Last Picture Show*: Driving mechanics

The introductory scene of *Sonny* is but the beginning of this pattern. Old folk rituals of social permutation that structured the communal life of the town in the Western, notably the town dance (see fig. 17), still persist into the twentieth century. The town hall functions as a space in which alternate erotic constitutions can be rehearsed. Yet everywhere the socio-sexual dynamics of Anarene fail to cohere. It is expressed everywhere in poor or inappropriate choices of erotic object. Amongst the younger generation (whose experience is shaped by the new sociology of the “adolescent” as the very embodiment of emergent sexual desire<sup>33</sup>) there is Sonny and Charlene’s (Sharon Ullrick) aborted date (Sonny reports “It wasn’t very hot,” see fig. 18), Jacy’s (Cybill Shepherd) pre-arranged date with Duane (Jeff Bridges) at the motel (she plans to lose her virginity but is foiled by his impotence, later misrepresenting the encounter to her peers by extolling mellifluously “I just can’t describe it. I just can’t describe it in words,” see fig. 20), and Billy’s paid encounter with the town sexworker

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<sup>33</sup> For discussion of the history of the sociological category of the “teenager” see Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (London: Pimlico, 2008); Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

Jimmy-Sue (Helena Humann) (surely a figure inflected with the memory of Fellini's own figures of maternal erotic fantasy such as "la Saraghina" in *8½* (1963)) which ends with his premature ejaculation. Perhaps the most extreme example comes in the form of Bob-John, the preacher's son, whose abduction of the young girl (and implied paedophilic desires) most strongly indict the claims of Christian ethics to "manage" desire.



Figure 17 *The Last Picture Show*: The town dance



Figure 18 *The Last Picture Show*: Sonny and Charlene's Date

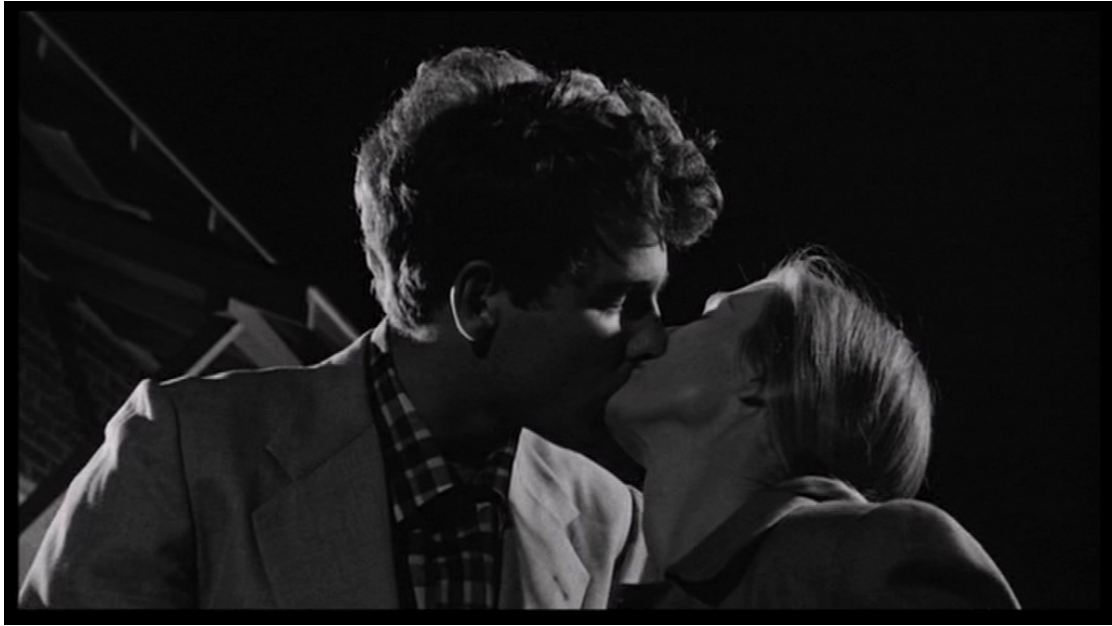


Figure 19 *The Last Picture Show*: Sonny and Ruth



Figure 20 *The Last Picture Show*: Duane and Jacy



Figure 21 *The Last Picture Show*: Jacy and Abilene

The relations of the older generation seem to exhibit a slightly different pattern. There is the domestic portrait of Jacy's mother, Lois, which stands as the most critical portrait of the fate of Desire under bourgeois or "civilized" marriage. The character is constructed initially as that for whom Desire has been most clearly banalized. We see, for example, her insistence on deflating Jacy's experience of romantic limerence: "I thought if you slept with him a few times, you might find out there isn't nothing *magic* about it." Furthermore, Lois' extramarital affair with Abilene (Clu Gulager) is subject to a certain confusion between industrial and sexual mechanics. Lois calls on Abilene to see if he would like "company," but when he declines to check his oil wells, Lois deadpans to "drill hard." And yet I have already suggested that Lois is revealed later on to have once experienced that "it" with Sam (that which "life has to offer") which suggests she retains the private memory of "authentic" Desire. Other clues to the possible recuperation of Desire in this climate can be found: Jacy and Abilene's encounter (the only real portrait of male virility to be found, see fig. 21) appears to find traction in its socially tabooed nature. A similar suggestion can be found in Coach Popper (Bill Thurman). When running a drill in the school gymnasium he slaps the buttocks of one of the boys. Bogdanovich's camera tilts down to make the gesture unambiguous. He taunts the boys with quips about their masculinity whilst

surreptitiously noting that some of them are indeed “pretty enough to be women.” These instances recall Jameson’s point that Desire might in fact require a “regressive norm or law” through which it may “burst and against which to define itself” (*PU*, 53).

Yet the narrative centre around which this enclosed social universe revolves is, of course, the relation between Sonny and Ruth (Cloris Leachman) (see fig. 19). It fuses the inappropriate, intergenerational choice of erotic object that united Jacy and Abilene with the portrait of Lois’ bourgeois marriage (after all Ruth has the misfortune to be married to Coach Popper). Whilst the yearnings of Ruth and Sonny’s relation are antagonistic to the warp and weft of the social fabric, the connection suggests an erotic constitution that might, under different circumstances, have been felt as “true” or “authentic.” On the one hand, it is the catalyst for the revivification of Ruth’s very being. Tellingly, this revivification finds its expression not only in erotic activity (brushing Sonny’s hair) but also through her re-emergence as a consumer— she “re-decorates.” That the interior decorative scheme carries a libidinal charge in the consumer economy is underlined by Ruth’s desire to repaint her bedroom Sonny’s favourite colour (blue). Yet on the other hand, the coupling appears doomed and unable to fix itself: when the attraction is consummated, the bedframe screeches at the motion and neither seems to take any delight in the coupling. Ruth weeps. Later on in the concluding scene, her tears speak to the fact that the renewed pain of Sonny’s disappearance has been altogether too much to bear and, after this temporary revivification, the “break up of hope” has been irrevocably finalized in her circumstances.

In fact, Bogdanovich figures the character of Ruth with a twin historical orientation. Earlier in the film he employs a high angle long shot to reveal Ruth and Coach Popper’s house as a small, single story dwelling on the edge of town, its fence demarcating the zone of private ownership over against the mesquite tree infested plain. The image speaks to the Western yeoman’s homestead standing proud on the prairie (see fig. 22). Recalling that in *Shane*, the Starrett’s ethical stature as worthy of the promise of American democracy was signaled by

their willingness to toil and craft the homestead “with their own hands,” Bogdanovich now ironizes the emblem of the old Jeffersonian yeomanry which, in a new historical climate, no longer nurtures the young Joey Starrett but a loveless and childless marriage. Equally however, the interpenetration of the postwar consumer economy glimpsed in Ruth’s “make over” announces itself more forcefully in the *embourgeoisement* of those able to manoeuvre successfully in the economic transitions of the twentieth century. Lois’ house is, for example, conspicuously bedecked with the *mise-en-scène* of their middle class status.



Figure 22 *The Last Picture Show*: Ruth and Coach Popper's House

In this stultifying climate, two essentially American strategies present themselves for evading the all-pervasive *ennui* and dislocation of Anarene. The first is to take to the road in search of some other libidinized zone. In the first instance, Sonny and Duane take an impromptu trip to Mexico. The pair returns with souvenir sombreros and a stomach complaint suggesting the overindulgence of long-deprived “gastronomical libidos.”<sup>34</sup> But Sonny and Jacy are less lucky. Upon eloping to a shotgun wedding in Kansas they are caught by a police patrol vehicle (see fig. 23 and fig. 24). The town exhibits a kind of gravity that pulls those who seek to escape its social climate back into it. Whilst the iconography of the road often functions as a privileged trope for American

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<sup>34</sup> See note 73, chapter 2 above.

narratives of autonomy and mobility in the mid to late twentieth century,<sup>35</sup> the structures (as spatial interpenetrations into the West following the horse trail, the wagon trail, and the railway) now function equally to support repressive forms of social surveillance. It is unsurprising therefore that one of the primary zones of generic hybridity I will continue to trace in the forthcoming films will be that in which the codes of the Western are rewritten on Eisenhower's highways.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 23 *The Last Picture Show*: Jacy and Sonny light out for Kansas

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<sup>35</sup> For discussions of the emergence of the road movie and narrative of political automobility see Katie Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction and Television* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006); Neil Archer, *The Road Movie: In Search of Meaning* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2016); David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Brian Ireland, "American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre," *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 4 (2003): 474-484.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the importance of the interstate highway system to the road movie see Laderman, *Driving Visions*, 37-42.





Figure 24 *The Last Picture Show*: Regimes of repressive surveillance

However, this centrifugal strategy of “lighting out” towards the world and new social realities is turned inside out by the other strategy for escaping the town’s climate. At the local cinema, the town’s subjects turn inwards rather than outwards to the fantastical projections of cinema itself (see fig. 25). The interiority of the psyche and its fantasy life is another refuge from the empirical weight of the Real. The film’s eponymous “last picture show” is triggered by the death of Sam the Lion (Johnson was of course a seasoned and legendary figure in the genre having appeared in a number of Ford and Peckinpah’s most iconic Westerns as well as *Shane*), the figure who seemed to hold out some last possibility of cathecting with the old vision of the West. By figuring the failure of the local cinema in this apparently unremarkable small town (its bulletin board advertises *Winchester ’73* (1950) and *Red River* (1948)), Bogdanovich makes explicit his desire to measure the widening historical gap between a political economy and its collective ideological visions. It is a gap that appears to be ever more untenable, and the “false consciousness” instilled by such visions of an epic national identity inculcated by the mass product of Hollywood threatens to rupture at any moment. And yet the withering of cinema is here the greatest cause for nostalgia. The collective *cathexis*, or libidinal investment, in the

celluloid image appears hardest to give up.<sup>37</sup> As Sonny reflects, “Nothin’s really been right since Sam the Lion died,” a realization that surely comes to him as he wordlessly passes the horse tank on the way to senior picnic. Equally, in her final flood of rage, Ruth proclaims “You’ve ruined it. It’s lost completely.” She could be speaking of the entire transpersonal national adventure as much as the immediate microcosm of an interpersonal betrayal (see fig. 26 and fig. 27).

Bogdanovich’s film functions as a system of resonating nostalgias; a nostalgia for the climate of the wilderness where Desire could be felt as a revivification of one’s very being, for the Old West where the future remained open and full of hope, for the national relationship with the Hollywood spectacle as it existed prior to the penetration of television, and finally for the comforts of the Western, mystifying as they may have been. *The Last Picture Show* reveals what happens once the Frontier has closed and the regimes of civilization have completed their mission. All these nostalgias ultimately coalesce around the Western’s deeply contradictory promise of nourishing a virile national, libidinal economy out “there” beyond the Frontier.

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<sup>37</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, corrected reprint (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1974). This term pervades the Freudian literature to describe the investment of mobile energy (libidinal) in an entity external to the psyche. Freud argues, for example, that “Instinctual cathexes seeking discharge— that, in our view, is all there is in the id” (74).



Figure 25 *The Last Picture Show*: The frame-within-a-frame of *Red River*



Figure 26 *The Last Picture Show*: Sonny's apology



Figure 27 *The Last Picture Show*: Ruth and the “break up of hope”

### 3.4 Hitting the Road: *Easy Rider* (1969)

*Easy Rider* offers another New Hollywood vision of an America in which civilization has completed its historical mission. Yet the twentieth century landscape and the social debris that is strewn across it continue to speak back to the codes of the Western and the nineteenth century. The narrative of *Easy Rider* forms something of a cross-section of that landscape, offering us further moments in which the relation between the historical promise and resulting reality of American society can be assessed. The general critical view has cohered that *Easy Rider* presents an aggressive critique of the epic, ideological content I have traced, the older cinematic visions of the founding of America as a series of heroic performances that set the present in its binding empirical form. As much rises to the surface of the film when George (Jack Nicholson) observes, “You know, this used to be a hell of a good country. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong with it,” an observation famously followed up with the hypothesis that “It’s real hard to be free when you’re bought and sold in the market place.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Devin Orgeron, “Misreading America in Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*,” in *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 101-128. Orgeron explicitly links this

So whilst the narrative is bracketed by iconic moments that have drawn much critical attention (the geopolitics of the drug deal, the iconic utterance— “We blew it”<sup>39</sup>), it is rather the in-between or liminal spaces encountered on that cross-section that I wish to focus on and I will take the significance of the political climate of the 1960s as given. For the purposes of the present study, my aim is less to revisit the old debates around *Easy Rider*’s efficacy as a vehicle of genuinely subversive politics, than to suggest that the symbolic charge of the romance or wish-fulfillment content I have been tracing has been “smuggled” from one generic form— the Western— to another— the “road movie.”<sup>40</sup>

Billy (Dennis Hopper) and Wyatt’s (Peter Fonda) quest takes the form of the Beat-inspired road trip to “find America,” which is itself a kind of practical, informal ethnography. It is a precursor to the libidinal road trips to Mexico taken by Sonny and Duane, and later, by Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) in *Brokeback Mountain*. Their journey is not only geographical, but also one that traverses various sociological experiments that structurally co-exist as a kind of genealogical record of American national development (the narrative contains something of the older picaresque form of episodic narrative in which the *picaro* survived a sequence of encounters by his wits and quasi-criminal enterprise<sup>41</sup>). The first of these occur when the duo pull off the road at a roadhouse (see fig. 28), an image

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utterance to Mrs. Jorgensen’s own pronouncement that “Some day, this country’s gonna be a fine, good place to live” (101).

<sup>39</sup> For discussions of the film’s political orientation see Barbara Klinger, “The Road to Dystopia; Landscaping the nation in *Easy Rider*,” in *The Road Movie Book*, eds. Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Clark (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 179-203; Laderman, *Driving Visions*, 66-81; Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 122-130.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye explicitly extends his analysis of this mythos to the American traditions of narrative automobility that emerge most clearly with the Beats: “The same disintegrated society reappears in the cells of hermits, the caves of ogres, the cottages hidden in forests; in the shepherds of pastoral, the knights errant who wander far from courts and castles, the nomadic ranchers and rustlers of Western stories, which are a later form of pastoral, and their descendants in the easy-riding school founded by Jack Kerouac” (172). See also Klinger, “The Road to Dystopia; Landscaping the Nation in *Easy Rider*,” 178.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the “picaresque” tradition in the novel see Alexander Blackburn, *The Myth of the Picaro: Continuity and Transformation of the Picaresque Novel 1554-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

which begins the process of “transcoding” the image vocabulary of the Western into a new form. Billy and Wyatt sup with a white farmer and his Hispanic wife. He appears to have been waylaid on his travels and this first life world is framed as the residue of an earlier, incomplete labour migration. The social portrait is now unmistakably the iconography of the nineteenth century yeoman farmer or homesteader, the locus of national fertility in the Western (see fig. 29). This life world retains is ideological pull. Wyatt remarks: “Nice spread here... It’s not every man that can live off the land, you know. Do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud.” Not only does the scene celebrate the yeoman’s localized economic freedom, but also that of erotic constitution and fertility (see fig. 30). From the outset in *Easy Rider*, it would appear that certain enclaves of semi-autonomy have escaped the desiccating forces of post-industrial society, in stark contrast to *The Last Picture Show*.



Figure 28 *Easy Rider*: The roadhouse

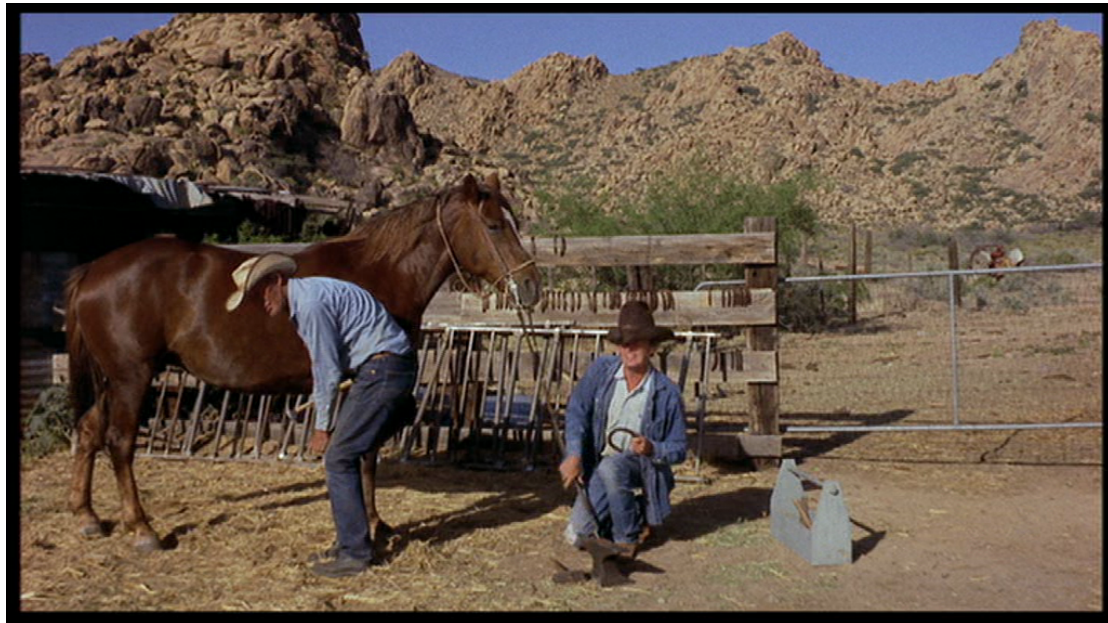


Figure 29 *Easy Rider*: The yeoman/homesteader



Figure 30 *Easy Rider*: The farmer's "spread"

Hopper re-doubles the film's inquiry into the historical significance of Frontier conditions in a more pronounced passage—the stay at the commune. It is at this point that the relation between the countercultural project and ethnographic nostalgia becomes clear.<sup>42</sup> Ethnographic nostalgia crystallizes as a Utopian

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the appropriation of Native American "spirituality" by the 1960s Counterculture see "The Return of the Native: Reclaiming Identities," in Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West*, 377-385.

project in the commune's adoption of Native American practices, as an attempted solution to the social contradiction of the Frontier in which civilization becomes inhospitable to those who blaze its trails. The countercultural symbolic vocabulary is predicated upon a newly reinvigorated sense of the subversive truths revealed by the ethnological encounter. Hence it is possible to detect the material traces of the Native American Other throughout the *mise-en-scène*. The commune is housed in an adobe-style dwelling of the American Southwest (see fig. 31). The rough-hewn domestic quarters of the collective are an open-topped barn-like structure that recalls the Native American "longhouse" (see fig. 34). Tipis and animal skins abound (see fig. 32). The means of subsistence appear to be a hybrid of hunter-gatherer practices (Wyatt is framed against a freshly killed deer strung up in a traditional manner, see fig. 33) and early agricultural practices. Importantly, the surfaces of the commune are both utilitarian and aesthetic, painted in a naïve folk art style depicting the objects of daily empirical experience (see fig. 35). Above and beyond the material practices, the social environment seems to change qualitatively too: what will emerge as I progress through these films is that a telltale sign of the imagined life world across the Frontier is the flourishing of "play" in the Schillerian-Marcusean sense.<sup>43</sup> Billy engages almost immediately in a spontaneous play-fight. Furthermore, female desire has been liberated from its systematic regulation and subjugation (the hitch-hiker's friend makes clear her desire to meet Wyatt) and sexualized gazes are unrepressed. The texture of the social environment seems, at first glance, altogether different and non-repressive in its nature. Billy and Wyatt's re-acclimatization within the environs of the commune culminates in the scene of the quartet bathing in the river, which

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<sup>43</sup> For Marcuse play is an indicator of the re-eroticization of experience: "Play is entirely subject to the pleasure principle: pleasure is in the movement itself in so far as it activates erotogenic zones" (*EC*, 214). For an extended discussion of the Schillerian significance of play see Hilde Hein, "Play as an Aesthetic Concept," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27, no. 1 (1968): 67-71.



functions as a spectacle of the rehabilitation and recuperation of the body itself (see fig. 36 and fig. 37).<sup>44</sup>



Figure 31 *Easy Rider*: The commune's Adobe-style construction



Figure 32 *Easy Rider*: The adoption of Native American material practices

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<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, "A Man Being Beaten," in *Westerns*, 150-187. For Mitchell, the spectacle of bathing in the Western is related to the violence suffered by the male body: it is a recuperation ritual.



Figure 33 *Easy Rider*: Hunter-gatherer practices



Figure 34 *Easy Rider*: Longhouse-style architecture



Figure 35 *Easy Rider*: Aesthetic expression



Figure 36 *Easy Rider*: The bathing scene



**Figure 37 *Easy Rider*: Bathing as erotic play**

However the portrait retains the suspicion that this Utopian social collective has been brought into existence prematurely. The scene contains something of Jameson's argument that the rise of the Counterculture movement (as the "final political mutation" of the Utopian impulse which seeks the "libidinal transformation of an increasingly desiccated and repressive reality") is in fact the moment at which the "ambiguity" of the Utopian impulse becomes "pronounced" (*PU*, 225). The agricultural practices of the commune have failed (the "living was easy" in the summer and the crops were planted too late) and the whole problematic of an effectively regulated division of labour returns anew (see fig. 38). The hitchhiker's monologue explains that the members of the commune are "city kinds," refugees from the historical transformations occurring in the urban centres of America, now listlessly throwing seed over the parched ground. The old knowledge structures by which the agricultural practices of the Native American life world were transmitted (song, narrative, and other ritualized transmissions) have been ruptured and lost irrevocably. Instead, we are left with one of the more damning admissions of ethnographic nostalgia as a futile and naïve attempt to re-constitute a past world in the present.



**Figure 38 *Easy Rider*: The failure of agriculture**

The unbridgeable schism between nostalgia and revolutionary forms of praxis is crystallized in a grim joke: Wyatt asks, “You get much rain around here?” to which the Hitchhiker replies, “I guess we’re going to have to dance for that”. On the surface appears to be an ethnocentric mocking of pre-Enlightenment belief modes characterized as “magic” or superstition. But in a somewhat Freudian moment in which repressed contents slip out, the Hitchhiker’s reply admits precisely that which cannot be emulated or replicated and eludes all attempts to return to earlier forms of human existence: an alternate form of consciousness. Ethnological nostalgia always turned upon the apprehension that the Native American knew an entirely other mode of consciousness (the “savage lives within himself” as Rousseau hypothesized) and the irrevocable transformations of human history preclude the individual from returning to an earlier sense of such “plenitude”. An aspect of this plenitude was surely that this consciousness held within it those “mythic” modes of belief that, whilst ascribing “non-rational” causal relationships to the natural world, saw human existence and cosmological order as intimately bound and mutually reinforcing, rather than engaged in an intensifying antagonism. And so it becomes clear that the commune’s project, which is aimed not merely at a transformation of material practices but also of consciousness, is futile. One is left unconvinced by Wyatt’s assurances that

“they’re gonna make it” and the episode stands as yet another portrait of collapse, disappointment, and enfeeblement.

The Utopian quest of *Easy Rider* is therefore characterized by a certain dynamic in which Billy and Wyatt encounter precious moments in which a sense of “plenitude” is briefly recuperated before it subsequently slips from grasp. Nowhere is this plenitude felt more vividly than in the cinematography of the film. Where Bogdanovich’s style consisted of emptying out the lush Technicolor of the classical Western and instituting instead an astringent black and white aesthetic, Hopper readmits something of the older revelry in visual sensation that characterized the Technicolor Western as a kind of “chromatic sensorium.” If Marxist hermeneutics is correct in suggesting that the life world shaped by capitalism is characterized by diminution or systematic repression of the sensory capacities of the human body,<sup>45</sup> I would suggest that the changing status

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<sup>45</sup> Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious*:

The scandalous idea that the senses have a history is, as Marx once remarked, one of the touchstones of our own historicity; if, in spite of our thoughts about history, we still feel that the Greeks, or better still, that primitive peoples, were very much like ourselves and in particular lived their bodies and their senses in the same way, then we have surely not made much progress in thinking historically. In the case of sight, it ought to be possible to understand how much the deperceptualization of the sciences—the break with such perceptual pseudosciences as alchemy, for example, the Cartesian distinction between primary and secondary senses, and the geometrization of science more generally, which substitutes ideal quantities for physically perceivable objects of study—is accompanied by a release in perceptual energies. The very activity of sense perception has nowhere to go in a world in which science deals with ideal quantities, and comes to have little enough exchange value in a money economy dominated by considerations of calculation, measurement, profit, and the like. This unused surplus capacity of sense perception can only reorganize itself into a new and semi-autonomous activity, one which produces its own specific objects, new objects that are themselves the result of a process of abstraction and reification, such that older concrete unities are now sundered into measurable dimensions on the one side, say, and pure color (or the experience of purely abstract color) on the other. (*PU*, 215)

See also Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*:

of cinematic colour tells us something about the Western's capacity for perceptual revivification as a kind of "substitute gratification" for the desiccation of sensory experience in modernity. One extraordinary shot stands out in this regard: Hopper figures the duo riding through a canyon formation which recalls Monument Valley (see fig. 40). The eroded canyons at first contain the subtle trace of coloured mineral deposits. But as the two journey down the highway and the sun sets, the pigments held by these "Badlands" (see fig. 39) then appear to be liberated and "paint" the American landscape itself. From Albert Bierstadt to John Ford, the Western landscape has been a profoundly painted surface and functioned as something like Ernst Bloch's "wish-landscape," in which there persists in the cinematic image something of the old mission of painting to reveal or revitalize a Utopian sense of the world as the sensorium to which human faculties are at home.<sup>46</sup> Hopper figures the sublime sensorium of the West to suggest that these eroded canyons of ochre and crimson hold not metallurgical wealth, but aesthetic wealth (see fig. 41 and fig. 42). Therefore, the tendency towards the "sublime shot," drawing upon all the aesthetic resources of the

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Under the predominance of rationalism, the cognitive function of sensuousness has been constantly minimized. In line with the repressive concept of reason, cognition became the ultimate concern of the "higher," non-sensuous faculties of the mind; aesthetics were absorbed by logic and metaphysics. Sensuousness, as the "lower" and even material, for cognition, to be organized by the higher faculties of the intellect. The content and validity of the aesthetic function were whittled down. Sensuousness retained a measure of philosophical dignity in a subordinate epistemological position; those of its processes that did not fit into the rationalistic epistemology— that is, those that went beyond the passive perception of data— became homeless. Foremost among these homeless contents and values were those of imagination: free, creative, or reproductive intuition of objects which are not directly "given"— the faculty to represent objects without their being "present." There was no aesthetics as the science of sensuousness to correspond to logic as the science of conceptual understanding. (*EC*, 180)

<sup>46</sup> Jameson argues in *Marxism and Form*, discussing and quoting from Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*: "In painting, in lyrical expression generally, we catch a glimpse of the transformation and transfiguration of objects to come: 'Just as Franz Marc said that pictures represent our own reemergence into a different place, so here, in placelessness, where interior and perspective interpenetrate and suffuse each other with a sense of the beyond, *a whole existence emerges into elsewhere*: here there no longer exists anything but the wish-landscape of this everywhere, this at-home-ness in the universe.'" (148)

European romantic landscape (in which meteorological and atmospheric effects serve as the raw material for performing the alchemy of perceptual revelation characteristic of the Sublime<sup>47</sup>) will permeate the films that flow from this New Hollywood moment, culminating in the hyper-chromatic aesthetics of *Avatar*.



Figure 39 *Easy Rider*: Painted canyons

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<sup>47</sup> See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1759, 2nd ed. (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970). This aesthetic category is most famously associated with Burke who describes the psychic dynamics of its perception in these terms: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect” (95-96). For a survey history of this aesthetic category and its emergence during the Romantic period see Jane Stabler, “The sublime,” in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-28; Sharon Ruston, *Romanticism* (London: Continuum, 2007), 48. For a discussion of the history of this aesthetic category in the visual culture of the United States (especially nineteenth century landscape painting) see Andrew Wilton, “The Sublime in the Old World and the New,” in Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 10-37; for a discussion on how it passed into the visual vocabulary of the Western through the paintings of Albert Bierstadt see Mitchell, “Falling Short,” in *Westerns*, 56-93.





Figure 40 *Easy Rider*: Monument Valley



Figure 41 *Easy Rider*: Aesthetic wealth



Figure 42 *Easy Rider*: The “painting” of the West

The issue remains as to how Billy and Wyatt’s libidinal quest towards a restored sense of plenitude is terminated both by the narrative and by the regimes of civilization. Civilization’s “resistance of the Real” now takes the form of a pair of agricultural workers in a pickup truck wielding a shotgun. It is at this point that the New Hollywood’s interest in transgressive couples “on the lam” becomes important, a narrative motif associated, moreover, with automobility.<sup>48</sup>

Greenblatt’s “New Historicist” perspective offers the observation that any historical narrative tradition:

...sets up under wildly varying circumstances and with radically divergent consequences,... a structure of improvisation, a set of patterns that have enough elasticity, enough scope for variation, to accommodate most of the participants in a given culture. A life that fails to conform at all, that violates absolutely all the available patterns, will have to be dealt with as an emergency— hence exiled, or killed, or declared a god.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Corey K. Creekmur, “On the Run and on the Road: Fame and the Outlaw Couple in American Cinema,” in *The Road Movie Book*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 90-112; Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 150-152, 156-158.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Greenblatt Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 14.

If this era in Hollywood history can be characterized by a renewed interest in forms of subjectivity at the very edges of political and historical possibility, the tendency of New Hollywood to concurrently eliminate and “deify” its heroic pairings comes as no surprise. Just as we saw in *The Last Picture Show*, the highway as structure of automobility, autonomy and liberation dialectically inverts to facilitate forms of surveillance that seek to cauterize any putative revolt against its repressive norms. And so the narrative conclusion of *Easy Rider* resembles less a properly tragic *denouement* deriving from the internal contradictions of the characters themselves than an inverted or ironic *deus ex machina*, a pair of agricultural workers animated by reactionary *ressentiment*<sup>50</sup> (see fig. 43 and fig. 44). It is no surprise then that the failed countercultural mission of the of Billy and Wyatt is at one point summed up as the attempt to “beautify America.” Theirs was the attempt to retrieve an authentically American life world of an erotic-aesthetic character.



Figure 43 *Easy Rider*: Reactionary *ressentiment*

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<sup>50</sup> See note 86, chapter 2 above.



Figure 44 *Easy Rider*: Billy's roadside death

### 3.5 Auteurism and Metaphysics: *Days of Heaven* (1978)

A couple “on the lam” became one of the most reliable motifs in both the Nouvelle Vague and the New Hollywood.<sup>51</sup> The lineage runs from Godard’s *À Bout de Souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), through Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), directly to Holly (Sissy Spacek) and Kit (Martin Sheen) in Terrence Malick’s debut film *Badlands* (1973).<sup>52</sup> In *Days of Heaven*, Malick rhymes his protagonists Bill (Richard Gere) and Abby (Brooke Adams)—itinerant agricultural labourers turned opportunistic con-artists—with his earlier film but now adds a child narrator (Linda Manz). Whereas Kit and Holly’s flight from the law was the catalyst to “light out” to the Dakota Badlands and recreate their own Frontier conditions, in *Days of Heaven* the preparatory historical work of the Frontier has been completed and the regimes of modern industrial society have been irrevocably set in place. Once again, civilization has been fully instituted and can now be assessed. Yet the film retains that cinematic

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<sup>51</sup> See note 48, chapter 3 above.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the influence of European cinema on the New Hollywood road movie see Laderman, *Driving Visions*, 247-280; Orgeron, “Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* and the Road to the Road Movie,” in *Road Movies*, 75-100; Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 137-139.

vocabulary that we have been tracing as a means of critiquing the life world of civilization which has now taken the form of modern industrial capitalism. The result is that the codes of the Western are fashioned into new historical tableaux. Bill and Abby experience that accidental and unconscious warping of historical subjectivity that appears to salve the ontological wounds of alienation under the sign of an oppressed Nature. In other words, Malick invests profoundly in the old cinematic psycho-geography of the West.

The force that pressurizes Bill and Abby's travails, the resistant historical surface against which their protestations will be ultimately be felt, is to be found in the immiseration of the nineteenth century capitalist factory system, which belongs to the order of realism I defined earlier. The portrait is presaged by an opening montage of photo documents illustrating Edwardian-era labor conditions (the final image a false document of actor Linda Manz that suggests the film is performing that function of "narrativizing" history itself, without which it would remain inaccessible to us). The opening act of the narrative (which incites the sense of narrative "arousal") is Bill's violent protestation of conditions in the steel furnace (see fig. 46)– his murderous revolt against the plant's foreman. This scene of industrial immiseration is further emphasized later on when Abby recalls sitting and wrapping cigars till "after dark" as a child, never seeing daylight. Equally, the child narrator Linda recalls the scenes of an urban proletariat "nosin' around like a pig in the gutter" (see fig. 45). The life world of industrial capitalism remains out of frame for the remainder of the film, but applies a metaphoric pressure to the ensuing narrative.



Figure 45 *Days of Heaven*: The urban proletariat



Figure 46 *Days of Heaven*: Bill's industrial conditions

However, just as the mythos of romance subtly lingered in the degraded landscape of *The Last Picture Show* and *Easy Rider*, so it does in *Days of Heaven*. And just as the fullness of the Western was dialectically desiccated by Bogdanovich, so Malick will turn a world of immiseration inside out, as it were, to reveal a world of plenitude. The quest of the desiring libido in the mythos of romance is known to the child narrator by its old moniker of “adventure”: “We

used to roam the streets. There was people sufferin' and pain and hunger.... In fact all three of us been goin' places, lookin' for things, searchin' for things. Goin' on adventures." Bill, Abby and Linda flee the industrial north with the itinerant agricultural workers to the Texas Panhandle in search of work (Abby notes that their migration has a westward directionality— their "next stop" would be Wyoming). But the life world they encounter is not that of the Frontier *per se*. Instead Malick figures a world that, whilst undoubtedly capitalist, contains the memory of that most un-American of historical climates: the old European feudal order. It becomes apparent that the economic regimes of Europe have not been entirely shed in the development of the New World (of course the slave narratives of the South remind us that it was not only the feudal mode of production that was revived, but also the slave mode with all its utterly extreme forms of alienation and human degradation). The harvest is on and the landowner goes to market to purchase labour power. Immigration supplies a steady stream of cheap labour who move about on the railroads of the nineteenth century (see fig. 47). The difference here of course is that the serf's bonds to the lord have been severed and the labourer's movements are dictated by the rhythms of the market. The relation between the trio and the "Farmer" (Sam Shepard) is now clearly one of exploitation that must be read according to class.<sup>53</sup> At one point Linda muses, "From the time the sun went up, 'till it went down. They were working all the time, non-stop, just keep going. If you didn't work, they'd ship you right out there. They don't need you." If the point is at all unclear, the class relationship is further crystalized in the *mise-en-scène*: the Farmer is conspicuously framed as enjoying the material benefits of the appropriation of surplus labour: his foreman informs him of his "six figure" profit (making him the "richest man in the Panhandle") whilst lounging on a mahogany chaise under a parasol in the midst of his fields (see fig. 48).

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<sup>53</sup> For a reading of the film's class dynamics see Janet Wondra, "Marx in a Texas Love Triangle: 'Marrying Up' and the Classed Gaze in *Days of Heaven*," *Journal of Film and Video* 57, no. 4 (2005): 3-17.



Figure 47 *Days of Heaven*: The labour supply



Figure 48 *Days of Heaven*: A “six figure profit”

The world of *Days of Heaven* then appears another Lukácsian “world historical” intersection between two co-existing synchronic forms of economic production historically juxtaposed: a revived quasi-feudal order and industrial capitalism. At one point a graphic match on a jump cut between the whorl of the wheat



thresher and that of steel furnace solidifies the relation.<sup>54</sup> On the one hand the relation is one of contiguity: there is no doubt that the rationalized, capitalist agrarian economy knows domination and exploitation (Bill and Abby's jobs are threatened if they refuse to accept a pay cut for the wastage in their allotted harvest plot). But almost imperceptibly, the glimmers of an alternate life world can be perceived between the ontological cracks of life on the farm. Now a new form of industrial organization of labour reverts backwards historically to revive older forms of social engagement. These take the form of regression to a folk life amongst the worker population. The workers begin to exhibit certain expressive "natural" tendencies in the interstitial periods of the day. There is a resurgence of the pastimes of peasant cultures: daytime drinking, wrestling, spontaneous music making and dancing. The pastimes to which the workers revert once the regimes of bodily performance have been lifted at the end of the harvest recall those scenes of peasant life in the early modern period, such as those by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (see figs. 49, 50, 51 and 52). Equally salient is the focus on bathing which returns as an index of the sensory recuperation of the body on its liberation from the performance principle (see fig. 53 and fig. 54).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For Blasi, such images are evidence that for Malick, "nature and culture are part of the same order of things" (67). See Gabriella Blasi, "Nature and the Unmaking of the World: Reading Figures of Nature in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 61, no. 1 (2014): 67-73.

<sup>55</sup> See note 44, chapter 3 above.



Figure 49 *Days of Heaven*: Spontaneous dancing and music making



Figure 50 *Days of Heaven*: Daytime drinking and wrestling



Figure 51 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games*, 1560. Oil on panel, Vienna, Kunsthistorischesmuseum.



Figure 52 Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games* (detail).



Figure 53 *Days of Heaven*: Bathing



Figure 54 *Days of Heaven*: Bathing and play

The classical Western had always presented the Frontier as retaining certain unifying, expressive social rituals carried over from the European folk cultures carried by newly arrived émigrés.<sup>56</sup> Both *Shane* and *The Searchers*, for example,

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<sup>56</sup> For a collection of influential sociological analyses of the peasantry and associated “folk cultures” see Teodor Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Dobrowolski argues that “a very significant

contain scenes in which the Frontier community is brought together in a town dance. Malick's images of the life world of the population are informed by nineteenth century image traditions of the old agricultural community or *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies notion of the "community"<sup>57</sup>) as an "organic" social order with what Jameson describes as more "'natural' [*naturwuchsig*] unities (social groups, institutions, human relationships, forms of authority, activities of a cultural and ideological as well as of a productive nature)" (*PU*, 215). His *mise-en-scène* plays upon the provincial imagery of nineteenth century French realism in painting for whom the social terrain of the village ritual (the funeral, the harvest blessing) is the figuration of the community's collective life (see fig. 55 and fig. 56). Malick's camera surveys the social scene of the temporary society that springs up on the estate. Once this transformation is underway, Abby notes to Linda that in comparison to the old factory life of the north, this neo-serfdom is "not so bad." The figuration takes on a somewhat Tolstoy-esque quality and the connotation is not unsurprising. For Jameson, the figuration of "some primal reunified genuine natural experience" that can be found in Tolstoy must be understood as anchored in the social reality of the peasantry in the feudal mode of production.<sup>58</sup>

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feature of the peasant traditional culture was a strong bond of social cohesion which, despite the existing class differentiation, joined the population of individual settlements into well-defined territorial groupings, the village communities" (293). See Kazimierz Dobrowolski, "The Peasantry as a Culture," in Shanin, *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, 277-298.

<sup>57</sup> See note 49, chapter 2 above.

<sup>58</sup> See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*: "Whereas in the West the drama of the individual and his passions was opposed to the empty conventionality of his society, in Tolstoy both of these phenomena are seen as ultimately deformed and vitiated, both enter opposition with nature itself, with glimpses of some primal reunified genuine natural experience. Yet once again this tension is a precarious one: for it depends not on any realized and fully achieved narration of the natural term, the natural life, but on mere lyric glimpses of what such a life might be. In this sense Tolstoy falls short of a reinvention of the epic, creating fragments that strive toward epic unity only" (178); see also this later passage: "except for the relatively metaphysical formulation of a primal nature in Tolstoy's environment, Lukács here substitutes [in *The Theory of the Novel*] the social reality behind the ideal of nature and the natural life, namely the peasantry itself" (204).



Figure 55 *Days of Heaven: The harvest blessing*



Figure 56 Jules Breton, *The Blessing of the Wheat in Artois*, 1857. Oil on canvas, Paris, Musée D'Orsay.

All of this is underlined by the transition from the daytime social terrain to that of the night and the development of the spontaneous festival. We know that for Derrida, the festival is that ritual by which the social collective “consumes itself in presence” (OG, 262). The festival lingers in the feudal order amongst the peasant class, the end of the successful harvest being amongst the most canonical of those rites that punctuate the rhythms of agricultural life. To the strains of the fiddle and banjo, the workers break into dance (see fig. 57 and fig.

58). Whole animals are roasted on the spit. The whole ecstatic scene is of the liberation of the body from the repressive weight of the performance principle enforced by an order of domination. The whorls of the sparks released by the bonfire into the night sky are a notably Malickean motif in such moments (see fig. 59). If we can accept that the life world of the estate is to be read according to the historical category of the feudal mode of production, two forms of historical imaginary coalesce in the eponymous “Days of Heaven”: the nostalgia for the West now resonates with a related nostalgia for the feudal that still characterizes the European poetic imagination.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 57 *Days of Heaven*: Music-making

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<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of perhaps the most obvious manifestation of a poetic preference for the medieval or feudal order in Romanticism see Elizabeth A. Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002). Fay appears to agree that this nostalgia contains both an ideological or conservative, and utopian or progressive moment within it, arguing that in its vision of the past “history is no longer irrelevant to present times; it begins to provide an imaginative field of potential solutions to the crises of the now” (2).



Figure 58 *Days of Heaven*: Dancing



Figure 59 *Days of Heaven*: Malickean fire

But this recuperation of an alternate experience of existence, like all those we have surveyed since Wright's "professional plot," cannot be socially "fixed" and the return to the flux of the labour migration threatens the newly gratified libido. In these conditions, criminality or social transgression is increasingly tied to the ontological state of the West. Fraud becomes a solution (a kind of prototypical criminality driven by the desperation and the powerlessness of the individual in the marketplace) to the problem of maintaining the awakened erotic life world of the West (ethics are, after all, distinct from metaphysics). Bill conceives of a plan



in which Abby accepts the Farmer's proposal on the basis that the faltering health of the Farmer will allow them to escape the subsistence cycles of migratory labour. It is perhaps then no surprise that Bill makes his proposition to capitalize on the Farmer's proposal in a scene that serves as a high water mark of Malick's sense of cinema as a recuperation of sensory reverie (see fig. 60). The *mise-en-scène* of unharnessed horses in the riverbed is redolent of an early painting of Pablo Picasso (see fig. 61). The scene becomes, like the Picasso, a tone poem of pinkish ochres and blue umbers. Malick's body-mounted camera pivots around the pair (see fig. 62). The sense of erotic play of the body is underlined by Malick's cut to a pair of otters cavorting in the stream (see fig. 63).



**Figure 60** *Days of Heaven*: Abby hears Bill's proposal

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**Figure 61** Pablo Picasso, *The Watering Place*, 1905-6. Gouache on paper board, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 62** *Days of Heaven*: Erotic play



**Figure 63** *Days of Heaven*: Play in the animal world

After Abby's marriage to the farmer, a new form of the titular "days of heaven" precipitate: the quartet no longer labour in the fields and enjoy a quasi-aristocratic life of daily leisure. In the montage following the marriage, the Farmer and Abby are seen to engage in the emerging forms of "tourism."<sup>60</sup> Abby takes to drawing and other gendered pursuits of her adopted class. Equally, the Farmer fashions himself along aristocratic lines, adopting the pose of the landed gentry, hounds at his heel in the pursuit of game. It is still an ontological climate of temporary release or relief from the effects of history, and bathing is still its hallmark. But whereas the body is generally naked in the "authentic" climate of the West, the body is now subject to the regimes of "decorum" and enclosed in the repressive dark woollen cloth of Edwardian bathing suits (see fig. 64 and fig. 65).

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the emergence of mass tourism in America in the late nineteenth century see Thomas Weiss, "Tourism in America Before World War II," *The Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 2 (2004): 289-327; see also John A. Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), especially "Nature as an Attraction" (53-83).



Figure 64 *Days of Heaven*: Leisure



Figure 65 *Days of Heaven*: The “days of heaven”

Whereas the tragic *denouement* of *Easy Rider* came as an extinguishment from external reactionary sentiment, that of *Days of Heaven* emerges from within the contradictions of the narrative itself: where the Farmer offered the trio a form of narrative stabilization, the fraudulent nature of the arrangement emerges to corrode it from within. The arrangement (and the charge of incest it carries) calls

in a catastrophe of Biblical resonance (see fig. 66).<sup>61</sup> Amongst the plague of locusts and ensuing fire, Bill and the Farmer face off on the razed terrain over compromised “honour” (see fig. 67). Having murdered the farmer, Bill and Abby finally become a fully articulated couple “on the lam” in the manner of Holly and Kit in *Badlands*. Their flight from society on the boat down the river (see fig. 68) with Linda’s voiceover observing the social scene from the water recalls the classical function of Huckleberry Finn<sup>62</sup> (perhaps the most famous naïve child protagonist to offer pronouncements on the American national project).<sup>63</sup> Throughout the Western, civilization was seen to crystalize in a delicate series of rhizome-like nodes, connected by wagon trails, railroad tracks and rudimentary roads. It was enswathed in a vast sea of wilderness and was often charged with a sense of man’s vulnerability in the face of nature. But in the post-Western, the realm of the wilderness is no longer an outer geographical terrain. The wilderness must henceforth be located in a geographical enclave or “blind spot” that has escaped the all-pervasive regimes of civilization. Bill and Abby’s refuges (the farm, the boat on the river, and the encampment in the woods) represent a sequence of increasingly clandestine enclaves from which the trio resists coercion to return to society, to history as all that which “refuses Desire” (see fig. 69).

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<sup>61</sup> For a reading of the biblical overtones in the film see Hubert Cohen, “The Genesis of *Days of Heaven*,” *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 4 (2003): 46-62.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of the role of female voiceover in Malick’s oeuvre see Joan McGettigan, “Interpreting a Man’s World: Female Voices in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*,” *Journal of Film and Video* 52, no. 4 (2001): 33-43.



Figure 66 *Days of Heaven*: The locust plague



Figure 67 *Days of Heaven*: The Farmer accuses Bill



Figure 68 *Days of Heaven*: The trio light out by boat



Figure 69 *Days of Heaven*: The trio's woods encampment

The movement of the characters into the realm of the wilderness can then take two forms in these post-Westerns: either the unexpected and serendipitous surprise of “happening upon” an enclave of nature unexpectedly in the process of labour migration or, alternatively, an aggressive rebellion and flight from society fuelled by a transgressive form of social being (this latter form reflected in the countercultural position of *Easy Rider* and the criminality of *Badlands*). *Days of Heaven* represents the fusion of these two narrative strategies. However, where

the elimination of the band of outlaws in Wright's professional plot (SS, 171) was profoundly freighted with dramatic significance, Bill's death carries far less in the way of the old "catharsis."<sup>64</sup> The moment of death is registered bathetically as his body is carried off by the currents of the river (see fig. 70) that are stubbornly insensate to the rhythms of individual existence as it wavers between life and death. Subsequently Abby and Linda return to civilization (what could telegraph the roaring arrival of the twentieth century better than the departure of troops for the First World War?) and their narratives dissolve back into the impenetrable and impersonal currents of history. As much is literalized in the final shot of the film: two orphaned girls disappearing into the distance on the tracks of the railroad— the very guardrails of history's penetration into the terrain of the West (see fig. 71).<sup>65</sup>



Figure 70 *Days of Heaven*: Bill's death

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<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the complexities of Aristotle's term, which is normally invoked to describe that combination of pity and fear essential to the experience of "tragic" emotion, see Angela Curran, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook to Aristotle and the Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 214-235.

<sup>65</sup> Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 34; Bazin, "The Western: Or, The American Film Par Excellence," 140; Langford, "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western," 28.





Figure 71 *Days of Heaven*: The railroad as guardrails of history's penetration into the West

### 3.6 Recuperating Romance: *Dances with Wolves* (1990)

Pivoting from the New Hollywood to an altogether different political climate, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* represents a maligned but unavoidable contribution to rewriting the Western in the late twentieth century. In contrast to the New Hollywood turn towards the "Real," *Dances with Wolves* inaugurates an alternative strategy—the unabashed rehabilitation of the older textual registers associated with the epic and romance contents of the Western. This turn has been characterized by Jim Collins as part of a tonal shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s towards the "New Sincerity" (as part of the "Reaganite" period of Hollywood cinema<sup>66</sup>), which expressed an exhaustion with the dominant cultural, registers of irony, cynicism and detachment.<sup>67</sup> *Dances with*

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<sup>66</sup> Robin Wood, "Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1986), 162-188; Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 97-156; Gary Needham, "Reaganite Cinema: What a Feeling!," in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, eds. Yannis Tzioumakis, Claire Molloy (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 312-322.

<sup>67</sup> Collins argues in "Genericity in the Nineties" that the "new sincerity" is "obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony, where everything

*Wolves* was therefore required to negotiate the demands of a complex and somewhat contradictory cultural landscape in its efforts to revive the old generic promise of the Western. Moreover, *Dances with Wolves* inaugurates a sequence of revitalized “blockbuster” Westerns that characterized Hollywood production in the 1990s; including Edward Zwick’s *Legends of the Fall* (1994), Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe* (1991), and Michael Mann’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).<sup>68</sup>

In an important sense, the form of subjectivity recovered by the Westerner at the Frontier had nowhere to fix itself in the classical Western. It was so often a sterile fantasy in which the death or departure of the “noble” but wounded Westerner signaled the end of the recuperative power of this unique historical structure. Shane served as the emblematic figure here: the ephemeral Westerner leaving ghost-like in the night and taking his compromising speculations with him. However Wright’s “professional plot” was important in this regard: it suggested that the American *pensée sauvage* already envisioned a homosocial micro-society (most obviously in the form of the “band of outlaws”) in which the liberated sociality of men in the wilderness could be “fixed” in a collective form. Yet even this narrative solution to the contradictions of the Frontier was ultimately subsumed by the demands of civilization: Wright notes the convention that the band of Professionals must always die together, and their mode of being must always be extinguished (SS, 87). But another narrative solution had already arisen subtly in the “liberal Westerns,” such as *Broken Arrow* (1950), which suggested a new direction for the fantasy to take.<sup>69</sup> At the conclusion of that film, Tom Jeffords (Jimmy Stewart) marries an Apache woman Sonseeahray (Debra Paget) and is formally inducted into Apache society. The narrative now poses the radical question: could not the Westerner pass formally back into the society of the Other through its alien kinship structures? After all, Leatherstocking was adopted by Uncas, and the Westerner’s flight across the

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works in unison” (242) and that it “rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity” (243).

<sup>68</sup> In *Horizons West*, Kitses also cites *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), *Posse* (1993), *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) (5).

<sup>69</sup> See note 9, chapter 3 above.

Frontier already required the dissolution or abdication of his kinship relations to his own culture by spurning marriage. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of Costner's *Dances with Wolves* for the current purposes. At this point in the historical record, the ideological opprobrium attached to the poetic preference for the savage order is no longer equal to the ethnographer's desire for wholesale return, now manifesting as formal integration into the society of the Other. The fantasy is now for the complete, permanent and transformational return to the life world of an ethnographic Other, rather than the band of outlaws— a weak, loosely bound facsimile form of social entity composed only of white men free-floating in the wilderness. The point must be made, however, that the purpose of the following analysis is not to interrogate the ethical implications of this fantasy system as it shapes actually existing power relations. This approach has been well articulated by the various post-colonial critiques of the film.<sup>70</sup> It is intended rather to speculate on the symbolic gratifications it may provide, and therefore try to account for its empirical persistence.

The film introduces its protagonist, John Dunbar, in a theatre of that traumatic and fratricidal national conflict, the Civil War. Dunbar awakes with an opening point of view shot, looking down at a bloody and macerated foot which is being prepared for amputation. The realization of the impending trauma impels the protagonist to mount a steed and make a seemingly suicidal dash across no-man's land (see fig. 72). In breaking the stalemate amidst a scene of martial incompetence, Dunbar's confused and feverish act is taken as *valour extraordinaire* and this "heroism" earns him the privilege of spurning the historical traumas of the East and lighting out for the Western territories. Dunbar proclaims openly to the administrator that he has "always wanted to see the Frontier...before it's gone." Dunbar's enlistment as colonial emissary contains something of the eighteenth and nineteenth century narrative tradition identified by Brooks in which the institutional forces of the army serve as the narrative mechanism for the "advancement" of an ambitious protagonist keen to "make his name" or

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<sup>70</sup> For highly critical postcolonial readings of the film see Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 1-18; Prats, *Invisible Natives*; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 194-195.

“fortune” (consider, for example, Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975)).<sup>71</sup> However, it is quickly revealed that Dunbar has less a tendency toward institutional advancement than something of that Rousseauist pattern of wounded individualism seeking refuge in self-exile at the Frontier. Dunbar’s election initiates a westward “quest” which revives the romance mythos in the strongest and clearest form we have yet seen: it becomes the outward manifestation of an unconscious search by a desiring libido for an alternate society and identity.



Figure 72 *Dances with Wolves*: Dunbar’s martyrdom

Dunbar strikes out for the Frontier in a montage of long shots of rhythmically undulating grass, as the wagon makes its way across the prairie under the hazy setting sun. *Easy Rider*’s painted canyons and Malick’s Dakota Badlands now morph into the symbolic terrain through which Dunbar must travel in order to symbolically sever himself from civilization and enter the enchanted realm of

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<sup>71</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 39.

ethnological encounter (see fig. 73). As it shifts to the Frontier, the focus of the narrative comes to the fore— a wholesale and deeply contentious attempt by the American *pensée sauvage* to re-imagine the historical encounter between the white colonial emissary of colonialism and the Native American society he meets. Over the course of the film, it aims to perform nothing less than a complete inversion in the colonial relationship and in doing so, reconstitute in John Dunbar yet another “American Adam.”<sup>72</sup> In *Dances with Wolves*, the opposing realms of the West will finally and unambiguously “trade valences:” the life world of the Other (the Sioux) will be valorized and the life world of the Self indicted.<sup>73</sup> This will be the most unambiguous statement of ethnographic nostalgia yet registered in the Hollywood record.

But in order to perform this operation, Costner must first revive the older collective cultural memory of the Native American as demonic, Satanic or “evil” Other (recalling that the seventeenth century Protestant conception of the Native American was over-coded in the eighteenth century and that the two appear to structurally co-exist in the cultural imaginary. These are grasped by most of the scholarly literature as mere “stereotypes” without hypothesizing why those forms of figuration persist<sup>74</sup>). Dunbar inadvertently reveals his presence to the first of two tribes that inhabit the region— the Pawnee (see fig. 74). The Pawnee

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<sup>72</sup> See note 19, chapter 1 above.

<sup>73</sup> Tompkins appears to grasp the Utopian signal emitted by the Sioux in these terms in *West of Everything*: “Here the Lakota Sioux (played by themselves) are attractive and believable, individually and as a group. They draw you to them, their closeness is palpable— the family you never had, the community you never belonged to— and you know why the protagonist deserts the army to become one of them. Their lives make sense” (10).

<sup>74</sup> For examples of this common form of analysis see Ernest Stromberg, “Out of the Cupboard and Up with the ‘Smoke Signals’: Cinematic Representations of American Indians in the ‘Nineties,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 24, no. 1 (2001): 33-46; George W. Hopkins, “Constructing the New Mythic West: *Dances with Wolves*,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 21, no. 2 (1998): 71-83; Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 1-18; Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 1-15; Judith Villa, Lindsey Claire Smith and Penelope Kelsey, “Introduction,” *Studies in the Humanities* 33, no. 2 (2006): 129-139; Shohat and Stam express this critical thematic as “good Indian/bad Indian binarism” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 67, 197.

appear “designed” to invest the terrain of the film with all the dangers and anxieties necessary to the successful revival of the romance mythos. Dunbar picks up an arrowhead from a sun-bleached skeleton and his travelling companion succumbs in an Indian attack by an arrow to the groin (see fig. 77 and fig. 78). The Pawnee costumes clearly recall the iconography of George Catlin’s nineteenth century proto-ethnographic portraits in their vivid red and black patterns (see fig. 75 and fig. 76).<sup>75</sup> They thus serve a dual function: the film may claim an unprecedented degree of ethnographic accuracy in its representation of Native American material practices on the one hand (an important ethical issue raised in the next chapter), but it also serves as a striking graphic reminder in the *mise-en-scène* that the Pawnee function as the symbolic bearers of the violence which, as Frye suggests, constitutes the “rocket propulsion” required by the quest form of the romance mythos.<sup>76</sup> It is the threat of war with the Pawnee that will drive the film’s second act (and which will allow Dunbar to first demonstrate his allegiance to the Sioux). It is against this backdrop that the encounter with Native American Other will be felt as a dialectical inversion: Dunbar expects to find a violent, thanatic world only to find in the Sioux an entirely different, quasi-Utopian and erotic life world.

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<sup>75</sup> Kellner, “Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns,” 243. For a discussion of Catlin’s proto-ethnographic art see George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman, eds., *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum and New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

<sup>76</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 183.



Figure 73 *Dances with Wolves*: The badlands



Figure 74 *Dances with Wolves*: The Pawnee

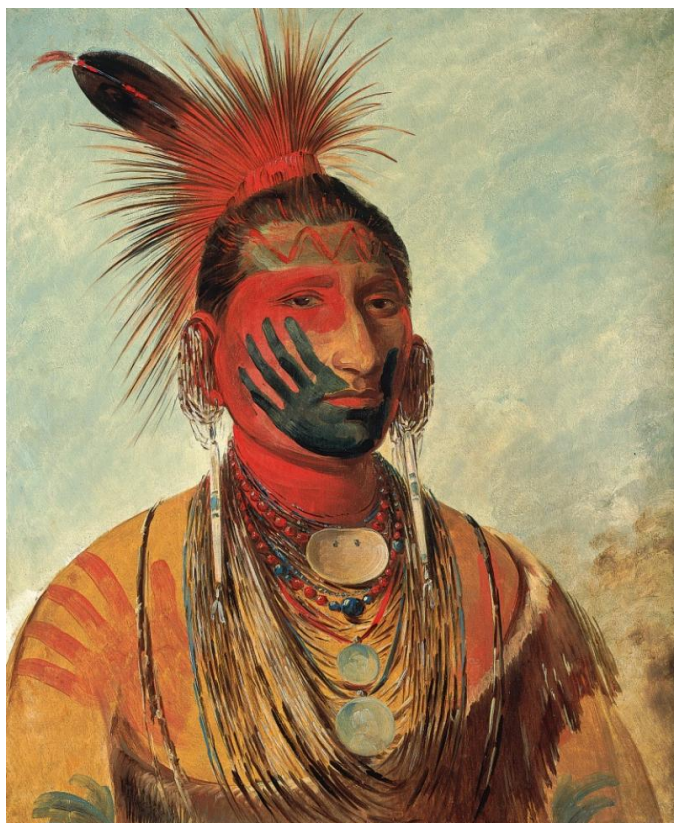


Figure 75 George Catlin, *Wash-ka-mon-ya, Fast Dancer, a Warrior*, 1844. Oil, Washington D. C., Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 76 George Catlin, *Shón-ka-ki-he-ga, Horse Chief, Grand Pawnee Head Chief*, 1832. Oil, Washington D. C., Smithsonian American Art Museum.





Figure 77 *Dances with Wolves*: The threat of death



Figure 78 *Dances with Wolves*: The arrow

Once this backdrop is in place, Dunbar's transformation can begin. It is wrought in a narrative sequence of ethnological encounters that becomes the paradigmatic template for the imagined ethnological encounter in later Hollywood films (as I will show in the next chapter). It takes place in a vocabulary that displays a strong correlation to that meticulously traced by Derrida in the thought of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. This is then some of the strongest evidence that the symbolic gratifications offered by this narrative fantasy system is predicated upon that metaphysical sense of nostalgia I have traced in the philosophical record. The first of these encounters occurs in the Indian raid on Dunbar's camp to intimidate the colonial emissary. This first encounter is visibly characterized by a reciprocal sense of anxiety. Kicking Bird is "spooked" by the sight of the white colonizer. The second encounter is the raid to capture Cisco (the humiliating loss of his steed places him directly in the lineage of the dismounted knights of the chivalric romance tradition<sup>77</sup>). Dunbar's reaction to these initial encounters is revealing: the journal becomes a device of ethnographic documentation. Dunbar documents his observation of Sioux dress. With each encounter, Dunbar will be drawn further into the orbit of the life world of the Sioux.

In Dunbar, the figure of the Westerner has finally taken on the form of the Rousseauist anthropologist, documenting the figure of the Other (see fig. 79). His interaction with the Sioux, the *agon* of the film, will henceforth turn around the "anthropologist's mission" that Derrida identifies in which:

Non-European peoples were... studied as the index to a hidden good Nature, as a native soil recovered, of a "zero degree" with a reference to which one society could outline the structure, the growth, and above all the degradation of our society and our culture. (*OG*, 114)

Costner's film functions as the single most striking demonstration in the Western tradition thus far that it is only by reference to savagery that civilization may be

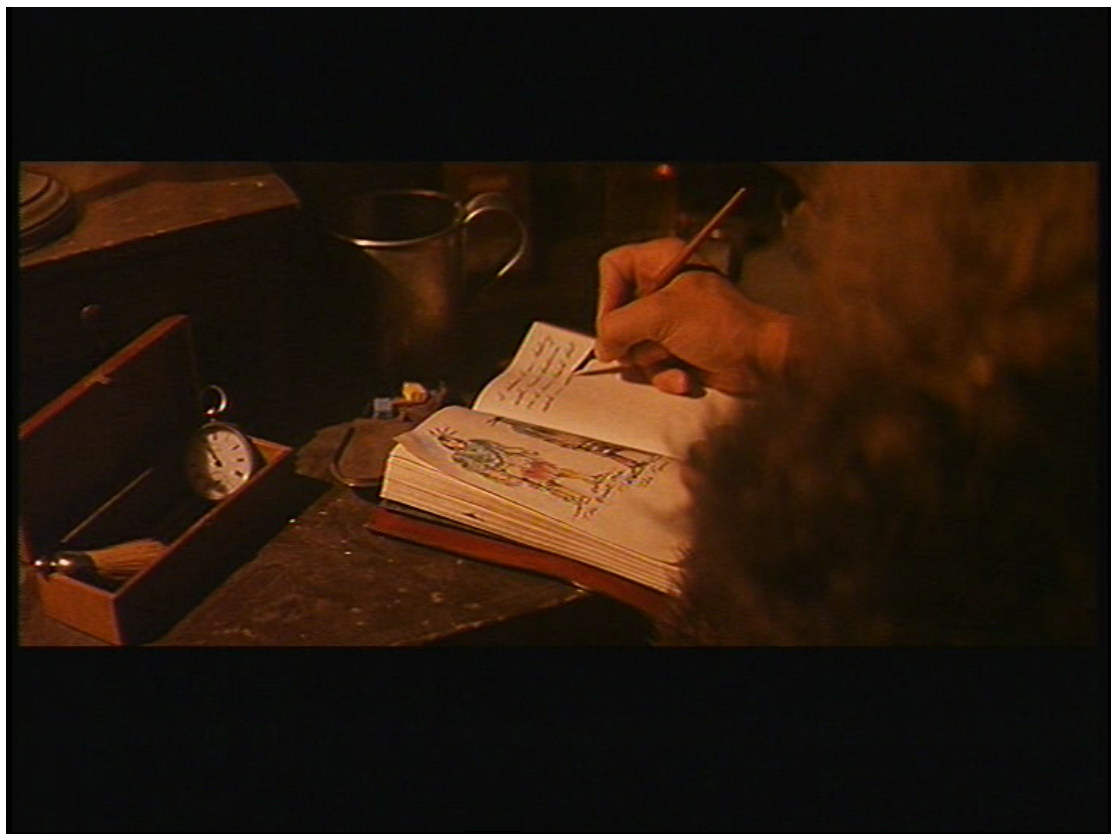
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<sup>77</sup> For a study of the conventions of chivalric romance see Alex Davis, *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003).

properly thought and indicted. It is not until radical difference or Otherness is encountered that the Self and the society of the Self, which appears “natural” or ontological, can be adequately detected as *historical*, or in other words governed by its own contingent set of structural contradictions.

Dunbar’s proto-ethnographical journal can then be seen to emanate from an:

...eighteenth-century tradition, [in which] the anecdote, the page of confessions, the fragment from a journal are knowledgeably put in place, calculated for the purposes of a philosophical demonstration of the relationships between nature and society, ideal society and real society, most often between the other society and our society. (*OG*, 113)



**Figure 79** *Dances with Wolves*: The proto-ethnologist and the journal

This trope will be preserved in *Avatar* as it “rewrites” the ethnological encounter of the Frontier. Dunbar’s next ethnological encounter then intensifies the merging of intercultural horizons by the language lesson, the transmission of

isolated fragments of linguistic communication. The lesson is conducted by the co-ordination of object, gesture, mime and vocalization in unified time and space. Dunbar becomes an embodied signifier for the most important totemic animal object for the Sioux— the buffalo or “tatanka” (see fig. 80). Through the spoken language lesson, word by word, the possibility of discourse emerges. And it is then Rousseau’s conception of *speech* that is the key to the symbolic gratification offered by this form of figuration. In the tradition of films I am surveying, the life world of the ethnological Other is characterized above all by a fantasy of *transparency*. In these imagined societies, the transparency of linguistic sign systems in which the relation between the signifier and referent remains “intact” has a deep affinity with the legibility of interpersonal motivations in social interaction. In other words, these societies are imagined as characterized by a dual linguistic and social transparency: the absence of the lie as the purposeful false utterance and a social field in which the subject is acquainted with all others and held in precise, stable bonds of relation and obligation.

In order to affirm this point, when Costner introduces his fantasy Sioux society in the following scene, he radically re-positions the spectator, transporting them across the Frontier as the very horizon of historic subjectivity without any form of emissary or interpretive conduit, and crosscuts to a tribal conference taking place. Kicking Bird and other men (gender domination does appear subtly present in this world) gather around a fire in a tipi to discuss Dunbar’s arrival. In this first vivid portrait of the social climate of the Sioux world, it appears that power, esteem, and collective decision making are all explicitly modulated and mediated by this “transparent” speech which is now politicized as the “right” to speak in the presence of the collective. The right to speak signals the *presence* of the individual in a relation to the collective, to the “people.” It stands in stark contrast to the interpersonal climate of the East, of civilization, and of the martial world from which Dunbar emerged. In that world of the modern army, the right to speak, or rather the obligation not to speak, is the expression of hierarchy, domination and subordination. So when Kicking Bird acknowledges the previous speaker’s validity, he states “Wind in His Hair’s words are strong and I have heard them.” When Wind in His Hair wants to warn of the new colonial presence,

he objects to the “talk” of the “white man.” The gesture is signaled, the socio-political right to speak passed around. This is the first scene in which the reimagined life world of the Native American comes to resemble the ideal of the Rousseauist micro-society identified as described by Derrida:

Only an innocent community, and a community of reduced dimensions (a Rousseauist theme that will soon become clearer), only a micro-society of non-violence and freedom, all the members of which can by rights remain within the range of an immediate and transparent, a “crystalline” address, fully self-present in its living speech, only such a community can suffer, as the surprise and aggression coming from without, the insinuation of writing, the infiltration of its “ruse” and of its “perfidy.” (*OG*, 119)

Derrida here alerts us to a crucial fact. This form of society is imagined, in both Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss as *without writing*. In this fantasy system, writing belongs to the degraded social and historical climate of the east, of Europe, of civilization. It is therefore crucial to this fantasy system that Dunbar never teaches the Sioux to write.<sup>78</sup> The absence of writing is a cue that the world of the Sioux now functions in the scheme of the romance mythos as a quasi-Utopian or “higher” world in the sense proposed by Frye.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For an important counterexample in this pattern of imagining the Native American climate as having escaped the “perfidy” of writing see the scene in Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe* (1991) in which Daniel (Aden Young) teaches his Algonquin companions the “sorcery” of writing.

<sup>79</sup> In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye argues that “Romance has its own conception of an ideal society, but that society is in a higher world than that of ordinary experience” (150). I have argued in the tradition here under discussion that world takes the form of the imagined Native American life world as the romance mythos is grafted onto American narrative traditions and historical experience.



Figure 80 *Dances with Wolves*: "Tatanka"

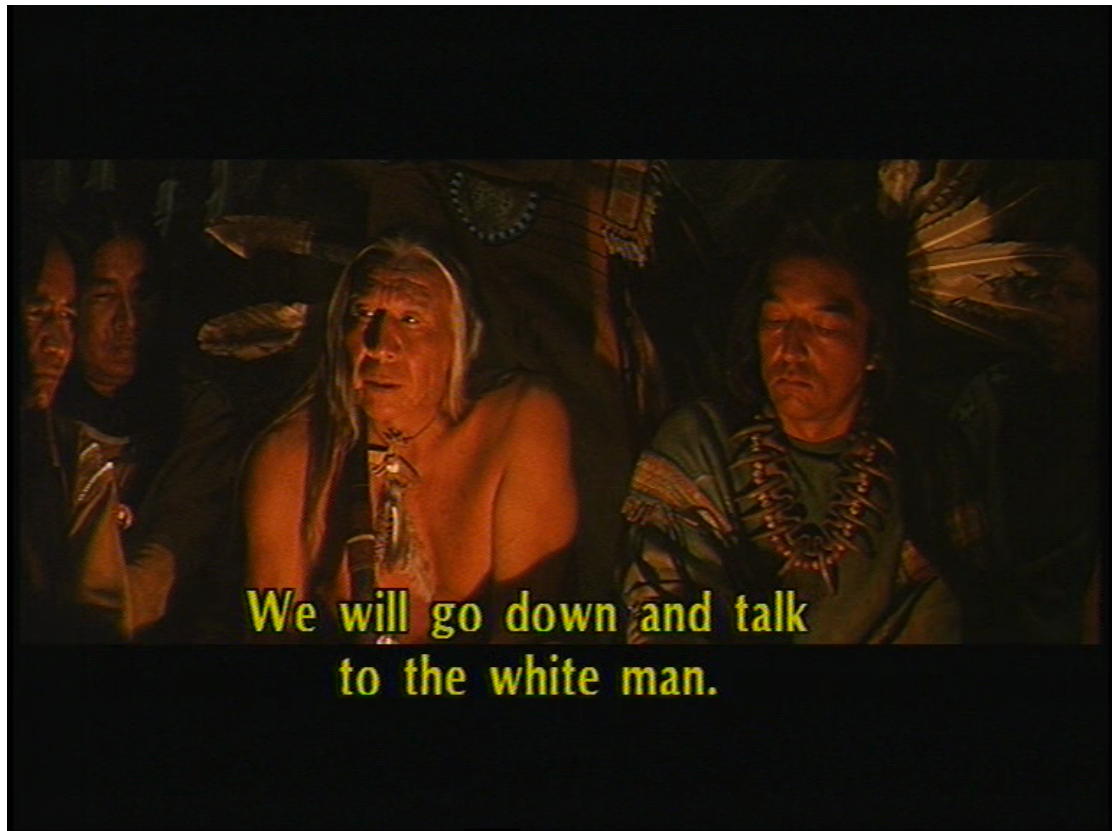


Figure 81 *Dances with Wolves*: Crystalline address

Dunbar's entry into this privileged life world is orchestrated with a distinct sense of arrival. Having encountered a woman bleeding, Dunbar assumes that she has been separated from the Sioux. He rides over a ridge and the vista reveals the origin of the ethnological Other in all its glory. Dunbar is taken aback at the sight of the life world of the Sioux, bathed in late afternoon, golden sun. Costner lavishes close-ups on the scene to mimic Dunbar's gaze as it surveys the scene. Horses graze unsaddled in the meadows and wade in the river as they did in *Days of Heaven* (see fig. 82). In fact this visual template is revived by Steven Spielberg in *Jurassic Park* (1993) as that shot in which Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) first gazes down upon the restored biological life world of dinosaur ecology, with herds of distinct species also grazing in marshy alluvial plains (see fig. 83). The unbridled horses of the Sioux world transform into herds of *Parasauropholus* and other non-carnivorous species. In each case the shot signals a sense of narrative "quickenings:" each narrative turns upon the revelation of a life world as immanent and manifest but which before was veiled or only knowable

indirectly. The realm of the Native American was always a hidden but imagined realm in the Western, known only by reports of colonial emissaries, just as the world of the dinosaur ecology is only available to us indirectly through the reports of science. Yet surely one of cinema's strongest drives is towards satisfying our desire to visualize alternate life worlds precluded to us by time and space.



Figure 82 *Dances with Wolves*: The spectacle of an anthropological life world unveiled



Figure 83 *Jurassic Park*: The spectacle of a recuperated biological life world unveiled



Having made contact with the social world of the Sioux, Dunbar finds himself drawn steadily into its orbit. He begins to integrate himself into its relations, rhythms, its forms of ritual, its economic and cultural life. The world of the Sioux now assumes the form of a functional collective bound together by an entirely different mode of production and to entail a recalibration of the relation between the Self and “the people.” At this point the imagined historical privilege of the Westerner becomes clear: emanating from capitalism and modernity, he finds himself encountering an altogether different form of human historicity that appears still intact. In other words, the colonized society has not yet been subject to those irrevocable processes by which it is “broken up,” remade and “assimilated” to capitalism by colonial domination, an experience that can be characterized as a genocidal assault and trauma. This form of human historicity is imagined as a superior or more “humane” form of social existence, characterized overall by a reduction in internal antagonisms between Self and Other, between individual and society, between mind and body, indeed within the dynamics of the psyche itself. The mind of the ethnological Other appears to display a kind of internal integrity. This state is the apotheosis of an imagined historicity and a figuration by which we attempt to grasp that most precious of ontological states, what I have been calling following Derrida, “self-presence” as a state of essential *congruity* or *adequation* between the subject and the object, between consciousness and the world into which it emerges. It is a state in which philosophy has not yet been called into being because consciousness remains “at home” within its material conditions, or as Lukács suggests, the “rift” between “inside and outside” has not yet opened up.<sup>80</sup> The fantasy contains something of Adorno’s notion of *Versöhnung* and Marcuse’s “logos of gratification.”<sup>81</sup> This fantasy, which is equally to be found in Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss, I would suggest, is the highest form of symbolic gratification animating the films that follow *Dances with Wolves*. In the American *pensée sauvage*, the existence of the

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<sup>80</sup> See note 90, chapter 1 above.

<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of the complexities, difficulties and ambiguities of the notion of achieving a “reconciliation” between subject and object (the reestablishment of a “primal unity”) as a philosophical and political fantasy, see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 336-340. Jameson confirms that reconciliation corresponds to “this or that illusion or metaphysic of ‘presence,’ or its equivalent in any other postcontemporary philosophical code” (335).

American Indian appears to offer the tantalizing glimpse of a template for a genuinely social and historically immanent form of human happiness. Nevertheless, empirical history itself appears to stand between us, with all the stimulated antagonisms of our historical being, and such a state. Yet as Dunbar demonstrates, even empirical history can be shrugged off by the lone ethnologist individual, having entirely dissolved his bonds to the society of the Self. The Self can now be remade under the conditions of the Frontier *in the guise of the Other*. In fact, the Self and the Other now appear as dialectical categories: the Other will be revealed as a new form of Self, and the Self will be revealed to be a form of historically alienated Other.

The process occurs as a threefold transformation. The first centres around the absorption of the Self into the “true” and “authentic” collectivity of the tribe. This passage turns around the development of Dunbar’s relation to Sioux ritual life. Having returned *Stands With A Fist* and learnt some Sioux words, Dunbar builds a relationship with the Sioux but remains a symbolic outsider. When he then penetrates the sacred realm of a Sioux festival one night, he defies a strict taboo and clearly transgresses (see fig. 85). But his transgression is forgiven when he shares his knowledge of the whereabouts of the buffalo, the ur-totem of the Sioux collective for their ability to sustain the life of the people. Dunbar’s participation in the buffalo hunt then ritually creates a certain symbolic relation between him and the Sioux. He now shows some allegiance with Sioux identity, expressed in his nostalgia for the festival. At this point it is important to return to Derrida’s insight that the festival is the prototype for the event in which the collective “consumes itself in presence.” The festival, with its reveries, ecstasies and altered forms of consciousness, its coordination of dance, story, vocalization, time and space, its orchestration of the people into a unified and aesthetic design or pattern, is the prototypical expression of a more satisfactory relation between the Self and society (see fig. 84). The narrative remains incomplete because Dunbar has not yet been fully absorbed into the social field of the Sioux, but denied a right of entry into Sioux ritual space, he simulates the festival for one around his own campfire (see fig. 86).



Figure 84 *Dances with Wolves*: The festival



Figure 85 *Dances with Wolves*: Dunbar transgresses the festival



**Figure 86** *Dances with Wolves*: The festival for one

Secondly, the social climate of the Sioux life world is characterized by a certain re-eroticization of experience (Smith grasped this as the “sexual license” of “savage life”). Once accepted amongst the Sioux society, Dunbar spends the night in the collective tipi. The scene already subtly assaults the spectator with its ethnographic portrait of the cultural specificity of such a banal bodily function as sleep (indeed we are only now in the process of becoming aware of the degree to which sleep is managed, quite often to our detriment, ideologically and sociologically in capitalist modernity<sup>82</sup>). Dunbar awakes in the middle of the night to find Kicking Bird and his wife engaging in the sexual act, with no regard for any potential opprobrium (see fig. 87 and fig. 88). It would appear that for the Sioux, the sexual function has a radically different status: it remains something of a “banal inner worldly event” like eating or sleeping that occurs

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<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of how such seemingly natural bodily processes as sleep are shaped under capitalism see, for example, Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2014); Matthew Wolf-Meyer, "Natural Hegemonies: Sleep and the Rhythms of American Capitalism," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 6 (2011): 876-95.

within the social field of the community.<sup>83</sup> Whilst it is undoubtedly managed by ritual and kinship processes, it is not yet relegated to a “private” sphere of experience. It appears encumbered neither by “bad consciousness,” nor the ethical regimes associated with Christian ethics. Dunbar appears somewhat delighted at this altogether new and radically different historical orientation to the issue of pleasure.

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<sup>83</sup> Jameson argues that the ethnographic observation of difference in seemingly “natural” bodily functions is important for detecting their historically specific forms of cultural articulation: “The psychoanalytic demonstration of the sexual dimensions of overtly nonsexual conscious experience and behavior is possible only when the sexual ‘dispositif’ or apparatus has by a process of isolation, autonomization, specialization, developed into an independent sign system or symbolic dimension in its own right; as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as, say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited, and the sexual retains its status as a banal inner-worldly event and bodily function. Its symbolic possibilities are dependent on its preliminary exclusion from the social field. As for primitive sexuality, if we were able imaginatively to grasp the symbolic trajectory that leads from tattoos and ritual mutilation to the constitution of the erogenous zones in modern men and women, we would have gone a long way toward sensing the historicity of the sexual phenomenon.” (*PU*, 49)



Figure 87 *Dances with Wolves*: The sexual function within the social field



Figure 88 *Dances with Wolves*: Dunbar awakes to the cultural specificity of the sexual function

Finally, I have suggested repeatedly, following Frye, that the romance mythos leaves its trace in the Western in the form of dialectical reversals culminating in revelations of “true identity.” Furthermore I have suggested that these now take a Rousseauist form: the shedding of inauthentic, “outer” or historical forms of self to reveal the restoration of an “inner” Self.<sup>84</sup> After the spectacle of the buffalo hunt and the experience of the festival, sensing the possibility of dissolving the ego into the society that consumes itself in self-presence, we arrive at the point where Dunbar’s series of pronouncements of “inner” or “true” identity begins. These pronouncements take the form of an undivided allegiance to the Sioux, to the society of the Other. Indeed it has been implicit in many scholarly accounts of the Western that there has been, since Cooper, a desire on the part of the Westerner not only to revitalize the Self at the point of ethnological contact but to completely and irrevocably immerse the Self in the climate across the Frontier. It is important to recall that this fantasy had some basis in empirical historical reality. By all accounts, as the Frontier rolled westwards, thousands of white colonists were found living in Native American communities having “defected” from the culture of the Self. The colonial society was— *and remains*— profoundly vexed by such defections.<sup>85</sup> Tompkins argues that the Westerner and the ethnological Other have regarded themselves as “brothers” since Cooper, but were unable to pledge undivided allegiance to one another openly. The long history of this unspoken and taboo desire— of complete and permanent dislocation from the culture of the Self and restoration of the subject in the opposing order— now announces itself in Dunbar’s moment of catharsis: “As I heard my Sioux name being called I knew for the first time who I really was” (see fig. 89). The re-iterations of identity repeat at key moments. After this initial statement of identity, Dunbar sheds the final vestments of the army uniform and adopts the fringed buckskin. At the moment of recapture and interrogation by the agents of civilization, Dunbar adopts the rhetorical style of self-presence

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<sup>84</sup> Baird appears to agree, stating: “This renaming of a white man with a ‘natural name’ and the shedding of his European name is the quintessential American myth— the self-made man rediscovering both America, and, most importantly, his own true self in the process,” in “Going Indian’: *Dances with Wolves* (1990),” in Rollins and O’Connor, *Hollywood’s Indian*, 161.

<sup>85</sup> See note 108, chapter 2 above.

spoken in the crystalline speech of Lakota: "I am Dances with Wolves. I have nothing to say to you. You are not worth talking to."<sup>86</sup> The accusation of "turning 'injun'" by the apprehending officers is clearly animated by the old *ressentiment* of colonial consciousness. The "traitor" that "they hate like no other" attracts a special form of opprobrium for his explosive revelation: the demonstration that the entire alienating climate of civilization is historically contingent and not natural or ontological. Once Dunbar has been rescued, Ten Bears signals that the dissolution of Dunbar's old identity has been completed: "Now there is only a Sioux named Dances with Wolves." Kicking Bird later remarks that he sees Dunbar on the "trail" of a "true human being." These statements deserve to be interrogated as an apparent representation of actually existing social communities whose rights and privileges may be profoundly affected by such representations. But the point I wish to make is that until such fantasy figuration and its associated symbolic gratifications are understood as born within and driven by the structural contradictions of the society that generates them, the source from which they draw their power cannot be adequately *thought*. Returning to Jameson's exhortation to "always historicize" and to do so dialectically, surely it is only in a historical form of society that systematically coerces subjectivity into "forced identifications" (as Lévi-Strauss puts it, *JF*, 40) that such apparent reveries of socio-historic transubstantiation can take on an emancipatory charge, value or meaning in the first place.

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<sup>86</sup> Prats' reading of this moment is a good example of postcolonial scholarship that seeks to grasp the contradiction of these ethnological encounters in *Invisible Natives*. Prats argues that a form of "self-othering" or "auto-alterity" is "implicit in the dialectical context that compels [the Westerner] to reject his race and culture. Therefore the 'white-hero's' self-othering originates almost always in his double and often simultaneous recognition of Indian worth and white perversity" (129).





Figure 89 *Dances with Wolves*: Recuperated identity

This threefold passage (the induction into Sioux ritual life, the eroticization of experience and the discovery of an alternate identity) now requires a final narrative element to be stabilized: an erotic object (see fig. 92). The introduction of the character Stands With A Fist revives one of the very oldest anxieties of ethnological encounter, the projection of which we have seen most notably dramatized in *The Searchers*—the captivity narrative derived from early folktales that told of female captives taken as children. Stands with A Fist goes some way then to rewriting the character of Debbie from *The Searchers* (see fig. 90). In the first instance, Dunbar’s “rescue” of Stands With A Fist directly answers Debbie’s salvation. The anxiety that propelled the narrative momentum of *The Searchers* was heightened (and given its psychosexual charge) by Ethan’s threat to kill Debbie if she is beyond “redemption.” The climax of the narrative is entirely predicated upon the retrieval of her selfhood (perhaps more specifically her sexuality) from the “evil” false consciousness instilled by her abductors. That Ethan rediscovers the “true” Debbie and returns her to her society of origin was

a cause for overt but also uneasy ideological celebration.<sup>87</sup> Seen in this light, Dunbar does the unthinkable and returns *Stands With A Fist*, wounded and vulnerable to the Sioux. However it is important to note that this is not the society of her abductors. The flashback to childhood memory strategically ascribes the abduction to the Pawnee (who are seen to conspicuously engage in scalping in the raid). In this way the Sioux are subtly exonerated of any uncomfortable liability for *Stands With A Fist*'s trauma (see fig. 91). It is a subtle ideological move on the part of the film. But the conceit has clearly been turned inside out with a deliberate narrative purpose: *Stands with Fist* exists in order to provide an appropriately "naturalized" erotic object choice for the character of *Dances with Wolves*. However, one wonders at this point whether the narrative retains some lingering anxiety over the logical conclusion of this process—miscegenation. Many have read *Stands with Fist*'s immutable ethnicity as an alibi for the reticence of the political unconscious to see the complete merging of horizons so longed for in ethnographic nostalgia.<sup>88</sup> If this is the case, it is an anxiety surely overcome by the films in the following chapter.

In the long history of the Western, it was common for emissaries who had been remade by the conditions of the Frontier to emerge mysteriously from the realm beyond the edge of civilization or disappear back into its unknown spaces when the credits rolled. But Costner's most famous of revisionist Westerns is significant for its willingness to follow the Westerner hero into the world of the Other. The film's final utterances are those of *Wind In His Hair*, testifying to the elemental pleasures of fraternal solidarity, made within earshot of the entire community. They are the final instances of the crystalline address of the Rousseauist microcommunity, now sheltered by the natural auditorium of the secluded winter valley: "I am Wind in His Hair and I am your friend." But the tragedy of the closure of the Frontier is now double-fold: Dunbar has

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<sup>87</sup> For sensitive discussions of the ideological intricacies of the film's ending see Prats, *Invisible Natives*, 58-70 and 281-286; Dagle, "Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters," 124-128.

<sup>88</sup> See Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 4; Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*, 128-129; Melvyn Stokes, *American History through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153-154.

successfully enmeshed the Self within an adopted form of collectivity, only to be expelled yet once more back into the wilderness by the insatiable *telos* of civilization. Yet this time he has managed to fix his being in a relation with Stands With A Fist. Theirs is a micro-society of two that retreats to a contracting “islet of resistance.”<sup>89</sup> In these final images, Costner re-writes Shane’s silent and elegiac departure into the inky depth of the Wyoming night (see fig. 93 and fig. 94).



Figure 90 *Dances with Wolves*: Memory of abduction

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<sup>89</sup> Derrida argues that for Rousseau “the theme of a necessary or rather fatal degradation, as the very form of progress” necessarily implies a “nostalgia for what preceded this degradation, an affective impulse toward the islets of resistance, the small communities that have provisionally protected themselves from corruption” (*OG*, 134).



Figure 91 *Dances with Wolves*: The Pawnee as abductors



Figure 92 *Dances with Wolves*: Erotic union beyond the Frontier



Figure 93 *Shane*: Shane's departure



Figure 94 *Dances with Wolves*: Elegiac retreat

### 3.7 Orphic Desire and the Western: *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

The transformations of the Western in the post-classical Hollywood era culminate with a film much closer to our contemporary moment that plays upon the cinematic codes established in all these precursors, Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*.<sup>90</sup> The scholarly and popular notoriety of *Brokeback Mountain* is well-known and reflects the enthusiasm with which the academy now reads the dynamics between social transformations and mass cultural texts.<sup>91</sup> Underlying all such analyses has been an awareness of the degree to which the film and its reception are evidence of a socio-political environment characterized by a profound sociological transformation—the new post-civil rights visibility of homosexuality in the late twentieth century. What I contend is that the American *pensée sauvage* collectively “thinks” this new social landscape in and through the older, sedimented materials in the narratives I have parsed. Old forms and structures are therefore grafted onto new forms of social content, such as the lived experience of “closeted” homosexual men in the repressive social climate of the twentieth century American West. In tracing how this occurs, it will be useful to recall an insight of Foucault who, at the conclusion of his analysis of the erotic “stylistics” in ancient Greece, notes a fundamental problematic within the contemporary category of “homosexuality”:

...we can say that in a thinking such as ours, the relationship between two individuals of the same sex is questioned primarily from the viewpoint of the subject of desire: how can it be that in a man a desire forms whose object is another man? And we know very well that it is in a certain

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<sup>90</sup> For more general discussions of the relation between the codes of the Western and *Brokeback Mountain* see Sue Brower, “‘They’d Kill Us if They Knew’: Transgression and the Western,” *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 4 (2010): 47-57; Jim Kitses, “All That Brokeback Allows,” *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2007): 22-27; Gary Needham, “Queering the Western,” in *Brokeback Mountain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 31-78.

<sup>91</sup> For a reflective meditation on the historical and political significance of the public’s reception of the film, see Robin Wood, “On and around *Brokeback Mountain*,” *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2007): 28-31; see also William R. Handley, “Introduction: The Pasts and Futures of a Story and a Film,” in *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. William R. Handley (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 1-26.

structuring of this desire (in its ambivalence, or in what it lacks) that the rudiments of an answer will be sought.<sup>92</sup>

The *agon* or central conflict generating the narrative of *Brokeback Mountain*, I wish to suggest, represents the trace of the American *pensée sauvage* seeking to construct the “rudiments” of just such an “answer.” This answer will be formulated by locating the origin point of the protagonists’ Desire across the Frontier, in the wilderness, and therefore under Baudrillard’s “sign of Nature” as that figurative system which “speaks in terms of repression and separation.”<sup>93</sup> I propose that in doing so, the structures of the Western are pressed into service for their ability to “naturalize” male homosexual desire and render it politically admissible to the American body politic.

For the current analytical purposes, it will be useful to once again divide the film into its three acts.<sup>94</sup> The first I will take as that portion of the film in which the constitution of the couple occurs in the spatial zone of the wilderness, on the eponymous mountain. Upon the dissolution of the relationship, I will take the second act as that portion of the film that traces the separate development of each character’s heterosexual relations and social obligations. The final act is that portion of the film from Jack’s proposition of the “cow-and-calf operation” to Jack’s death and the ultimate coda. The pattern of the three act Hollywood narrative structure then corresponds to the following sequence: the first act will reveal the plenitude of life beyond the Frontier (which once belonged to “savagery”), the second act will negate that plenitude in the repressive realm of “civilization”, and the third act will attempt to recuperate, fix and contain that original Utopian plenitude within the degraded climate of the Real. The film’s ultimate tragedy will flow from the failure of such a synthetic possibility.

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<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 225.

<sup>93</sup> See notes 40 and 41, chapter 2 above.

<sup>94</sup> For an exemplary discussion of the “three act” structure as a convention of Hollywood screenwriting practice see Linda Aronson, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow’s Films* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2010), 48-58.



This triadic unity of form finds itself not only structurally supported by conventional Hollywood screenwriting practice, but embedded graphically into the first shot of the film. The cinematic vocabulary of *Brokeback Mountain* betrays more than one debt to the aestheticized, “dreamlike” quality of *Shane*, but it is possible to read a similar pattern of diegetic planes in Lee’s opening shot as that which governed Shane’s descent from the Wyoming mountains. These diegetic planes revive the sense of the West as a romance world with “higher” and “lower” planes.<sup>95</sup> Lee figures a tripartite division of the image (see fig. 95). The top band of mountain peaks and glowing sunrise corresponds to an upper, sublime world of mountain peaks as a “higher” wilderness or “dream world” characterized by libidinal gratification and refuge from a repressive civilization. The middle zone of the frame is a quotidian “waking” world of ranches and agriculture on rolling plains corresponding to the realm of social obligations and coerced, inauthentic identities (“civilization”). Finally, the “lower” zone is demarcated by the highway, the structure upon which reactionary *ressentiment* will extinguish the protagonists’ libidinal quest and therefore functions as a source, as we will see, of anxiety.



Figure 95 *Brokeback Mountain*: Lee's opening tripartite frame

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<sup>95</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 111 and 151.



Figure 96 *Brokeback Mountain*: Lee's debt to Shane



Figure 97 *Shane*: The homestead and valley

The analysis must begin, however, with the narrative prelude that opens the film and prepares its groundwork. If the wish-fulfillment functions of this narrative are to be felt as a “protestation” against a hostile historical reality, that reality must first be invoked. And so the arrival of each protagonist is articulated by Lee

to subtly recall certain cinematic images. The lorry travelling across the low edge of the opening frame carries the first protagonist. Once dawn has broken (a kind of inverse to the “magic hour” of Malick’s aesthetic), Ennis’s roadside drop-off at the outskirts of Signal adopts the framing of a key moment in Hollywood’s engagement with the aesthetics of social realism: Tom Joad’s (Henry Fonda) homecoming in John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1940).<sup>96</sup> The image configures Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) within the memory of the migrant laborers (“Okies”) who felt most forcefully the social and economic dislocation of the Depression (see figs. 98-101).<sup>97</sup> This gesture sets up the terms of the film’s engagement with the history of American society and economy: Ennis’ life will oscillate between a nostalgia for the old homestead of the nineteenth century yeoman and the flux of the new, transient forms of labour organization characterizing modern capitalist industrial agriculture (which were so vividly illustrated by Malick in *Days of Heaven*).

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<sup>96</sup> For a discussion of how Depression-era social realism was “re-mapped” by the Beats, see Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 141-148.

<sup>97</sup> For explorations of the political orientation of Ford’s adaptation of the novel, see Graham Cassano, “Radical Critiques and Progressive Traditionalism in John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Critical Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2008): 99-116; Gabriel Sealey-Morris, “Dustbowl Iconography: Populist Translations of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 48, no. 1 (2015): 198-208; John R. Smith, “Making the Cut: Documentary Work in John Ford’s ‘*The Grapes of Wrath*,’” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2007): 323-329.



Figure 98 *Brokeback Mountain*: Ennis arrives in Signal



Figure 99 *Brokeback Mountain*: Ennis makes his way to Aguirre's office



Figure 100 *The Grapes of Wrath*: Tom Joad arrives home



Figure 101 *The Grapes of Wrath*: Tom Joad at the crossroads

Once he has unloaded from his ride, Ennis awaits the arrival of Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid). The next wordless event is the arrival of Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) in an equally loaded set of images. His pickup truck swings around into the yard, spluttering, in a movement reminiscent of Sonny's arrival at the pool hall in *The Last Picture Show* (see fig. 102 and fig. 103). The scene outside Aguirre's office constitutes the pair and incites the narrative. In a somewhat dialectical inversion, two atomized individuals floating through the social vacuum of Wyoming like particles in space are flung together by the combinatory nature of the labour market and an industrial relation between the pair becomes one of rare friendship and solidarity. Aguirre charges them with a labour contract, albeit a temporary one, that will inevitably return them to the flux of the labour market in a few months' time. Jack and Ennis begin unremarkably, as men brought together in the homosocial environment of the agricultural West that is familiar from the Western. But they also belong to the American tradition of literary and cinematic "buddies."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> For a recent discussion of the "buddy" narrative structure see David Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity and the Double-Protagonist Film," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 22-43. Greven assesses the period between the late 1980s and 2009, but I would argue the structure can be detected in much earlier literary precedents. See also Robin Wood, "From Buddies to Lovers," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1986), 222-244.



Figure 102 *Brokeback Mountain*: Jack swings into the lot



Figure 103 *The Last Picture Show*: Sonny's jalopy swings in front of the pool hall

The sequestration of Jack and Ennis to the forestry preserve for the first act of the film involves a steady dissociation of their subjectivity from the climate of American twentieth century capitalist modernity (“civilization”).<sup>99</sup> It turns upon the vocabulary of ontological transformation I have traced in the Western. As in

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<sup>99</sup> The “Better Most” brand of beans supplied in the ration packs for example, hints subtly at the psychic climate of the consumer capitalism and the ubiquity of commodification strategies such as “branding.”

*Days of Heaven*, certain lingering fragments of the old wilderness remain available for narrative colonization. But now the civilization-wilderness dialectic is inverted: where in the Western the old node of “civilization” was beset by a hostile but enchanted realm of nature, now nature is confined to a forestry preserve beset everywhere around by an relentless regime of industrial agriculture. The division is not only topographical, but also altitudinous: mountainous areas that cannot be cultivated in a rationalized manner therefore retain something of their old character. This forestry reserve is then something of a fragment of that mist-shrouded realm glimpsed earlier that was so reminiscent of *Shane* (see fig. 96 and fig. 97). Critically however, *Brokeback Mountain* never refers in any explicit manner to the ethnological Other. But it is crucial to recall that it was the encounter with the Native American that fundamentally shaped the “ways” of the mountain men, trappers and other pioneers.<sup>100</sup> Thus, their camp accommodation (a modified tipi structure, see fig. 104) and their emphatic decision to hunt rather than rely on the foodstuffs of the ration pack signal the subtle (see fig. 105), unconscious pull of the nostalgias I have traced. And so this sense of containment that the mountain camp exhibits, as an enclave or world unto itself where the life of the frontiersman is rekindled,<sup>101</sup> can now be read as evidence for its properly Utopian character.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of the complexities of this interaction in empirical history see Johnson, “Mountain Men and Other Explorers: The Vanguard of Western Exploitation,” in *Hunger for the Wild*, 75-94.

<sup>101</sup> Brower agrees with the characterization of the mountain camp as a Utopian enclave in “‘They’d Kill Us if They Knew’: Transgression and the Western,” 55. Campbell argues that “Jack and Ennis enter a separate, but temporary, time zone made of natural rhythms and routines— weather, food, work, and ultimately love” (215). See Neil Campbell, “From Story to Film: *Brokeback Mountain*’s ‘In-Between’ Spaces,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (2009: 205-220).

<sup>102</sup> Jameson discusses the enclave as a Utopian structure in *Valences of the Dialectic*: “The Utopian program, which aims at the realization of a Utopia, can be as modest or as ambitious as one wants: it can range from a whole social revolution, on the national or even the world scale, all the way down to the designing of the uniquely Utopian space of a single building or garden: what all have in common, however, besides the Utopian transformation of reality itself, is that closure or enclave structure which all Utopias must seemingly confront one way or another. These Utopian spaces are thus on whatever scale totalities; they are symbolic of a world transformed; as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the Utopian and the non-Utopian; and it is of course such limits and with such enclave structure that any serious critique of Utopia will begin” (415).





Figure 104 *Brokeback Mountain*: The summer camp



Figure 105 *Brokeback Mountain*: Hunting the elk

Furthermore, once the pair is ensconced on the mountain, the film employs the resources of the pastoral mode, a related but distinct form of imagery belonging to the older traditions of European poetry (see fig. 106).<sup>103</sup> Jack and Ennis' days

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<sup>103</sup> For discussions of the incorporation of pastoral imagery into the American imaginary see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*. Frye also argues in *The Secular Scripture* that: "In literature, however, the pastoral, the Arcadia, the simplified life of a handful of shepherds who are also lovers and poets, seems to represent something that carries us into a higher state of identity than the social

as shepherds are figured as radically unencumbered by the regimes of industrial agriculture. Something of the rhythms of the feudal or pastoral agricultural worker return: the men enjoy large periods of idleness between periods of intense activity. In these periods, sleep and aesthetic activity return. Jack is seen to indulge in the midday nap of the peasant, and Ennis begins to carve an effigy of a horse— an aesthetic expression of not only an object of immediate sensory experience, but also that very totemic animal that tethers the Westerner hero to his forebear, the knight with his steed.



Figure 106 *Brokeback Mountain*: The pastoral mode

The culmination of this narrative sequence is, of course, the constitution of an erotic relation between the characters. It appears that the West as a Utopian terrain of erotic emancipation does not end with the revelation of a flourishing heterosexuality. If I am correct in arguing that the fantasy terrain of the Western is to some degree imagined as a libidinized space,<sup>104</sup> it is necessary to engage the

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and comic world does. The closer romance comes to a world of original identity, the more clearly something of the symbolism of the garden of Eden reappears, with the social setting reduced to the love of individual men and women within an order of nature which has been reconciled to humanity” (149).

<sup>104</sup> This may be ultimately due to its romance content, as I have repeatedly cited with approval Frye’s argument in *The Secular Scripture* that the romance mythos is inherently erotic: “Romance in particular is, we say, ‘sensational’: it likes

recurring suspicion in the generic literature that the homosociality of the West nurtured latent homosexual desires away from civilization's purview. Anxiety over this prospect permeates the scholarly record. Anticipating these suspicions, Cawelti observed that the classical Western already displayed a certain hostility to female characters on the basis of the symbolic relation between "femininity" and the cultural household of civilization:

The most important single fact about the group of townspeople is that there are women in it. Character groupings in the Western often show a dual as well as tripartite opposition: the hero and the savages are men while the town is strongly dominated by women. This sexual division frequently embodies the antithesis of civilization and savagery. Women are primarily symbols of civilization in the Western. It is the schoolmarm who even more than the entrepreneur who signals the end of the old wilderness life. (*SM*, 47)

Cawelti is clear on the implications of this antipathy, noting with approval Fiedler's "interpretation [which] stresses the strong emotional, cultural and even sexual ties between hero and savage which are threatened and finally disrupted by the female" (*SM*, 47). Seen from this vantage point, heterosexual erotic relations appear to entail the risk of the loss of self-presence, that hard-won recuperation of the fullness of being only achieved by a problematic encounter with savagery. If Cawelti's observation of the relation between women and the conceptuality of civilization is correct, it is no wonder that the genre theory has noted the unconvincing nature of many heterosexual couplings in the Western.<sup>105</sup> So often marriage or the constitution of the couple at the narrative

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violent stimulus, and the sources of that stimulus soon become clear to the shuddering censor. The central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union" (24).

<sup>105</sup> Cawelti notes in *The Six-Gun Mystique*: "With women as central agents, the town reflects a somewhat ambiguous view of the values of civilization, an ambiguity which is invariably resolved in favor of social progress, but not without some reluctance and sense of loss. The town offers love, domesticity, and order as well as the opportunity for personal achievement and the creation of a

conclusion looks like a loss, whose implications must be repressed, rather than the culmination of the desires aroused by the narrative. Other narrative solutions are available to manage this tension— the Mexican woman whose culture permits a degree of unrepressed desire and overt libidization that may match the virility of the Westerner or the “Pocahontas complex” in which the colonial emissary engages in erotic relations with a female emissary from the society of the Other. Equally it is possible to find examples of the elegiac necessity of sacrificing the Westerner’s erotic being to the rituals of procreative, monogamous sexuality in the process of constituting the national entity. But the possibility of desire expressed *between men* has been allowed to rise to the surface of certain Westerns only on rare occasion (most notably the infamous dialogue between Cherry Valance and Matthew Garth in *Red River*<sup>106</sup>). Wollen identifies in Hawks’ Westerns a certain “undercurrent’ suggestion of male homosexuality that is never “crystallized.”<sup>107</sup> Willemen argues that Mann’s films coordinate a certain mode of homoerotic spectacle within which the “male hero is consistently positioned as a site of visual pleasure.”<sup>108</sup> But equally, where it cannot be secured ideologically to monogamous, procreative, heterosexual coupling, the Westerner’s erotic being incurs mechanisms of self-censorship and repression in the *pensée sauvage*. Mitchell suggests that the sadistic beatings “suffered by the Mann hero are homoerotic signals of sexual repression that have the effect of punishing the erotic potential of the male body” in a “masculinizing process” that ultimately affirms a reactionary conception of masculinity.<sup>109</sup> Willemen argues similarly that the guilt crystalized by such tabooed cinematic pleasure “renders the look of the man anxious, and provokes the violence

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family, but it requires the repression of spontaneous passion and the curtailment of the masculine honor and camaraderie of the older wilderness life” (49).

<sup>106</sup> Kitses notes that “Borden Chase, author of so many key Anthony Mann directed scripts as well as Hawks’ *Red River*, once defined the relationship between two men as ‘the greatest love story’” (229). See Jim Kitses, “Peckinpah Re-visited: Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 223-244; see also Needham, “A Queer History of the Western,” in *Brokeback Mountain*, 55-57.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory,” 570.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Willemen, “Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male,” *Framework*, no. 15 (1981): 16.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Kitses, *Horizons West*, 13. See also Mitchell, “A Man Being Beaten,” in *Westerns*, 150-187.

inflicted on and by the hero, the signs of a repressed and fundamentally homosexual voyeurism.”<sup>110</sup> And so it would seem that the genre, even in its classical phase, already subtly entertained on some level the return of an alternative libidinal regime which was the subject of long-standing ideological denigration by the Christian ethical tradition.

Evidence for this dynamic exists in the subsequent passage of the film. Once the narrative has constituted the pair sexually, the film takes a tonal detour. On waking, the full “bad consciousness” of guilt or shame descends, aligned with Ennis (see fig. 107). The tonality of the score sours, the light quality of the cinematography dulls, and when he arrives at the high camp, Ennis makes the discovery of a sheep that has been disemboweled by coyotes overnight. The sexual encounter only occurred by Ennis’ abdication of nocturnal pastoral duties and now an entire Christian symbolics of personal *scandalon* crystallizes in the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>111</sup> The eviscerated, distended cavity of the disemboweled sheep portends a threatening omen (see fig. 108). The sheep speaks to a tradition of Christian pastoral iconography (the sacrificial lamb and the faithful as the “flock” of Jesus). Furthermore, the nighttime incursion of the coyote into the sheepfold becomes a subtly demonic entity in the symbolic realm of the pastoral. In an act of attempted revenge or expulsion, Ennis catches the perpetrators and crucifies them upon a crude rack structure. One coyote is pointedly hung from the stake upside down, “crucified” as it were (see fig. 109).

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<sup>110</sup> Willemen, “Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male,” 16. Landy also observes that “Heterosexual romance is not a central motif [in the Western] and is subordinated to the motif of homosocial bonding” (218). See Marcia Landy, “He Went Thataway: The Form and Style of Leone’s Italian Westerns,” in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 213-222.

<sup>111</sup> See Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, “The Formal Design of *Brokeback Mountain*,” *Film Criticism* 31, no. 3 (2007): 8. Edgecombe also reads this image as an externalization of Ennis’ internal struggle.



Figure 107 *Brokeback Mountain*: Ennis' "bad consciousness"



Figure 108 *Brokeback Mountain*: The sacrificial sheep



Figure 109 *Brokeback Mountain*: The crucified coyotes

Jack, meanwhile, is pictured to be concurrently washing and bathing—the old trope identified by Mitchell as central to the genre’s presentation of the recuperated and rehabilitated male body for the spectator’s gaze (see fig. 110).<sup>112</sup> In the struggle between Ennis’s reservations and the re-eroticization of experience signaled by Jack’s bathing, the latter appears to triumph. The pair reconstitutes the following night, this time in the light of the campfire (see fig. 111). Thus when Aguirre comes upon the protagonists and observes them from the anonymity of a forest vantage point, the two have clearly forged a durable sexual and social relation. The scene revealed by Aguirre’s binoculars has a clear resonance with that moment in *Days of Heaven* when Bill and Abby’s movements in the riverbed are emphatically rhymed with those of a pair of otters, as well as the play fighting that characterized the commune in *Easy Rider*. The climate is now one of the re-emergence of Schillerian play, that form of activity in which the body is “entirely subject to the pleasure principle: pleasure is in the movement itself in so far as it activates erotogenic zones” (*EC*, 39). Where the bodily comportment or *habitus* of the pair before had indicated the repressive weight of managing the body to avoid social scrutiny, the pair now cavort in a moment of horseplay that is of an obvious erotic nature (see fig. 112).

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<sup>112</sup> See note 44, chapter 3 above.



Figure 110 *Brokeback Mountain*: Jack bathing



Figure 111 *Brokeback Mountain*: The camp





Figure 112 *Brokeback Mountain*: Schillerian horseplay

The significance of this passage, and its strategic invocation of the image vocabulary of the Western, is that homosexual desire appears now to be “discovered” as “within” a “natural” Self (and its recuperated body) and is only revealed upon the dissociation of that Self from the regimes of “civilization” (as Rousseau sought to reveal an inner natural subjectivity by draining away the “artifice” of society in which it is submerged and by which it is obscured). Without the summer “up on Brokeback” which provides the conditions under which such an inner Self and Desire can emerge from these opacities and begin to make themselves known, it is hypothetically likely that the protagonists would have remained irreparably alienated. This is a radical narrative proposition in a period in which the dominant popular conception of homosexuality locates it in a “denaturing,” diremption or deviation of Desire that takes place in the urban climate of the city.<sup>113</sup> I began this argument by suggesting that what we require is an *erotics* of the West and noted that Marx and Freud diagnose modern subjectivity between a set of twin alienations: an alienation on the one hand

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<sup>113</sup> For a historical discussion of the association, see Robert Aldrich, “Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview,” *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (2004): 1719-1737; for a sociological analysis of the association and its effect on “identity” formation see Robert W. Bailey, *Gay Politics, Urban Politics: Identity and Economics in the Urban Setting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

from the underpinnings of consciousness and another from production under capitalism. What Marcuse has shown is that any erotics must devote its attention not only to the historical regimes that manage Desire, but also the regimes that manage labour. This is nowhere more evident than in the narrative of *Brokeback Mountain*, which dramatizes the retrieval of an “authentic” desiring Self only when released from alienated labour into a pastoral mode of material existence. For the remainder of the film, the protagonists will oscillate between two polarities: a gratifying and erotic mode of existence on the one hand, social and economic alienation on the other.<sup>114</sup>

On a final speculative note, Marcuse offers us a provocative theoretical conception of homosexual desire that may have implications for reading this resurgent narrative interest in the homosociality of the Frontier. Marcuse posits a suppressed ontological realm, an “Orphic” mode of existence (embodied in the images of Orpheus and Narcissus in Classical Mythology) which stands against the “Promethean culture hero” of capitalism and its symbolic vocabulary of heroic increase, production, domination of nature and deferment of pleasure (*EC*, 171). This is accessible for Marcuse only by the “Great Refusal” in which the privileged subject resists the coercion to join the productive endeavours of the capitalist mass, and in which the negative act of *non-production* take on metaphysical significance. For Marcuse, the Orphic culture hero refuses “to accept separation from the libidinous object (or subject)” and “aims at liberation— as the reunion of what has become separated” (*EC*, 170). Moreover, “the representative content of the Orphic and Narcissistic images was the erotic reconciliation (union) of man and nature in the aesthetic attitude, where order is beauty and work is play” (*EC*, 176). The ultimate conclusion of Marcuse’s speculations is that in this mode, “Being is experienced as gratification, which

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<sup>114</sup> Roger Clarke argues that in the film “mechanization is routinely shown as alien and alienating and the two main characters’ fishing trips seem to be as much about getting away from the world as about evading their wives.” Quoted in Edgecombe, “The Formal Design of *Brokeback Mountain*,” 6. For a more thorough Marxian perspective on Jack and Ennis’ industrial circumstances, see Vanessa Osborne, “Marx on the Mountain: Pleasure and the Laboring Body,” in *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. William R. Handley (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 283-298.

unites man and nature so that the fulfillment of man is at the same time the fulfillment, without violence, of nature” (*EC*, 166). Marcuse’s Utopian speculations have been central to the discussion all along, but it is interesting to note that the Orphic mode is associated, for Marcuse, with homosexual desire:

The classical tradition associates Orpheus with the introduction of homosexuality. Like Narcissus, he rejects the normal Eros, not for the ascetic ideal, but for a fuller Eros. Like Narcissus, he protests against the repressive order of procreative sexuality. The Orphic and Narcissistic Eros is to the end the negation of this order— the Great Refusal. In the world symbolized by the culture-hero Prometheus, it is the negation of all order; but in this negation Orpheus and Narcissus reveal a new reality, with an order of its own, governed by different principles. The Orphic Eros transforms being: he masters cruelty and death through liberation. His language is song, and his work is play. Narcissus’ life is that of beauty, and his existence is contemplation. These images refer to the aesthetic dimension as the one in which their reality principle must be sought and validated. (*EC*, 171)

If this striking notion contains a degree of truth, could we not suggest that the American *pensée sauvage*, to its own great surprise, dreams in its own “aesthetic dimension” of that most taboo ontological state, “defamed” as it is by the performance principle and capitalism itself, that Marcuse calls the “logos of gratification.” In this state, “the restless labor of the transcending subject terminates in the ultimate unity of subject and object: the idea of ‘being-in-and-for-itself,’ existing in its own fulfillment” (*EC*, 112). Could it be that the seductive qualities of the American West lie at least partially in allowing us to glimpse, through the distorted figuration of the world beyond the Frontier, the symbolic gratifications of a world of rest and idyllic repose, of “relief from the frenzied anxieties of the actual social world, [and] a glimpse into a place of stillness and of transfigured human nature.”<sup>115</sup> My contention is the film draws much of its force

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<sup>115</sup> See the following passage in Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* for a discussion of the pastoral form as Utopian figuration:

from this state, unexpectedly rediscovered by Jack and Ennis up in the mountains.

In any event, after the descent from the mountain and the dissolution of the sexual relationship, the attention of the narrative turns to the reintegration of the protagonists into “civilization” as a field of social and economic relations.<sup>116</sup> Whereas the cinematographic register of the mountain-enclave recalled the rehabilitated “romanticism” of the Western in the 1990s, the register of the second act hews closer to the precedent set by *The Last Picture Show*. Everywhere the *mise-en-scène* of the town is imbued with a sense of the Real,

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It is not appropriate to raise practical political objections to these enclave Utopias, always threatened by the hegemony of private business and monopoly all around them, and at the mercy of distribution as well, not to speak of the dominant legal system. I would rather speak of the genre of the revolutionary idyll: and indeed, in his *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1960), William Empson went a long way towards assimilating social realism in general to such a form, which, with its shepherds and shepherdesses and its rural peacefulness and fulfillment, seems to have died out everywhere in the literature of the bourgeois age as such. William Morris subtitled his great Utopia “an epoch of rest”: and this is indeed what, on the aesthetic level, the idyll or the pastoral promises as a genre: relief from the frenzied anxieties of the actual social world, a glimpse into a place of stillness and of transfigured human nature, of the transformations of the social relations we know today into what Brecht memorably called “friendliness.” To that degree, what I’ve been calling representational Utopias today do seem to take the form of the idyll or the pastoral: and assuredly we do need to recover the significance of these ancient genres and their value and usefulness in an age in which the very psyche and the unconscious have been so thoroughly colonized by addictive frenzy and commotion, compulsion and frustration.

So I do see a place for the representational Utopia, and even a political function for it: as I tried to argue in *Archaeologies*, these seemingly peaceful images are also, in and of themselves, violent ruptures with what is, breaks that destabilize our stereotypes of a future that is the same as our own present, interventions that interrupt the reproduction of the system in habit and in ideological consent and institute that fissure, however minimal an initially little more than a hairline fracture, through which another picture of the future and another system of temporality might emerge. (414)

<sup>116</sup> Campbell aptly refers to society and its urban matrix as a “disciplinary grid,” in “From Story to Film: *Brokeback Mountain’s* ‘In-Between’ Spaces,” 215.

specifically the broken and degraded monuments that speak of a lost collective belief in the American national project (see fig. 113). As in Anarene, *Brokeback Mountain's* Wyoming towns exhibit the traces of economic decline and a thin, ragged social fabric. The film's West displays an all-pervasive and potentially sinister *ennui* that expresses itself through characters whose identities have collapsed under the demands of capitalist agribusiness.



Figure 113 *Brokeback Mountain*: Signal's Main Street

At this point, the narrative bifurcates. Ennis' trajectory is characterized by moving between jobs and rental properties, and the resulting anxiety. We see moments in which the flux of the agricultural labour market disrupts the ability to coordinate duties in the private, domestic sphere (Ennis must drop the girls to Alma (Michelle Williams) on shift in the supermarket, having been called in to oversee the heifers calving on short notice). In the third act of the film, the passive, powerless position of the freelance hand-for-hire increasingly performs the narrative function of frustrating the protagonists' driving desires. In the narrative climax where the resentments and frustrations finally spill over into threats and recriminations, the catalyst for the expression of the underlying conflict is the constraints imposed by Ennis' industrial predicament— he cannot “get the time off.” Ennis' experience of civilization is defined by the dynamics of alienated wage labour.

However, Ennis and Alma's life speaks concurrently to those old tropes of the Western in which the optimism of the American social project were invested: the yeoman's ranch, the homestead, and social rituals such as the folk dance. As we saw in *The Searchers* and *Shane*, both these tropes were intimately connected to an ideology of nourishing and constituting the American social fabric (see fig. 114). Indeed both were to some extent gendered zones in which female characters were given some form of agency that was denied them, "out there" in the wilderness, and on horseback. Wollen suggests both are classically Fordian tropes, in contrast to the "purer" male homosociality of the Hawkesian Western.<sup>117</sup> When we are introduced to the Del Mar ranch that supports the growing clan, it is shot in a characteristically Fordian manner through doorways that demarcate the zone of a heroicized domestic femininity (see fig. 115).<sup>118</sup> Within this Western society, now shaped by the advent of industrial agriculture, the older, essentially nineteenth century, folk structures that figured so prominently in the Western (centring on the local church or town-hall) persist. Alma, for example, repeatedly urges Ennis to attend the church picnic or the church social.

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<sup>117</sup> See Wollen's discussion of Hawks' preference for the "all-male community" in "The Auteur Theory," 568-572.

<sup>118</sup> Wollen argues that the Fordian Western "almost always include[s] domestic scenes. Woman is not a threat to Ford's heroes; she falls into her allotted social places as wife and mother, bringing up the children, cooking, sewing, a life of service and drudgery and subordination. She is repaid for this by being sentimentalized," in "The Auteur Theory," 570; see also Budd, "A Home in the Wilderness: Visual Imagery in John Ford's Westerns," 133-148.



Figure 114 *Brokeback Mountain*: Alma as “Fordian” female



Figure 115 *Brokeback Mountain*: The interior spaces of female agency

On the other hand, the narrative trajectory of Jack is one of *embourgeoisement*. Set between 1963 and 1983, the film speaks subtly of the consolidation of the American postwar *société de consommation*. At first he attempts to kindle the erotic homosociality found on the mountain— he tries to pick up the rodeo clown, but his desire is detected. And so instead, Jack courts and marries Lureen (Anne Hathaway), who belongs not to the tradition of Fordian feminine forbearance and fortitude, but rather to that character trope established by Lois

Farrow in *The Last Picture Show*— a character drawn from a certain social strata of the American West which has profited in the transition away from yeoman farming to “agribusiness” (see fig. 116). The Twist household is one of fashionable furnishings; a modernist lamp, a zebra rug, the strategic deployment of colour combinations that speak to the aesthetics of the 1970s. In a montage sequence that telegraphs the decay of Desire in the Twist marriage, Jack is seen performing his sales pitch to a crowd of potential customers whilst Lureen overhears two clients in conversation: “Say, didn’t that piss-ant used to ride bulls?” asks one client, “He used to try,” replies the other. The scene in which Jack’s *embourgeoisement* appears complete is the Thanksgiving dinner, staged as an ironic recreation of Norman Rockwell’s image of Thanksgiving (“Freedom from Want”), turning a kitsch image of middle class satiation into a portrait of untold, unsatisfied and repressed yearnings (see fig. 117 and fig. 118).



Figure 116 *Brokeback Mountain*: Lureen and agribusiness





Figure 117 *Brokeback Mountain*: The Twist family Thanksgiving

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Figure 118 Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943. Oil on canvas, Stockbridge MA, Norman Rockwell Museum.

It is against this backdrop that Jack is able to assert his dominance in an underlying Oedipal drama with the father-in-law. The image of the ritual turkey carving provides the fulcrum point by which Lee pivots from one familial drama to another, except that Ennis' drama is that of lingering matrimonial resentment rather than patriarchal domination. Alma's insinuations ("you didn't go up there to fish...") contain all the resentment of the Fordian female for the privilege given to "pure" male homosociality and disdain for the world governed by the "schoolmarm" that represented domesticity, social integration and desire bound to monogamous, procreative sexuality.<sup>119</sup> The breakdown of the Del Mar marriage answers the narrative question as to the possibility of embedding Jack and Ennis within durable heterosexual relations. Ennis' divorce, Jack's estrangement and the entire climate of social degradation that appears to follow in the wake of their re-insertion back into society completes the intolerable negation of that plenitude known at the Frontier. The structural midway point of the film then is the arrival of the postcard that disrupts the integration of the pair into the regimes of heteronormative desire. The pair decamp first to a motel but then display an intuitive orientation towards the psycho-geography of the West.<sup>120</sup> They "light out" on a camping trip to the wilderness. Their first act upon reaching a river clearly removed from the reach of the regimes of society ("Way out in the middle of nowhere") is to bathe in the river (see fig. 119).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> See Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*: "It is the schoolmarm who even more than the entrepreneur who signals the end of the old wilderness life" (47).

<sup>120</sup> For a reading of the film through its sense of spatiality see Campbell, "From Story to Film: *Brokeback Mountain's* 'In-Between' Spaces," 205-220.

<sup>121</sup> See note 44, chapter 3 above.



Figure 119 *Brokeback Mountain*: Bathing in the river



Figure 120 *Brokeback Mountain*: The campfire proposition

On this trip, Jack marshals the iconography of the American yeoman in a proposition that organizes the remainder of the narrative: he proposes that the pair sequester themselves on a “little cow-and-calf operation” (see fig. 120). It would be, he claims, a “sweet life,” the appropriation of the great social safety valve of the homestead out West now sheltering a taboo form of desire (Ennis calls it “this thing”) rather than those fleeing the oppression of European historicity. Jack becomes the character from which the Utopian polarity

continues to radiate. His “better idea” remains a sticking point in the relationship for Ennis, in whose psyche the reality principle appears to have irrevocably hardened and who ridicules such Utopian suggestions as patently unreal (he taunts Jack for envisioning a world “where bluebirds sing and there’s a whiskey spring”). When Jack takes the news of the divorce as a sign of Ennis’ acceptance of the proposal, he drives up to Wyoming whistling along as the “King of the Road.” But the psychic landscape of Ennis is too great to be overcome. Ennis reveals the childhood ur-trauma that institutes the internal antagonistic dynamic of desire and repression: an excursion to view the desiccated corpse of an old rancher “drug around by his dick,” beaten with a tyre-iron and left in an arid gully. The faceless paternal presence becomes the imagined projection and embodiment of a hypertrophied superego. Ennis recounts that his father “made sure” he and his brother saw the spectacle, and entertains the suspicion that the paternal figure performed the murder himself. When Ennis rebuffs Jack’s reinvigorated advances, Jack turns to that other psycho-geographic safety valve in the repressive (essentially Protestant) climate of the United States, Mexico. *The Last Picture Show* established that in the desiccated reality of the post-industrial West, Mexico functions as a symbolic zone in which Hispanic history provides an alternate libidinal climate. The cinematography confirms this: the flinty grey-blue of the Wyoming sky is transformed into the rich indigo of the southern dusk (see fig. 119). The blanched white light is transformed into the gold-red glow of a culture still characterized by the nocturnal folk festival (see fig. 120). The libidinal gratification that was implicit in Duane and Sonny’s trip south is now made explicit: Jack solicits an encounter with a male prostitute in an alleyway (see fig. 123).



Figure 121 *Brokeback Mountain*: Mexico



Figure 122 *Brokeback Mountain*: Mexican nocturnal festival



Figure 123 *Brokeback Mountain*: Jack solicits an encounter

It is then Jack's indirect admission to *extramonogamous* homosexual relations ("Yes, I been to Mexico") that piques Ennis' *ressentiment* in the final dramatic encounter between the pair. Thus far, the relation has carried something of the presence and metaphysical wholeness of authentic monogamous desire that displays no tendency to detach, divide and seek other erotic objects. It appeared free from the "perfidy" of adultery (in a dialectical inversion by which the adulterous affair was in fact the "purer" form of relation). It is related to the kind of erotic union fantasy nurtured by the vision of the Frontier: the marriage of Dunbar and Stands with Fist, the reveries of Smith and Pocahontas in *The New World* and the bond between Sully and Neytiri "mated before Eywa" in *Avatar*. When Jack introduces the perfidy of adultery into the conflict, Ennis's internal psychic antagonisms grow to such a level as to become apparently unbearable and we see his composure begin to fail and fracture. All along, Ennis has been characterized by resignation and acclimatization of the psyche to the empirical repressions of lived experience. His dictum ("If you can't fix it Jack, you gotta stand it") resounds with Jameson's formulation of history as "what hurts" (*PU*, 88). The "reality" of Desire is confirmed for the desiring subject by the resistance of the Real which speaks in the form of *pain*— entailing the requisite forbearance. This intolerable oscillation between Desire and the resistance of the "Real" culminates in that moment now etched into our pop cultural iconography

in which Jack proclaims, with the eponymous mountain range laid out in a panorama behind him, "I wish I knew how to quit you" (see fig. 124).



Figure 124 *Brokeback Mountain*: "I wish I knew how to quit you"

As the hopes of the relation (which carry the full weight and plenitude of the Westerner's sense of self-presence) break up upon contact with the "unanswerable resistance" of the Real, there is a momentary confusion. Lee inserts a scene of uncertain diegetic status. It is a recursive memory of Jack's? A Proustian recall of ineffable erotic commerce and distinctly *haptic* sensuality between the pair, itself another "inner" nostalgia for an earlier, "archaic" state of the relationship. The scene revels in a dreamlike or wish-fulfillment quality (Jack is "sleeping on his feet like a horse") and displays a certain profoundly satisfying integrity or wholeness (see fig. 125 and fig. 126). One senses that it is the moment most closely aligned with Lois' enigmatic and oblique reference to "it" in *The Last Picture Show*. If the spectator is most closely aligned with the character-libido of Jack, it is the moment when the desires of the subject come closest to fantasizing a state of plenitude or satiation which allows the spectator to grasp a form of existence in which the gap between "need" and "desire" need not arise again (which would, of course, signal the "death" of the narrative itself).<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> See Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*: "To cite Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis: 'Desire is born from the gap [*l'ecart*] between need and demand; it is irreducible

This glimpse is only fleeting and inevitably succumbs to the corrosive effects of temporality (see fig. 127). Yet it appears to anchor the film's narrative in some profound fashion. It is fundamental to coordinating the narrative's dynamics of desire and disappointment, the fullness of the past and the aridity of the future, the hopes of bringing an authentic form of relation into social and historical possibility, and the inevitable opprobrium attached to any attempt to escape the regimes of civilization. The nostalgia of the moment is only fully appreciable at the moment of the cut to Ennis' pickup disappearing in a plume of dust and the accompanying sharp realization that its status is mere memory. Yet on the other hand, if we follow these speculations on the rhyming deaths of Sam the Lion and Jack (as well as the grief of those left behind— Lois and Ennis) through to their conclusion, is it not possible to suggest that these "Utopian instants" undermine the very existential weight of the tragedy of death itself? The effect of this rare and precious "unity of meaning and life" is, I believe, in fact something of a *literary* transformation of time and experience (that process by which the base and inauspicious raw materials of real experience are "gilded by the light of future passions" that Brooks (following Sartre) tells us is amongst the extraordinary powers of narrative<sup>123</sup>) most accurately diagnosed by Jameson in an extraordinary and luminous passage:

Now again [approaching the conclusion of the narrative] the passive-contemplative hero can act, his life can be told as a story: yet these acts are now acts in time, are hope and memory. Now once again the novel can

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to need, for it is not in its principle relation to a real object, independent of the subject, but rather to a phantasy; it is irreducible to demand, in that it seeks to impose itself without taking account of language and the unconscious of the other, and insists upon being absolutely recognized by the other.' In this gap, desire comes into being as a perpetual want for (of) satisfaction that cannot be offered in reality. Desire is inherently unsatisfied and unsatisfiable since it is linked to memory traces and seeks its realization in the hallucinatory reproduction of indestructible signs of infantile satisfaction: it reposes on phantasmatic scenarios of satisfaction. Such unconscious desire becomes, in the later life of the subject, a motor of actions whose significance is blocked from consciousness, since interpretation of its scenarios of fulfillment is not directly accessible to consciousness" (55).

<sup>123</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 92.



express a kind of unity of meaning and life, but it is a unity thrust into the past, a unity remembered only. For in the present the world always defeats the hero, frustrates his longing for reconciliation: yet when he remembers his failure, paradoxically he is at one with it. The process of memory has therefore drawn the resistant outside world into subjectivity, there, in the past, reinstating a kind of unity within it. In this the remembering hero is a little like the novelist himself: for both, time is profoundly ambiguous in nature, a force both life-giving and life-destroying. In the hero's life it is the source of all pain, all loss, the very element in which he comes to know the vanity of human existence. Yet time is also the very fabric of life itself, for reader as well as for hero the very substance of experience; it is therefore at once duration and flow, and founds the density of the narrative at the same moment at which the latter tells of the tragic passage and ephemerality of all things.<sup>124</sup>

The relationship has fractured against the surface of a "resistant world." Jack and Ennis' longings have been "defeated" by the alienating reality of civilization. Jack and Ennis will come to know the "vanity of human experience." The moment cannot be recouped. And yet the narrative subtly insists that a temporary satiation of Desire was glimpsed by the protagonists, what Lois called "it" or that which life has "to offer" in *The Last Picture Show*. In this insert, Lee's articulation of cinematic time as nostalgia takes on a most intoxicating function for the spectator: the scene "suspend[s] time in a moment when past and present hold together in a metaphor."<sup>125</sup> In other words, the creation of an apparent relation of *meaning* out of the chaotic, contingent and metonymic structure of life as a mere sequence of events.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 176.

<sup>125</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 92.

<sup>126</sup> Brooks describes this effect which is central to the function of narrative in *Reading for the Plot* in these terms: "Narrative operates as metaphor in its affirmation of resemblance, in that it brings into relation different actions, combines them through perceived similarities... appropriates them to a common plot, which implies the rejection of a merely contingent (or unassimilable) incident or action. Plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes; it thus must use metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must be



Figure 125 *Brokeback Mountain*: "Sleeping on your feet like a horse"



Figure 126 *Brokeback Mountain*: Wish-fulfillment quality

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metaphoric insofar as it is totalizing. Yet it is equally apparent that the key figure of narrative must in some sense be not metaphor but metonymy: the figure of contiguity and combination, of the syntagmatic relation. The description of narrative needs metonymy as the figure of linkage in the signifying chain: precedence and consequence, the movement from one detail to another, the movement toward totalization under the mandate of desire" (91).



**Figure 127 *Brokeback Mountain*: The sharp return of the Real**

Yet death (in its old existential guise as a “darkness or hollowness”<sup>127</sup>) returns to the narrative in the form of a postcard (see fig. 128) and Ennis’ silent imagining of Jack’s roadside murder (see fig. 129). It was foreshadowed when Jack arrived unannounced on the news of Ennis’ divorce. As the two stood out on the open plain, Ennis could not help but monitor the landscape for passing cars as the agents of surveillance which might “suspect” the relation. *Brokeback Mountain* partakes in the central contradiction of the American road narrative. Where initially the road enables narratives of subversion, transgression and opened out onto an expanded universe of subjective possibility (most obviously with the Beat Generation’s embrace of Eisenhower’s highways) *Easy Rider* made the dialectical corollary clear: the road equally functioned as repressive web of surveillance allowing civilization to patrol and eliminate certain forms of subjectivity. This anxiety returns with full force on the news of Jack’s death. As Lureen recounts the official narrative, Ennis projects a nightmare vision of death by tire-iron. The Western’s old spectacle of a body being beaten now crystalizes an anxiety positing homosocial violence as the only curative in the eyes of the reactionary for such a “liberated” erotics and its crimes.<sup>128</sup> The diegetic status of the cutaway is again ambiguous (is it merely Ennis’ imagination?), but the point

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<sup>127</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 143.

<sup>128</sup> Mitchell, “A Man Being Beaten,” in *Westerns*, 150-187

is the same: the threat of violence functions all the better for Ennis' ability to introject it back into the psychic apparatus and patrol his own body and mind.

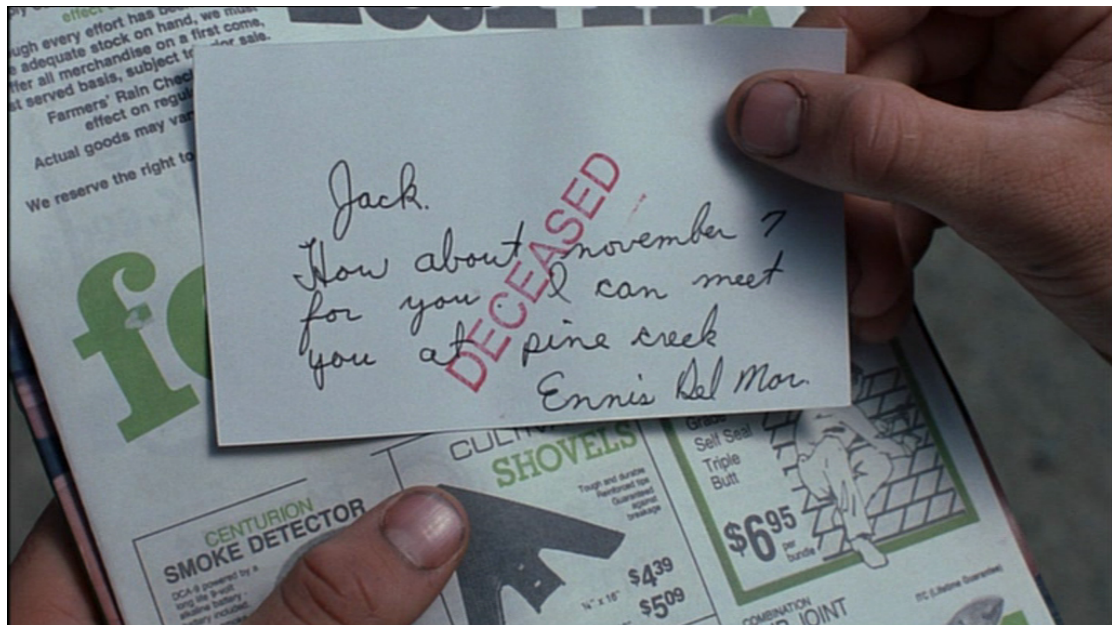


Figure 128 *Brokeback Mountain*: The break-up of hope



Figure 129 *Brokeback Mountain*: Jack's roadside death

The tragedy of *Brokeback Mountain* is then (following Brooks' notion of narrative as a "textual erotics"<sup>129</sup>) one of sexual and narrative desire *short-circuited*,

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<sup>129</sup> See note 190, chapter 1 above.

reaching its eschatological conclusion prematurely.<sup>130</sup> The *mise-en-scène* of the penultimate scene is vital to the final integration of all the national iconography the film has evoked. Lee's figuration of Jack's parents and childhood home returns the film (after its detours through the consumer society of the 1960s and 1970s) to its beginnings in the iconography of 1930s social realism. It is the encounter with Jack's parents that allows the Utopian desires aroused in the spectator to measure the gap between the old national ideal of an American yeomanry and the short-circuiting of that object-goal in Jack's death (the "brutal wrenching" of his subjectivity from that future in which he might have "found completion"<sup>131</sup>). Everything about the homestead speaks to a certain sepulchral register: the cries of crows, the blinding sunlight bleaching the bone-like structures of the house, the decaying old pickup trucks, and the desiccation of the vegetation (see fig. 130 and fig. 132). Jack's parents could have emerged out of the photodocumentary of Dorothea Lange (see fig. 131 and fig. 133).<sup>132</sup> Therefore on the one hand, Jack's parents are themselves part of that "visual

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<sup>130</sup> See Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, quoting Freud: "We are given the extraordinary image of the organism in which the tension created by external influences has forced living substance to 'diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death.' In this view, the self-preservative instincts function to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, to ward off any ways of returning to the inorganic which are not immanent to the organism itself. In other words, 'the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.' It must struggle against events (dangers) that would help it to achieve its goal too rapidly— by a kind of short-circuit" (102).

<sup>131</sup> See Jameson's discussion of the Utopian wish and death in *Marxism and Form*: "Now it may be clearer how the Utopian instant, or indeed the Utopian eternity, if it cannot abolish death, may at least rob it of its sting; for where normally at the moment of dying the individual is brutally wrenched from that future in which he might have found completion, now the transfigured time of Utopia offers a perpetual present in which there is a specific, yet total ontological satisfaction of every instant. Death, in such a world, has nothing left to take; it cannot damage a life already fully realized" (143).

<sup>132</sup> For discussion of Dorothea Lange's significance to 1930s social realist documentary photography see Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 1-15; Jan Goggans, *California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010); James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 11-28.

braille” of the Real, that sense in which the *mise-en-scène* of the post-Western offered a vision of the West characterized by exhaustion, aridity and collapsing national metanarratives. It is upon contact with this historical bedrock that Ennis, as yet another exquisitely desiring subject, knows the “break up of hope” in the form of a postcard. Yet on the other hand, the Twist ranch bespeaks an erotic union that was able to reach death “on its own terms,” one that constituted itself *concretely* in the form of the homestead, and which represents all that which was ultimately denied to Jack and Ennis by their historically-determinate fate.



Figure 130 *Brokeback Mountain*: The Twist homestead



Figure 131 *Brokeback Mountain*: Jack's mother



Figure 132 *Brokeback Mountain*: Sepulchral atmosphere

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**Figure 133** Dorothea Lange, *Couple Seated on Porch, Gunlock, Utah*, 1953. Silver gelatin photograph. Provo, Utah.



## 4. Aesthetic Anthropology in the Age of the Simulacrum

*Perhaps science fiction from the cybernetic and hyperreal era can only exhaust itself, in its artificial resurrection of “historical” worlds, can only try to reconstruct in vitro, down to the smallest details, the perimeters of a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies of the past, emptied of meaning, of their original process, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth.*

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I suggested that the revisionist or post-Western retained the memory of a privileged form of experience in the West long after the cessation of colonial contact. In the films to which I will now finally turn, the old Cooperian ethnological encounter returns in force as a “clash” between two modes of production. Each of these films offers us a glorious, iridescent spectacle that could only exist in the cinematic form because only this medium— with its ability to offer something of an aestheticized simulacrum of lived experience— offers the possibility of “reconstituting” the object worlds, bodily and social regimes, temporal rhythms and psychic climate of speculative and alternate life worlds. This phenomenon now occurs in three distinct, somewhat *sui generis* examples of recent Hollywood production. Once again, it is the pattern created by this ideologeme as it recurs across highly disparate cultural strata that I contend reveals its foundational role in the American “poetic imagination” or imaginary.

In the first instance, I return to Terrence Malick’s vision of the “Pocahontas myth” in *The New World* (2005), which renews the epic significance of the founding of Virginia. In this film, the vocabularies of ethnographic encounter that subtly populated the Western are traced back to their very earliest historical context, the Age of Discovery. Emerging at around the same time, Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto* (2006) is a striking piece of Hollywood filmmaking that gambles on the mass appeal of a particularly provocative ethnographic spectacle: the cult of

human sacrifice in pre-Columbian Mayan society. It imagines a historical moment coordinating three civilizational “orders” or modes of production: the “primitive communism” of the hero’s native village, the life world of the Maya, and the colonial regime of the Spanish missionaries that will irrevocably transform the various Meso-American civilizations. Finally, a number of significant transformations are wrought upon this fantasy structure in James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009). I take the sociological backdrop for my analysis of these films to be our own “postmodern” historical moment with its *société de consommation* (Baudrillard)<sup>1</sup> or equally the “society of the spectacle” (Debord).<sup>2</sup> It is thus unsurprising that *Avatar* particularly bears the strong traces of this historical “force field,” populated as it is by “simulacra” and “simulations.”<sup>3</sup>

In the course of this study I have tried to counter the suspicion that the ideologeme under discussion somehow belongs to the lower strata of “degraded” mass Hollywood “product” which might be taken to represent the very worst aspects of the “culture industry.”<sup>4</sup> This perspective (which informs much of the scholarly literature) need merely point to the fact that the Disney corporation offered its own animated iteration of this material in *Pocahontas* (1995).<sup>5</sup> This position surely derives at least in part from the opprobrium noted by Frye (and exemplified in Leo Marx) that attaches to apparently “serious” discussions of the romance mythos.<sup>6</sup> But by suspending the analyses in this chapter between the

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<sup>1</sup> See note 177, chapter 1 above.

<sup>2</sup> See note 25, chapter 1 above.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Fraser Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). In the following analysis I will make extensive use of Baudrillard’s highly influential formulation of the simulation, which he defines broadly as “to feign to have what one doesn’t have” (3), and the simulacrum, the sign whose relation to the real has been entirely problematized (1-7).

<sup>4</sup> This term is most famously associated with Adorno for whom it takes on pejorative connotations. See Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 98-106.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the Disney iteration see Pauline Turner Strong, “Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*,” 187-205; for a discussion of its relation to *The New World* see Buscombe, “What’s New in *The New World*?” 35-40.

<sup>6</sup> See note 109, chapter 2 above.

twin oeuvres of Malick (an auteur whose resistance to the commodifying powers of the Hollywood production environment is legendary<sup>7</sup>) and Cameron (a filmmaker whose embrace of that environment is equally notorious<sup>8</sup>) I have tried, in a fashion somewhat similar to the manipulation of variables in the experimental situation of the laboratory, to hold the ideologeme as the constant and examine the stylistics as they shift around it.

Furthermore, in order to track this shifting articulation, it is useful to turn to a final Jamesonian dialectical dynamic. For Jameson, the dilemma of “historicism” (defined as the “possibility of understanding [the] monuments, artifacts, and traces” of any historical life world which is alien to our own) is that “peculiar, unavoidable, and yet seemingly unresolvable alternation between Identity and Difference.”<sup>9</sup> Surely it was part of the mission of the Revisionist Western (culminating in *Dances with Wolves*) to neutralize the radical Otherness or Difference of the ethnological Other (in order to efface its older ideological status as “evil”) and instead affirm a kind of identity or radical equivalence between the Self and the Other (a “common humanity” in the casual parlance of liberal humanist thought, which is relieved to find that the Other was “just like us” after all). Such a simple and unproblematic assimilation of the Other to the Self is unacceptable as it forecloses prematurely the dialectical tension inherent in the ethnological encounter (in which, as Lévi-Strauss makes clear, the apprehension of an alien subjectivity turns back, self-reflexively, into an interrogation of the historicity of the Self, revealing that the “I is an Other”). Jameson suggests that when parsing an alien cultural object or life world:

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<sup>7</sup> For discussions of Malick’s complex relation to Hollywood institutions as a hallmark of his auteurism see note 49, chapter 1 above.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of Cameron’s “auteurism” see James Clarke, *The Cinema of James Cameron: Bodies in Heroic Motion* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 1-28; Alexandra Keller, “Introduction: James Cameron: Blockbuster Auteur, Spectacularizer of Apocalypse,” in *James Cameron* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 1-38; Thomas Elsaesser, “Auteurism Today: Signature Products, Concept-Authors and Access for All: *Avatar*,” in *The Persistence of Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 281-304.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, “Marxism and Historicism,” 150.

...if we choose to affirm the Identity of the alien object with ourselves—if, in other words, we decide that Chaucer, say, or a steatopygous Venus, or the narratives of nineteenth-century Russian gentry, are more or less directly or intuitively accessible to us with our own cultural *moyens du bord*— then we have presupposed in advance what was to have been demonstrated, and our apparent "comprehension" of these alien texts must be haunted by the nagging suspicion that we have all the while remained locked in our own present— the present of the *société de consommation* with its television sets and superhighways, its Cold War, and its postmodernisms and poststructuralisms— and that we have never really left home at all, that our feeling of *Verstehen* is little better than mere psychological projection, that we have somehow failed to touch the strangeness and the resistance of a reality genuinely different from our own.<sup>10</sup>

The failure in this case to "touch" the "resistance" of such a "reality" would then have the consequence of sealing off the spectator from any climate different to that governed by the regimes I have parsed— know variously as civilization, capitalism, or (post)modernity. This would have the effect of negating the Lukácsian insight with which I began: that the historical text's power lies in its ability to allow us to imaginatively grasp a sense of existence in two distinct modes of production, thereby revealing the radical contingency of one's own empirical and immediate experience of history. Only in this dawning realization is our historical imagination expanded sufficiently to learn to *feel* history. The answer to such an intolerable state would then be to amplify the sense of *Difference* between us and the object or life world in question. But Jameson points out that the difficulty incurred by emphasizing radical *Difference* is that the "doors of comprehension begin to swing closed" and the possibility of a merging of horizons between Self and Other vanishes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," 150.

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," 151.

So it is instead the delicate interplay between these twin and irreconcilable poles that is served by the heightened and self-conscious sense of anthropological realism we find in the films here under consideration. Each of these films follows the impulse of Costner in *Dances with Wolves* to answer the ethical charges of the post-colonial critique with a renewed commitment to ethnographic realism.<sup>12</sup> The ensuing claims of anthropological sensitivity, accuracy and responsibility seem designed to answer the longstanding, substantive charges leveled at Hollywood of insufficient differentiation, “monolithic” representation, homogenization, indeed of caricature of Native American cultures on screen and therefore of ultimate complicity in colonial domination.<sup>13</sup> The literature on both *The New World* and *Apocalypto* details the efforts undertaken to consult the relevant expert anthropologists and archaeologists.<sup>14</sup> For some, the gesture is deeply inadequate and remains subject to a profound “imperialist nostalgia.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, I believe there is an attempt in each case to reach beyond realism to a kind of naturalism or fetishization of “museum-quality” reproductions of ethnographically correct *mise-en-scène*. They surely contain something of the old natural history museum tableau or diorama that has “come to life,” animated before our eyes. Of course *Avatar* takes a distinct approach, digitally conjuring

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<sup>12</sup> Kellner notes in “Historical Discourse and American identity in Westerns” that “one of the studio’s press releases claimed, ‘down to the last elk tooth decoration’ that the costumes [in *Dances with Wolves*] were ‘historically accurate’” (243).

<sup>13</sup> For an extended postcolonial critique of Malick’s anthropological naturalism see Monika Siebert, “Historical Realism and Imperialist Nostalgia in Terrence Malick’s *The New World*,” *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 65, no. 1 (2012): 139-155; see also Villa, Smith and Kelsey, “Introduction” for an aggressive postcolonial critique of *The New World* and *Apocalypto* as profoundly alienating to the descendants of those ethnic communities represented (129-139).

<sup>14</sup> For the insights Jack Fisk (production designer) and Jacqueline West (costume designer) into Malick’s dedication to ethnographic accuracy in *The New World* see Carlo Hintermann and Daniele Villa, eds., *Terrence Malick: Rehearsing the Unexpected* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 248-295; see also Monika Siebert, “Historical Realism and Imperialist Nostalgia in Terrence Malick’s *The New World*,” 139-155; Blair A. Rudes, “Giving Voice to Powhatan’s People: The Creation of Virginia Algonquian Dialogue for *The New World*,” *Southern Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2014): 28-37; Richard Hansen, “Mel Gibson’s Maya,” *Archaeology* 60, no. 1 (2007): 16.

<sup>15</sup> Siebert, “Historical Realism and Imperialist Nostalgia in Terrence Malick’s *The New World*,” 139-155.

the simulacrum of an alien “indigenous” material culture. But the result is a new cinematic delight in fetishizing the *Difference* of the material world of the ethnological Other. The camera lavishes attention upon the technologies of architecture, the practices of bodily adornment, and an object world that it is always “enchanted” and aesthetic.

The result of this dialectical interplay is that moment in which our tendency towards complacent, self-affirming and insipid readings of the cultural Other is relieved by the explosive negation of the seemingly binding nature of empirical lived reality. In this moment of *Difference*, the present of late capitalism and its consumer object world stands unmasked as radically contingent; we retrieve a sense in which what appeared ontological and immutable is, in fact, subject to dynamic change. In line with my own thesis, it is precisely the Aztec civilization that Jameson nominates as an alien life world which retains an extraordinary sense of “electrifying otherness and fascination” in our present moment.<sup>16</sup> Each

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<sup>16</sup> This interplay is dramatically illustrated by Jameson’s chosen example of the “classical world” in “Marxism and Historicism”:

The status of the classical world has long been paradigmatic of this dilemma. When Greek forms and Latin texts were felt as classical for us, what was affirmed was not merely the Identity of these formal languages and sign systems with our own aesthetic values and ideals, but rather also, and through the symbolic medium of the aesthetic experience, a whole political analogy between two forms of social life. Thus we are today in a position to grasp better, when Greek forms— and the ideal of classical beauty that derives from them and of which the art of Raphael has generally been taken as the supreme embodiment— come to be felt as insipid and when the temptation arises to rewrite them more “strongly” in terms of Difference. Then the Nietzschean reassertion of the Dionysian and of the orgiastic counter-religion of the mysteries, the ritual studies of the Cambridge school, Freud himself (and Lévi-Strauss’s rewriting of the Oedipus legend in terms of primitive myth), decisive reversals in classical scholarship, such as the work of George Thompson, Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational*, or the newer French classical scholarship; above all, perhaps, contemporary aesthetic reinterpretations of the Greek fact, such as Karl Orff’s opera *Antigone*— all converge to produce an alternative Greece, not that of Pericles or the Parthenon, but something savage or barbaric, tribal or African, or Mediterranean-sexist— a culture of masks and death, ritual ecstasies, slavery, scapegoating, phallographic homosexuality, an utterly non- or anticlassical culture to which something

of the films here under discussion displays a desire to “electrify” or “jolt” the spectator out of a present in which lived experience is ever more reified, commodified, homogenized, and subject to radical equivalence under a rapidly globalizing capitalism.

#### **4.2 Origins and Apotheosis of Malickean Nostalgia: *The New World* (2005)**

Earlier I nominated the opening scene of Malick’s *The New World* as one of the most audacious “epic” visions in American cinema: the attempt to re-imagine the arrival of the colonial expedition that founds the colony of Virginia in Chesapeake Bay (surely a “world historical” spectacle if ever there were one). Pearce has characterized this event as the dim and distant origin point of the American Frontier itself.<sup>17</sup> It is now possible to suggest that the entire oeuvre of Malick might be characterized as an extended cinematic meditation on the *historical* nature of the relation between subject and object, on the expanding and contracting capacity of the subject to suffuse itself with some sense of the ontological “plenitude”<sup>18</sup> or the possibility of retrieving a sense of “at-onement”<sup>19</sup> with the world. *The New World* confirms that these meditations are, at least partly, Rousseauist in origin. To the climate of Kit and Holly’s camp in the Dakota “Badlands” and the “Days of Heaven,” I wish to now add the encounter at the heart of *The Thin Red Line* (1998).<sup>20</sup> Amid the Pacific theatre of World War II, traumatized US servicemen meet, unexpectedly, an entirely other form of being in the Melanesian peoples whose lives continue in the interstitial spaces of the

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of the electrifying otherness and fascination, say, of the Aztec world, has been restored. (151)

<sup>17</sup> Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 38, 92, and 113.

<sup>19</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> For an extended discussion of the ambiguities and intricacies of Malick’s vision of historical subjectivity in this film see Robert Pippin, “Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (2013): 247-275; cf. Whalen who offers a critique of the “hoax” of Malick’s metaphysics in this film in Tom Whalen, “‘Maybe All Men Got One Big Soul’: The Hoax within the Metaphysics of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1999): 162-166.

global conflict (see fig. 134).<sup>21</sup> The realm of the Melanesian peoples is, for Malick, an erotic-aesthetic world, a thoroughly Marcusean vision of collective song, play and sea bathing (the coral reef now envisioned as a distinct perceptual realm, see fig. 135 and fig. 136) that offers the possibility of temporarily salving the “trauma” of history (see fig. 139). In the scene of twilight bathing, the war’s radical constriction on subjectivity suddenly releases its grip, and being itself seems to expand, retrieving some elemental feeling akin to Rousseau’s sheer *sentiment d’existence*<sup>22</sup> (see fig. 137 and fig. 138). In this sense, Malick’s vision contains what Marcuse argued was the ultimate content of art: a vision of non-alienation and ontological gratification (the “negation of the unfreedom” (EC, 143)). *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* confirm that for Malick, the ethnological encounter is the proper “baseline” structure against which all other forms of historicity are measured. John Smith and Pvt. Robert Witt become the progenitor to and descendent of the Western hero that I examined earlier. They are linked as figures cast out from civilization to win for it treasure or security, but which are transformed by the ethnological contact they thereby incur. However, where the Westerner stands at the threshold of modernity, Pvt. Witt suffers a most bitter and brutal fate.

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<sup>21</sup> Donougho appears to agree characterizing the Melanesian life world as “paradise” (365) and noting that Witt says in voiceover that he “walked into a golden age. Stood on the shores of a new world” (365). The resonance with *The New World* is clear. Martin Donougho, “‘Melt Earth to Sea’: *The New World* of Terrence Malick,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2011): 359-374.

<sup>22</sup> See note 160, chapter 1 above.





Figure 134 *The Thin Red Line*: The Melanesian life world



Figure 135 *The Thin Red Line*: The coral reef as zone of perceptual revivification



Figure 136 *The Thin Red Line*: The body in water

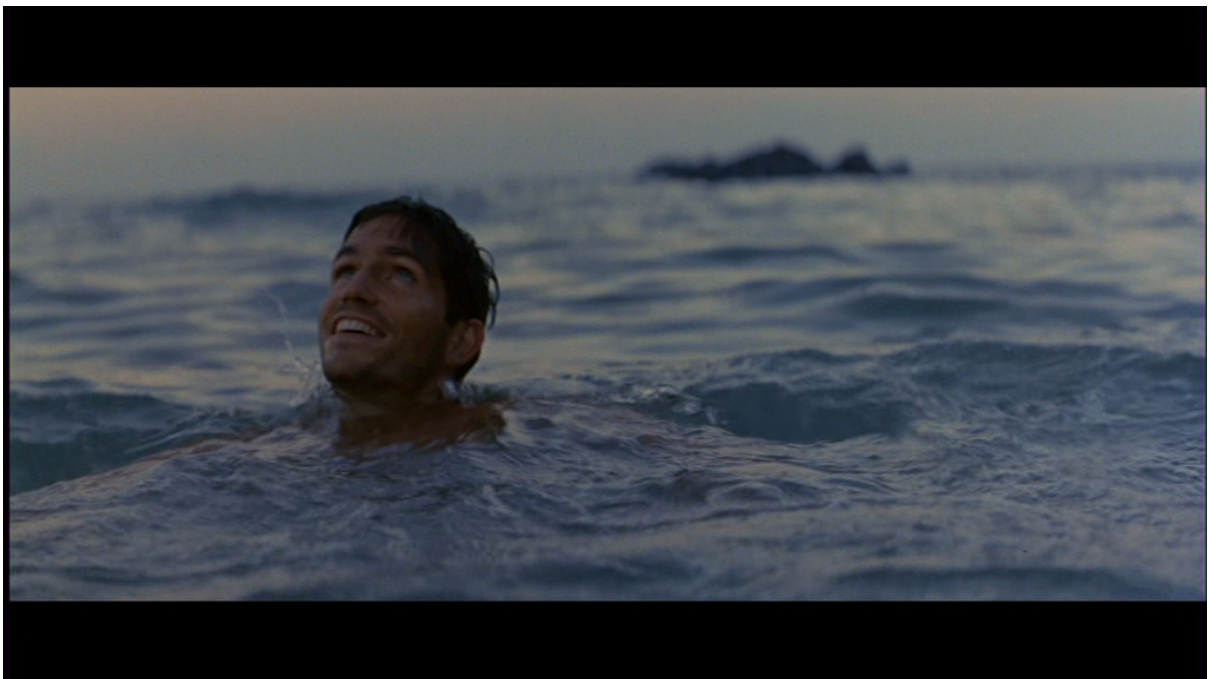


Figure 137 *The Thin Red Line*: Pvt. Robert Witt as desiring libido-hero



Figure 138 *The Thin Red Line*: Sea bathing



Figure 139 *The Thin Red Line*: The trauma of history

Returning to *The New World*, Malick's first scene thrusts the spectator without any mediating structure into the imagined climate of the Native American Other. He chooses a moment of quotidian ritual in which an unseen figure bathes and gives thanks to a feminine deity at the shore of a body of water (see fig. 140). The

characteristic inner monologue or voiceover appears,<sup>23</sup> this time of Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher), the favoured daughter of Wahunsonacock, the Chief Powhatan (August Schellenberg) (see fig. 141):

Come, spirit. Help us sing the story of our land.  
You are our mother... we, your field of corn.  
We rise... from out of the soul of you.

It is here in the first shot of the film that Malick seems to antagonize his critics who would object to such a nebulous representation of indigenous “spirituality.” The “prayer” (for lack of a better term) displays a vexing tendency: it appears to coordinate in a seamless totality the sphere of the social (society “rises” from out of the “soul” of the deity), the sphere of agricultural praxis as a metabolic exchange with nature (the society is the deity’s “field of corn”) and the sphere of symbolic narrative and ritual (the “story” of the land and people must be “sung”) through figuration (the “mother-spirit”) that is necessarily religious or mythic. Now to be sure, the degree to which the anthropological “correctness” of the ritual in relation to the actually existing systems of Powhatan religion is undoubtedly to be questioned. What are in our own epoch distinct, dismembered, strategically segmented and “reified” zones of thought or activity appear to retain a radical sense of unity or “totality.” The portrait assaults us with what appears to be an alternate form of consciousness that still conceives of human existence as a kind of integrated totality— a profound form of Difference to our own historical moment.

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<sup>23</sup> See note 62, chapter 3 above. Pocahontas’ voiceover appears in the direct lineage of Holly in *Badlands* and Linda in *Days of Heaven*.



Figure 140 *The New World*: The opening shot



Figure 141 *The New World*: Pocahontas addresses a deity

Once we have been introduced to the interior of the psyche of the as-yet-unidentified Pocahontas, Malick opens the ambit of the film to the embodied and social experience of this imagined life world. In a montage set to the *Vorspiel* of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, Malick layers in a sequence of shots of bodies

underwater. This montage serves as a prime example of that sense of precious, revelatory, perceptual and ontological expansion that Malick's cinema incessantly seeks. Malick's images of the body and the mind in the continual sensuous interchange with the object world around it attempt to recuperate and make felt, as if for the first time, the sense of being-in-the-world (the first emergence of human perception into the world and its original fullness or plenitude is Derrida's definition of savagery<sup>24</sup>). Swimming appears key to this mission for in the aquatic environment the mind is once again made aware of its embodiment but is equally liberated from the dulled and quotidian nature of terrestrial life. Perhaps for this reason, the body in water to be amongst the most reliable of Malickean motifs (I have already touched upon the collective sea-bathing ritual that marks the end of battle in *The Thin Red Line*, but also see relevant scenes in the more recent the *Tree of Life* (2011) and *Knight of Cups* (2016), see fig. 142). Moreover, the bodily experience of this life world is continuous with its social quality. The body is engaged in this sensuous relationship whilst it is equally engaged in social relations: hands are held underwater, bodies swim in flotilla, and the camera adopts an underwater perspective on some of the tribe's men "reading" the "scene" of nature (see fig. 143).

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: "Savagery does not characterize the primitive state of man, the state of pure nature, but rather the state of society being born, of the first language and the first passions" (237).

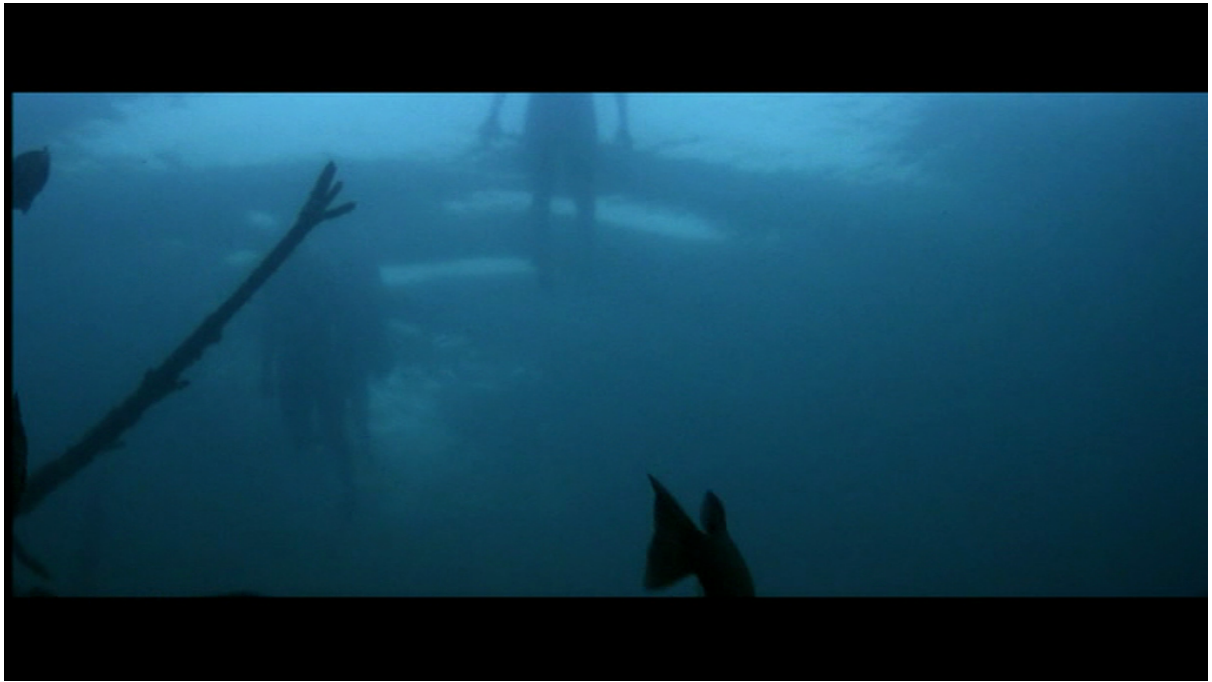


Figure 142 *The New World*: The body in water



Figure 143 *The New World*: The “reading” of nature

The opening montage is then followed by the moment of colonial arrival and ethnological encounter itself, which I have already touched upon. But rather than continuing to read that opening encounter (the implications of which should by now be clear), I want to note that the voiceover of Smith suggests that the British colonial voyage to the New World already contained something of an embryonic

Utopian impulse within it. Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell) speculates on the historical vocation of the expedition as deliverance to “a world equal to our hopes” and a new political economy:

Smith (voiceover): *Who are you  
Whom I so faintly hear?  
Who urge me ever on?....  
What voice is this that speaks within me...  
Guides me towards the best?  
Where?  
Always the star was guiding me...  
Leading me....  
Drawing me on....  
To the fabled land.  
There life shall begin.  
A world equal to our hopes.  
A land where one might  
Wash one's soul pure...  
Rise to one's true stature.  
We shall make a new start.  
A fresh beginning.  
Here the blessings of the earth  
Are bestowed upon all.  
None need grow poor.  
Here there is good ground for all  
And no cost but one's labor.  
We shall build a true commonwealth,  
Hard work and self-reliance our virtues.  
We shall have no landlords  
To rack us with high rents  
Or extort the fruit of our labor.  
No man shall stand above any other,  
But all shall live under the same law.*



*None shall eat up carelessly  
What his friends got worthily  
Or steal away that which  
Virtue has stored up.  
Men shall not make  
Each other their spoil.*

Smith's opening inner monologue gestures towards a number of Lockean thematics of the era that sought relief from the oppressive social relations of the feudal world. But the effect I wish to foreground here is that it displays a distinctly Utopian charge. Smith figures the founding of the colony as a salvational act or deliverance from the degradations of European history. However, Smith's rhetoric will be dramatically brought up short by the climate of this new civilization. The ensuing figuration of the colony will be seen to explicitly *fail* this inner, latent Utopian impulse. In fact, Smith has already been subject to the coercive powers of civilization on the voyage over and arrives a prisoner. It is in the opposing world of the "naturals" that he will find this Utopian impulse answered.

Thus far I have suggested that the captivity narrative has been a vitally important narrative structure for organizing the dialectical "chiasmus" (the cross-over, intersection, reversal or "trading" of places and valences between two parallel narrative strands related to Aristotle's *peripeteia*<sup>25</sup>) around which the ethnological encounter turns, and so it is the case here. His chance to "redeem" himself (he has the "makings of a leader," he is told) is to lead a party up the river to trade with the "naturals." Separated from his party, he moves further into the forest and the Native American Others arrive. Smith is captured, immobilized and presented before the Powhatan. For all "Smithian" figures, the

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<sup>25</sup> See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*: "None of this, however, touches as yet on what would make up the truly dialectical feature of *peripeteia*: that would consist in the unity of opposites, which is to say a structure in which the two forms of *peripeteia* would be overlaid, or better still, profoundly identified with one another" (554).

initial descent into the savage life world corresponds very clearly to Frye's topology of the romance hero:

At the beginning of a romance there is very often a sharp descent in social status, from riches to poverty, from privilege to a struggle to survive, or even slavery.... But the structural core is the individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity, and this has analogies to falling asleep and entering a dream world. The latter is a world of increased erotic intensity, as is obvious from the imagery of romance alone, without reference to psychology.<sup>26</sup>

Captivity serves as a new historical form of this "sharp descent" from privilege to struggle. So whilst the apparent mode of Malick's vision is a historical realism or epic (putatively the order of the "Real" and history), I suggest that it clothes the older, more archaic structures of the romance mythos that I have been tracking. Indeed this is a prime example of the earlier observation that the ethnological encounter forms a new "raw material" or "content" for the form of the romance mythos to colonize.

Once Smith has been tethered and blindfolded, he is taken to be presented before the Chief Powhatan. A painted warrior (we have already seen this figure painted in red and black as one of the earliest emissaries from the Powhatan village and he recalls the Catlin-esque images of the Pawnee in *Dances with Wolves*) sits at the right hand side of the Powhatan recalling subtly the earlier "demonic" overtones of Otherness that the American Native Other carried in the classical Western. Malick populates the frames visually and aurally with the jostling social energy of bodies and vocalizations, aroused by the presence of the alien being. The chiaroscuro of the cinematography within the longhouse is paramount. The naturalistic downlighting of the skylight structure creates pools of intense toplighting through which figures adorned in complex ritual costumes move. The origins of the aesthetic signals of the savage order emanating from the fringed buckskin of the Westerner hero are now revealed in all their glory by this

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 104.

properly *ethnographic* spectacle that revels in the “thick description” of the world depicted (see fig. 145).<sup>27</sup> The camera glides over the material heritage of this alien culture; finely worked sartorial artifacts of fur, leather, feathers, and other materials fashioned into totemic patterns. The most alien of these figures traverses a series of parallel lateral crossbars through a shaft of light above Smith’s head (it is presumably this figure that Villa had in mind when castigating the representation of Native Americans that “climb like monkeys,”<sup>28</sup> see fig. 144). It violently reminds the spectator of the cultural specificity of bodily *habitus*, and the extent to which repressive regimes of self-management patrol the older capacities and desires to “enliven” the bodily apparatus.<sup>29</sup> Malick returns to this figure repeatedly, most dramatically in an undershot that frames Smith against the hovering figure.

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<sup>27</sup> Morris notes in *Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* that “thick description” denotes a style of ethnography popularized by Clifford Geertz in which “data are carefully accumulated, [and] seen as embedded in a web of cultural meanings, and shown in context” (252).

<sup>28</sup> Villa, Smith and Kelsey, “Introduction,” 130.

<sup>29</sup> The term “habitus” is most famously associated with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu for whom it constitutes a “set of acquired dispositions of thought, behaviour, and taste, which is said... to constitute the link between social structures and social practice (or action),” see Scott and Marshall, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 260. For Bourdieu’s theorization of the issue see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).



Figure 144 *The New World*: Radical Difference

A masked shamanic figure emerges from beside the *mamanatowick* and reaches out as if to grasp Smith. In the ensuing moments, Malick employs a jump cut to conjure some of the psychic dislocation of the encounter. The integrity of time and movement rupture into a jagged montage of the shaman's totemic wings twisting as Smith is rendered immobile. At this point, Smith's death appears imminent as the final thanatic figure charges the camera, club held aloft to deliver the fatal blow (see fig. 146). In the final moment, Pocahontas intervenes with the legendary plea for Smith's life. For the spectator to fully feel this moment of *peripeteia* (Aristotle's dramatic "reversal of fortune"<sup>30</sup>), which is the fulcrum for the romance plot's upswing from certain death to transformative "rebirth" (see fig. 147), Malick must first render the life world as an utterly "anti-classical" culture of sheer alien character. Thus in this passage, Malick has prepared the groundwork for the dialectical transformation in which the Native American life world will be unmasked. The spectator will come to know it not as an order of Hobbesian immiseration (of grinding toil, ceaseless hostilities and catastrophic scarcity which preclude any form of delight in human existence), instead it will morph virtually inexplicably into a world of metaphysical

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<sup>30</sup> See note 25, chapter 4 above.

restitution— the rediscovery of an *originary* form of being characterized by the experience of plenitude. It is the cinematic potential for revealing phenomenologically the unified life world of the Other (in which bodies, movement, time, material culture, *habitus*, language and sociality itself are reunited into a singular spectacle of being) that assaults the spectator’s sense of their own historical being, and that opens new potentialities for historical imagination.



Figure 145 *The New World*: The spectacle of Otherness



Figure 146 *The New World*: Impending death



Figure 147 *The New World*: Ritual rebirth

Once Smith's fate has been transformed by Pocahontas' plea, Malick embarks upon perhaps the most classically Rousseauist passage of cinema to be found in modern American cinema. To the melody of Mozart's Piano Concert No. 23 in A Major K 488 Adagio, Smith's voiceover recounts the subjective, psychic and social texture of this "captivity" (see fig. 148). Smith divulges (To whom? The

voiceover, as in *Dances with Wolves*, is a Rousseauist confession of the unsuspecting ethnologist marveling at the dramatic revelation of historicity itself to an unidentified listener):

Smith (voiceover): They are gentle,  
Loving,  
Faithful,  
Lacking in all guile and trickery.  
The words denoting lying,  
Deceit, greed,  
Envy, slander and forgiveness,  
Have never been heard.  
They have no jealousy,  
No sense of possession.  
Real,  
What I thought a dream.

Here are the classical markers of the Rousseauist metaphysic, established in the *Second Discourse* and emerging forcefully in *Dances with Wolves*: this society encountered by Smith does not yet know private property (“no sense of possession”) and the social climate remains one of the familiar social transparency, a society that is inimical to the lie. What was assumed to be transcendent in fact occurs in actuality or history (“Real— What I thought a dream”). But the point, as always, about the Rousseauist vision is that the ethnological Other is not “noble” in so far as this is taken to mean “good.” “Good,” as a term implicated in the ethical mastercode I have discussed above, would suggest that some historical gap between needs and desires had been “stimulated” into being (as Lévi-Strauss might have put it) which now must be suppressed, over which the individual must “triumph” in an exercise of repressive self-mastery (domination over the “passions” being so central to British political philosophy as evidenced by Pippin’s reading of *The Searchers*). What Malick asks us to witness is instead an order in which repressive and alienating forms of ethics *have not yet come into being*. In other words, the social

and psychic antagonisms that characterize our own form of historical existence are revealed to be contingent and *historical* rather than *ontological*. As Derrida explains:

In that [savage] “state,” the oppositions available in Hobbes [good and evil] have neither sense nor value. The system of appreciation within which political philosophy moves, has as yet no chance to function.... What Rousseau thus reveals is the neutral origin of all ethico-political conceptuality, its field of objectivity, and its axiological system. All the oppositions that follow in the wake of the classical philosophy of history, of culture, and society must therefore be neutralized. Before this neutralization, or this reduction, political philosophy proceeds within the naiveté of acquired and accidental evidence...<sup>31</sup> (*OG*, 120)

Smith’s transformation— his privileged passage from one form of historical being to another which reveals the radical change to which human existence is subject— then dramatizes and performs this “reduction” or ‘neutralization’ on the contemporary spectator’s “ethico-political conceptuality,” our own mystifying tendency to project our present, synchronic sense of existence back diachronically into the past and forward into the future. What arises in its place is instead the primacy and priority of trying to think metaphysically rather than ethically, or at a minimum disentangle these two distinct zones of conceptual thought. The film challenges the spectator to imagine a form of being that is “concrete,” which is to say signifies a state of non-alienation.<sup>32</sup> In other words,

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<sup>31</sup> Also compare Jameson’s observation in *Valences of the Dialectic* that it is by the dramatic revelation of linguistic and conceptual anachronism in Hobbes that Rousseau unveils the necessity of dialectical and radically historicizing thought, see note 72, chapter 1 above.

<sup>32</sup> Jameson offers the alternate dialectical opposition of “abstract” and “concrete” as Hegelian categories that better convey the repressed necessity of trying to *think* non-alienation in *Marxism and Form*:

What is perhaps less evident is the degree to which this Hegelian opposition overlaps the more familiar contemporary notion of alienation: for the abstract and the alienated, no doubt, name the same object. Only it is easy to see why Western thinkers have on the whole preferred the



Malick asks us to consider what non-alienation might look like through a *figurative vocabulary* that is Rousseauist in origin— a speculative historical anthropology.



Figure 148 *The New World*: Rousseauist sociality

The status of language, I have already, is deeply implicated in the Rousseauist vision in these films. A cinematic vocabulary emerged with *Dances with Wolves* in which the restoration of transparency to being corresponded to an unproblematic relation between spoken language and the objects of sensuous experience (between “referents” and “signifiers”). Following Dunbar, Smith’s transformation begins with another intercultural language lesson. Pocahontas’ demonstrate the elements of the foreign vocabulary: “eyes,” “lips,” “ear” (see fig. 149). Note that each word in the lesson corresponds to an object that is immanent, immediate and fully *present* rather than an abstracted conceptuality.

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concept of alienation: the latter permits the diagnosis of an evidently fallen and degraded reality without demanding of the mind any reciprocal attempt to imagine a state in which man is no longer alienated. It is thus a negative and critical concept, from which the Utopian moment has been quietly eliminated; whereas the term abstract forces upon us, through its very structure as an antithesis, to preserve and develop the idea of concreteness on order to complete our thought. (164)

These are also the bodily components that function as instruments of the pleasure principle, which is unsurprising given that the alien life world is imagined as being one of heightened erotic intensity. Furthermore, the alien life world is punctuated by moments of Schillerian “play,” which has yet to be temporally confined to childhood.<sup>33</sup> The next scene in the montage is of Smith (having shed his breastplate and undershirt) engaging in martial play with a group of men whose painted regalia suggest their social functions as “warrior.” Smith is subject to ritual practices— smoke is blown from a pipe onto his chest by a figure wearing taxidermied wings of totemic significance. This homosocial warrior band of the society applies paint to their skin in a swamp. As I will come to suggest later in *Avatar*, the painting of skin with totemic designs becomes the very act that defines the erotic-aesthetic body of the savage. In these images, Malick coaxes and provokes the spectator into a highly unusual mode for a Hollywood film. The spectator becomes something of a Geertzian or *Verstehen* anthropologist, confronted by social and material practices that are deeply alien, in which the emissary of the colonial culture now participates (see fig. 150).<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the captivity culminates in heterosexual, monogamous erotic reverie (see fig. 151 and fig. 152). But for Malick, the erotic reverie is surely only the outer, “manifest” symptom of a new sensitization and receptivity to the sense data of the world (sexual desire being merely the most obvious form of a much broader phenomenon that I have called “Desire” following Frye and Jameson or “Eros,” following Freud and Marcuse). The marriage of the transfigured colonial figure and the representative of indigenous subjectivity establishes the daughter of the Powhatan as the most powerful site of symbolic and erotic attachment (variations on this trope abound in the Western epic of the 1990s, for example

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<sup>33</sup> See note 43, chapter 3 above.

<sup>34</sup> See an influential outline of interpretivist or “*Verstehen*” (“understanding”) anthropology see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000). In a classical statement, Geertz argues: “the concept of culture...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5).

Tristan (Brad Pitt) cements his symbolic identity with the persecuted First Nations by marriage to Isabel “II” (Karina Lombard) in *Legends of the Fall* (1994), Paul’s (Brad Pitt) liaison with a local Native American woman in *A River Runs Through It* (1992), Daniel’s (Aden Young) relation to Annuka (Sandrine Holt) in *Black Robe* (1991), most recently it returns with Hugh Glass’ (Leonardo DiCaprio) marriage to a Pawnee woman (Grace Dove) in *The Revenant* (2015)). Smith’s monologues do indeed reach that stage where he will seek to shed the old identity and sever the connection with the civilization of the Self:

Smith (voiceover): The river leads back there.  
It leads onward too.  
Deeper.  
Into the wild.  
Start over.  
Exchange this false life for a true one.  
Give up the name of Smith.



Figure 149 *The New World*: The language lesson



Figure 150 *The New World*: The *Verstehen* gaze

What was scandalous all along about Rousseau's ethnographic nostalgia is here reaffirmed: that state that was previously held to belong only to the realm of the imaginary (the patently "unreal" and transcendental realms of religious doctrine or the idyllic "dream" of the psyche both projected as virtually neurotic symptoms of unhappy, alienated historical consciousness) is discovered instead as a transfigured form of *Real* or actuality. The remarkable discovery, in the logic of the film, is that an altogether different historical relation between subject and object, or indeed individual and collectivity, is indeed possible within society and history. Alienation is historical not ontological, as Rousseau first hypothesized, which is to say a form of society, which was commensurate to human consciousness did once, in fact, exist. And if it existed before it might exist again. These are the hallmarks of Rousseau's project. So *The New World* is marked by the extraordinary confluence of a number of processes I have been tracking: the wish-fulfillment program of the romance mythos that sought to transfigure the Real, the content of ethnographic nostalgia in the rediscovery of an alternate life world at the Frontier, and a cinematic ontology expressed as a "naturalism" that claims to map an existent historical reality. Where the epic content is maintained (this remains, after all, somewhat of an ur-narrative of the national collective) it is in a significantly diminished form. Thus the narrative inverts from an

ideological ratification of the culture of the Self into an examination of that brief moment, prior to the wholesale penetration and destruction of such indigenous societies, when the culture of the Self could perceive its own contingent and historical character clearly for the first time, through a dialectic encounter with an alien subjectivity.



**Figure 151** *The New World*: Heightened receptivity to sense data



Figure 152 *The New World*: Erotic reveries

The brevity, instability and ineffability of Smith and Pocahontas' erotic and ontological gratification are at one with all the "authentic" and often taboo erotic unions fostered at the Frontier.<sup>35</sup> It is doomed because it is extra-social, and the problem of fixing the union re-emerges: Smith asks Pocahontas, "Where would we live? In the woods, in a tree top, a hole in the ground?" The matter is moot anyway, as Smith is expelled from his captivity and returned to the colony. What Smith discovers on his return inverts the relationship between the conventional images of these two modes of production. The scene of the nascent colony in winter is dramatically unveiled as the true scene of Hobbesian immiseration— of toil, violence, scarcity and degradation. Already prior to Smith's capture, Malick offered visions of the colony as governed by extreme domination and alienated labour. As soon as the decision to go ashore was taken, the Promethean work began: trees felled, the fort erected, the land rationalized into plots by the hoe, wheat and barley planted, regimes of domestic animal husbandry established,

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<sup>35</sup> It is a vision of the gratification of Desire appropriate to the privileged, Utopian climate of the Frontier enclave, a kind of "crystalline monogamy" that I propose here as an imagined characterological "solution" to a startling position highlighted by Jameson in *The Archaeologies of the Future*, namely that "Desire is permanently scandalous precisely because it admits of no 'solution'— promiscuity, repression, or the couple all being equally intolerable" (274).

and most importantly, the coercive power of the performance principle instituted. “Slackers,” it was announced, “will be whipped at the sight of their transgression.” In fact, it was the striking absence of the performance principle that characterized the earlier montage of Powhatan society. Production occurs (skins tanned, tobacco and maize grown, fish and oysters harvested), but without what Marcuse would call “surplus repression.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the ensuing transformation from Promethean productivity to catastrophic failure is striking: the imported technologies of production have failed and scarcity has assumed an institutional form, bodies are strung up on scaffolds for flogging, now subject to disciplinary regimes of pain, the imminent threat of political “chaos” and the resulting increase in political domination under Wingfield’s tyrannous authority as “President.” Cannibalism begins, violating the taboo against the ingestion of human flesh. Children are not sheltered from the spectacle having yet to be conferred their historical status as a privileged phase of subjectivity (which arrives later in the eighteenth century with the ideology of the “child”<sup>37</sup>). Smith’s voiceover sums up this new climate: “damnation is like this.” It is then no wonder that Wingfield expresses that *ressentiment* often directed at the Westerner hero who flourished, paradoxically, in the absence of civilization. He inquires bitterly “Been enjoying yourself Smith?” Smith’s return from captivity is intuitively understood by the colony’s children who remark, “You look like you’ve come back from the dead” (see fig. 153). His return is the simulacrum of death and resurrection that characterizes the journey of the hero in the romance mythos.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Marcuse argues in *Eros and Civilization*: “The extent of this surplus-repression provides the standard of measurement [of a given socio-historic situation]: the smaller it is, the less repressive is the stage of civilization” (88).

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the historical emergence of an “ideology” of the child in the eighteenth century see Andrew O’Malley, “The English Middle Classes of the Late Eighteenth Century and the Impetus for Pedagogical Reform,” in *The Making of the Modern Child: Children’s Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 1-16.

<sup>38</sup> Frye discusses the many forms this may take in “Themes of Descent,” in *The Secular Scripture*, 111-126.



Figure 153 *The New World*: The return from the dead

But in another dialectical reversal, Smith's return from the "dead" is the very passage by which his relation to Pocahontas is fatally ruptured. Smith takes up again his institutional role as President of the colony, and his reinsertion into the order of European history, of "civilization," continues when he is invited to return to England to prepare further expeditions. His voiceover muses after the invitation:

Shall you not press on?  
Shall you be a discoverer of passages  
Which you yourself refuse to explore  
Beyond the threshold that is?

Once returned to the civilizational climate of the colony, Smith introduces a certain "perfidy," a flaw or opacity that is associated with the lie and the false appearance, into the pure, "crystalline" monogamy of the erotic union: when Pocahontas asks "why have you not come to me?" He replies, "Don't trust me—you don't know who I am." The return to civilization is seen to incur that multiplication of inauthentic and opaque outer selves "necessary" for modernity and its social and psychic antagonisms. Yet Smith retains the memory of the



recuperated climate of the captivity period, saying to Pocahontas, “There’s something I know when I’m with you that I forget when I’m away.”

All of the examples up to this point have staged the transmogrification of a male colonial subjectivity into the life world of the Native American Other. The ethnological imaginings of *Dances with Wolves* gave Dunbar an erotic alibi in his transformation, *Stands With A Fist*, and the result was that the union did not require a corresponding induction of a female Other into the order of civilization. The ethnological transformation has always, from Cooper onwards, been a unilateral and highly gendered affair. But *The New World* mirrors Smith’s passage with that of Pocahontas in a narrative chiasmus (the “trading of places” or “charges” between two zones in the narrative<sup>39</sup>). However, this chiasmus retains a privilege for one of its terms: Smith’s passage is a metaphysical restitution, whilst Pocahontas’ passage is a historical degradation. It begins with the expulsion from her natal society by her father as punishment for permitting the trauma of colonial history to enter the Powhatan life world (this trauma culminates in what I will call in these final three films the “holocaust” scene, in which the colonial power destroys the home village of the colonized society by a genocidal fire<sup>40</sup>). Malick returns to the Powhatan Longhouse, with its shafts of light and racks lined with tobacco and fur, to figure the scene. Pocahontas now suffers her own form of symbolic and social death in the form of an excommunication from the people.

So Pocahontas’ passage becomes a true descent from a “higher” into a “lower” world. It is at the instigation of Smith’s false death and its perfidy that Pocahontas is inducted into civilization (Her maid implores her: “He’s left you

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<sup>39</sup> See note 22, chapter 2 above.

<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that the genocidal destruction of the village has the function of breaking up the Rousseauist micro-society, preparing the groundwork for new forms of historical domination by creating a “situation of dispersion.” Derrida explains: “The governments of oppression all make the same gesture: to break presence, the co-presence of citizens, the unanimity of ‘assembled peoples,’ to create a situation of dispersion, holding subjects so far apart as to be incapable of feeling themselves together in the space of one and the same speech, one and the same persuasive exchange.” (*OG*, 137)

princess, he told you a pack o' lies. Forget about him."'). She is newly christened "Rebecca," given a maid and clothes in the Western style. Malick devotes a moment to her astonishment at the new sensation of wearing shoes. But most importantly, she is inducted in the order of colonial society by the writing lesson. No sooner is Pocahontas shown to her new quarters than she picks up a book. Derrida claims that in the Rousseauist metaphysic, it is the "writing lesson" (the "essential confrontation" of the "anthropological war") that introduces the "ruse" or "perfidy" of colonial history and domination (*OG*, 119). In other words, the penetration of writing into non-writing cultures constitutes a form of *scandalon* (see fig. 154 and fig. 155). Malick's vision restages the original "ethico-political accusation" to be found in Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss (and to which Derrida objects (*OG*, 120)). As it is paraphrased by Derrida, Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss contend that "man's exploitation by man is the fact of writing cultures of the Western type" (*OG*, 120). Her transformation into "Rebecca" is then at one with her induction into the order of writing. It is in the repeated figuration of writing and speaking as entry points to the two alternate form of historical existence that constitutes, I believe, some of the strongest evidence that it must be read according to the mastercode of Rousseau's thought.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to briefly note that Buscombe mentions the importance of Rousseau and the *Second Discourse* in "What's New in *The New World?*" (37), but fails to interrogate its significance in relation to any of the thematics identified here: the role of spoken language, the relation of the society of the Other to Nature, the vision of alternate forms of social climate, the symbolic charge associated with metallurgy as a fetish, amongst others.



Figure 154 *The New World*: The writing lesson



Figure 155 *The New World*: The writing lesson

At this point, the narrative pivots from the male subject position (which was without doubt always the primary interest of the Western) to that of Pocahontas herself. Malick opens up two distinct forms of erotics seen from the female subject position: the “pure,” “authentic” and “crystalline” erotics of Smith’s

captivity, and a new “compromised” erotics embodied in her relation with John Rolfe (Christian Bale). Building on the writing lesson, Rolfe offers an education whose lessons are inductions into a world of quantification, rationalization, and domination. Tellingly, the first substance that is subject to division and quantification is that of time itself (Rebecca asks “What is a day? An hour?,” to which Rolfe replies, “An hour is sixty minutes” with apparently no real explanation to offer). In Derrida’s reading of Rousseau, time experienced as *flow*, time as yet undivided by anticipation and memory is the very index of savagery as a Utopian state (*OG*, 249). And so we see staged in this scene, the notion that the historical experience of time is the point at which the regimes of civilization find their entry point and begin to reorganize the psyche and its experience of existence. Furthermore, the following lessons are those of new forms of domination (Rebecca, regarding the geographical divisions of the globe, asks “Why does the Earth have colours?”). Finally, returning to the thesis that the privileged historical subject is able to live, within the space of a single biological lifetime, two alternate modes of production, two corresponding modes of being as distinct and historical “human natures,” Pocahontas-Rebecca “feels” the descent into her adoptive society as an expulsion from self-presence and the insertion of a flaw into subjectivity. She laments to the deity, “Mother, why can I not feel as I should?” and implores her to “Take out the thorn.”

Rebecca’s life with Rolfe then is the true *epic* moment of the film in the Bakhtinian sense established earlier: the foundation of the national collectivity in the form of a social stabilization following colonial rupture, degradation and *scandalon*. The couple is figured as the antecedent to the legendary homesteaders of the Western, the free yeoman farmers who found a distinctly American form of subjectivity (see fig. 156). Their agricultural practices draw upon European, proto-capitalist civilization (a monocultural plantation whose produce will go to market) but whose crop is tobacco and whose growth is nourished by the indigenous practice of burying a fish at the foot of each plant (see fig. 157). No “stabilization” of the “authentic” Smith-Pocahontas erotic relation was possible in the form of a child, as such a child (a child of *non-supplementarity*?) would essentially be born as an extra-historical subject.

However, a literal hybridization is available to the second erotic union, and Rolfe and Pocahontas have a son.



Figure 156 *The New World*: The proto-homestead



Figure 157 *The New World*: Indigenous agricultural practice

Having been the agent of historical perfidy and yet having briefly known a climate of self-presence, Smith comes to experience yet another inner nostalgia of personal biographical type. In the imaginary of the Age of Discovery, the

“Indies” now come to function as a placeholder for the imagined Utopian destination of the colonial expedition. Upon their final meeting at Hampstead Court Palace, Rebecca asks Smith, “Did you find your Indies John?” Having experienced the very first ethnological transformation at the Frontier, and having realized its value only upon its loss, Smith can only grope after its significance:

I may have sailed past them [the Indies].  
I thought it was a dream...  
What we knew in the forest.  
It’s the only truth.  
It seem as if I were speaking  
To you for the first time.

Note the return of the motif of a crystalline, originary form of speech.

And so we finally arrive at Malick’s equally audacious final passage of *The New World* which answers the opening passage by a structural inversion: the presentation of Rolfe and Pocahontas-Rebecca before King James VI & I and Queen Anne at Hampstead Court Palace. Where the colonized society had initially apprehended an emissary from the colonizing society, Malick now figures the colonizing society apprehending an emissary from the colonized realm. This spectacle (the parading of “natives” as new human objects of study and investigation, see fig. 158) figures precisely those empirical events in European history which created the conditions for Rousseau’s “ethnological consciousness” to emerge in the first place. It is the apprehension of such radically Other yet undoubtedly human subjects that throw the epistemologies of the West into turmoil by that profound transformation of which Rousseau is but the “agent,” according to Lévi-Strauss (*JF*, 35).<sup>42</sup> The important figure here is less

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<sup>42</sup> Baudrillard also grasps the epistemological magnitude of this moment of “stupor and bewilderment” when he observes in *Simulacra and Simulation* that: “We are fascinated by Ramses as Renaissance Christians were by the American Indians, those (human?) beings who had never known the word of Christ. Thus, at the beginning of colonization, there was a moment of stupor and

Pocahontas than Opechancanough (Wes Studi) who accompanies her across the Atlantic. Whilst Pocahontas has adopted European dress and “ways,” Opechancanough retains his cloak of animal skins in the dank English climate. As he wanders the gardens of Hampton Court Palace with an inscrutable sense of detachment, the image recalls one of the anecdotes that incited Rousseau to his original speculations (see fig. 159):

On a number of occasions, Savages have been brought to Paris, London, and other cities; people have scurried to spread out before them our luxury, our wealth, and all of our most useful and most interesting arts; all this never excited in them anything other than a stupid admiration, without the slightest stirring of covetousness. I remember, among others, the Story of a chief of some North Americans who was brought to the Court of England about thirty years ago. He was shown a thousand things in search of some present he might like, without anything being found that he seemed to care for. Our weapons seemed to him heavy and clumsy, our shoes hurt his feet, he found our clothes cumbersome, he rejected everything: finally it was noticed that, having picked up a wool blanket, he seemed to take pleasure in wrapping it around his shoulders; you will at least allow, someone straightaway said to him, the usefulness of this furnishing? Yes, he answered, it seems to me almost as good as an animal skin. He would not have even said that, if he had worn them both in the rain. (*SD*, 220)

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bewilderment before the very possibility of escaping the universal law of the Gospel. There were two possible responses: either admit that this Law was not universal, or exterminate the Indians to efface the evidence. In general, one contented oneself with converting them, or even simply discovering them, which would suffice to slowly exterminate them” (10).



Figure 158 *The New World*: The presentation at court



Figure 159 *The New World*: Opechancanough

Rebecca-Pocahontas' nostalgia to return to the hybrid life world left behind in her personal history (she asks Rolfe, having seen Smith and the society from which he emanated, "Can we not go home?") encapsulates that broader nostalgia that I have spoken of here. But Rebecca-Pocahontas' journey can only pass in one direction and there can be no "going home" no matter how intense the desire to



return to *heimlich* consciousness (in our own lives as well as in the transpersonal journey of history— which Rousseau himself well understood, despite the claims of his detractors beginning with Voltaire). The anecdotal material of history supplies Malick with an appropriate ending to the narrative, as Pocahontas-Rebecca dies on the outward passage.

Critically, Rolfe's voiceover, now addressed to their child in the future, reveals that death which we see only indirectly, in the distorted reflection of a convex mirror (see fig. 160):

*13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1616.*

*Dear son,*

*I write this so that someday in the future*

*You might understand a circumstance*

*Which shall be but a far memory to you.*

*Your dear mother, Rebecca,*

*Fell ill on our outward passage*

*At Gravesend.*

*She gently reminded me that all must die.*

*"Tis enough," she said,*

*"that you, our child should live."*

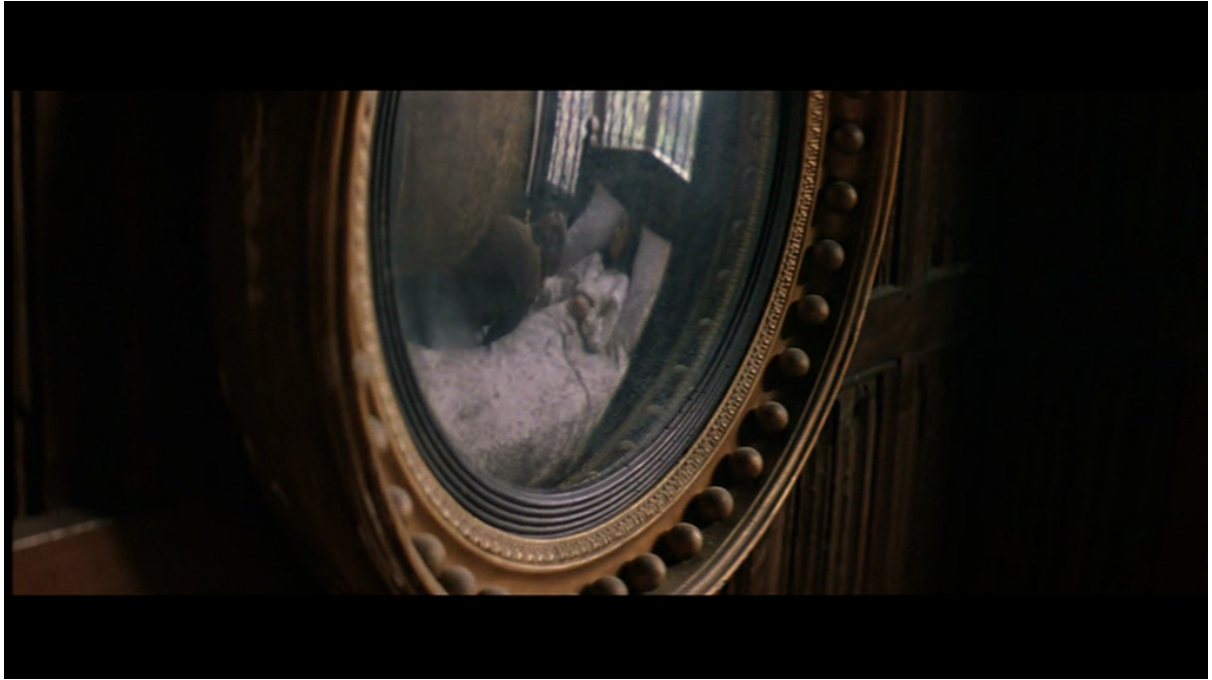


Figure 160 *The New World*: The death of Pocahontas

The passage re-introduces an important thematic. It has been hitherto hinted at, but now comes into clear view, and we will trace it in the ensuing two films: the historicity of death anxiety. Rousseau speculates radically in the *Second Discourse* that:

The only good he [the animal] knows in the Universe are food, a female, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain, and hunger; I say pain, and not death; for an animal will never know what it is to die, and the knowledge of death, and of its terrors, is one of man's first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition. (*SD*, 142)

What will characterize these representations of Native American subjectivity (especially in the form of “martial self-presence” that we will come to see shortly as a mastery over those twin psychic foes, fear and anxiety, and which the Westerner hero emulates after the ethnological encounters of the Frontier) is the striking reduction in or even virtual absence of death felt as that existential “darkness or hollowness.”<sup>43</sup> Rousseau, and here Malick, hypothesize that the

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<sup>43</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 143.

elemental terrors experienced in the apprehension of death belong to our own forms of historical existence, to our own civilization and its more recently stimulated forms of alienation and “bad consciousness.” Jameson’s Marxist hermeneutics contain and develop this thematic of the historicity of death anxiety. The “Pascalian wager” of Marxism lies, for Jameson, in:

...the idea that death in a fragmented and individualized society is far more frightening and anxiety-laden than in a genuine community, in which dying is something that happens to the group more intensely than it happens to the individual subject. The hypothesis is that time will be no less structurally empty, or to use a current version, presence will be no less of a structural and ontological illusion, in a future communal social life, but rather that this particular “fundamental revelation of the nothingness of existence” will have lost its sharpness and pain and be of less consequence. (*PU*, 250)

The accommodation of the psyche to the fact of death, the orchestration of a new imaginary relation to this fact (Derrida also develops this relation between death anxiety and historicity through *supplementarity* as the imagined relation to death<sup>44</sup>) and the dulling of its “sharpness” is without doubt amongst the greatest of the promises that the Utopian project of Marxism can make to us. It is perhaps the most concrete form of Adorno’s notion of “*ohne Angst leben*.”<sup>45</sup> I would

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<sup>44</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “A dangerous differance, of course. For we have omitted the master-name of the supplementary series: death. Or rather, for death is nothing, the relationship to death, the anguished anticipation of death. All the possibilities of the supplementary series, which have the relationships of metonymic substitutions among themselves, indirectly name the danger itself, the horizon and source of all determined dangers, the abyss from which all menaces announce themselves. We should not be surprised when, in the *Second Discourse*, the notion of perfectibility or liberty is set forth at the same time as the knowledge of death. The property of man is announced from the double possibility of liberty and of the express anticipation of death. The difference between human desire and animal need, between relationship with the woman and relationship with the female, is the fear of death” (*OG*, 183).

<sup>45</sup> Adorno’s maxim encapsulating the Utopian desire “to live without anxiety” is quoted by Jameson in *Marxism and Form*, 35. Marcuse employs the expression as well: “This Great Refusal is the protest against unnecessary repression, the

suggest that the ability to imagine such a condition derives from Marxism's Rousseauist inheritance. For Pocahontas-Rebecca, it appears that despite the writing lesson, the psychic climate of her original existence has persisted and the experience of death, by Rolfe's reports, is not one of terror or crippled apprehension. But the key to the reduction of death anxiety lies in a prior utterance in her voiceover that attends the image of their child playing hide and seek amongst the hedges of the palace garden: "Mother, now I know where you live." It occurs in a distinctly gendered form, as social and biological reproduction appears to have secured the future of the transpersonal and collective entity of the "people." After her death (shots of the empty death bed, the child wandering alone in the empty garden calling out "Mother"), the final images of Rebecca-Pocahontas (now perhaps a spectral figure) show the resuscitation of sacred ritual and Marcuso-Schillerian play, cartwheeling and communing in the pools on the grounds of Hampton Court Palace (see fig. 161).



Figure 161 *The New World*: Pocahontas' spectral figure

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struggle for the ultimate form of freedom— 'to live without anxiety.' But this idea could be formulated without punishment only in the language of art. In the more realistic context of political theory and even philosophy, it was almost universally defamed as utopia." (*EC*, 149)

The final montage is of water images: waters flowing from Gravesend into the Atlantic bearing Rolfe and his son back to the Americas (see fig. 162), waters flowing in the rivers of Virginia, in which the rituals of the “naturals” were first introduced. The very final shot is taken from a low angle, almost vertical, looking up the great trunks of Virginian pines (see fig. 163). It is held at length, as the wind sways the canopy, until a leaf hurtles down from the arboreal heights towards the camera. American cinema is replete with films that would ascribe a metaphysical significance to the crystalline observation of the natural world. This gesture is perhaps most successful in Malick’s hands.



Figure 162 *The New World*: Gravesend



Figure 163 *The New World*: Malick's final shot

#### **4.3 Human Sacrifice in the Meso-American Imaginary: *Apocalypto* (2006)**

Thus far, it has been the historical life world of the North American indigenous peoples and the Frontier has been the focus of the figuration under discussion. This study now turns towards two final films that shift spatially from the North towards the climate of the South, as millennial Hollywood takes an unexpected and unprecedented turn in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*. In the adventure of Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood), a member of an unnamed forest-dwelling tribe on the edge of an expanding Mayan empire, it is will be possible to detect the signals of the content I have been tracing in an altered context. Gibson's vision of pre-Columbian Mayan society necessitates an inquiry into the Hispanic history of colonial domination in Central America and of the subaltern consciousness of the Meso-American peoples. As much has been accomplished by present day Mayan scholars whose view on this film of course take the decidedly political form of

post-colonial critique.<sup>46</sup> Such readings are of course important for their ability to interrogate of the relation between mass cultural figuration and contentious historical conditions of lived existence for existing populations. However, for the present purposes, I intend to use this development to further my reading of these films as fusing ethnological spectacle with a Utopian functionality—enlarging our historical imagination to imagine alternate orders of human existence.

It is in the very first scene that a relationship to the old Cooperian heritage is established. *Apocalypto* directly appropriates a trope from the revived 1990s Western epic (see fig. 164 and fig. 165). *The Last of the Mohicans* opens with a montage in which Natty Bumppo (Daniel Day-Lewis), Uncas (Eric Schweig) and Chingachgook (Russell Means) hunt an elk. As in Mann's film, the opening of *Apocalypto* introduces the ethnological culture of the Other through its hunting practices, which allows us to automatically grasp the life world in question as an alternate mode of production. Gibson's pans are whip-fast, the frames blurrier, but employs the same essential montage strategy, derived from the cinematic grammar of the "action" genre.<sup>47</sup> The scene is rhythmically punctuated by shots in which the tribesmen co-ordinate their movements and descend from arboreal perches, funneling a tapir towards a precise location at which point a barbed and counterweighted club flies out of the undergrowth and impales the quarry. The overall effect is that of kinetically enlivening the body, which is of course common to the action chase sequence in all its various generic forms, but now is

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<sup>46</sup> See Villa, Smith and Kelsey, "Introduction," 129-139; Judith M. Maxwell, "Apocalypto: Then and Now," *Archaeology News* 48, no. 5 (2007): 38; Nexahualcoyotl Xiuhtecutli, "Gibson's *Apocalypto* as an Act Against the Maya," *Anthropology News* 48, no. 6 (2007): 29-30; Annette Kolodny, "Tropic Trappings in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* and Joseph Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2008): 21-34; David Friedel, "Betraying the Maya," *Archaeology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 36-41;

<sup>47</sup> For discussion of the significance of the body moving in the aesthetic of the Hollywood Action genre see Jennifer M. Bean, "'Trauma Thrills': Notes on early action cinema," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 17-30; as a thoroughly gendered phenomenon see Mark Gallagher, "Introduction: Popular Representations of Active Masculinity since the Late 1960s," in *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1-20.

strategically articulated in the service of historical memory and recovering an alternate sense of bodily *habitus* that characterizes this Meso-American tribe.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 164 *Apocalypto*: The tapir hunt



Figure 165 *The Last of the Mohicans*: The elk hunt

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<sup>48</sup> See note 29, chapter 4 above.



What I would like to suggest about this apparently simple-enough hunting trope (which will be preserved in *Avatar*), is that the relation between hunter and prey is not one of simple domination or instrumentalization. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard offers the striking hypothesis that capitalism has dissolved the earlier “symbolic order” that existed between the order of man and that of the animal (as it has in so many symbolic relations in so many other spheres). The older act of ritual predation or hunting remained enmeshed within (and was indeed constitutive of) that symbolic order:

Whatever it may be, animals have always had, until our era, a divine or sacrificial nobility that all mythologies recount. Even murder by hunting is still a symbolic relation, as opposed to an experimental dissection. Even domestication is still a symbolic relation, as opposed to industrial breeding.<sup>49</sup>

It is a finding surely already predicated upon the findings of totemism in anthropology and Baudrillard’s sensitivity to anthropological perspectives.<sup>50</sup> Our own epoch is instead characterized by the commodification of the animal in the form of rationalized, industrial agriculture and vivisection (according to Baudrillard our order is characterized by “animals sick from surplus value and humans sick from industrial concentration; from the scientific organization of work and assembly”<sup>51</sup>). Thus Baudrillard suggests provocatively that the relation of man to animal is a privileged space in which to witness this dissolution of the “symbolic order” that attends the historical development of capitalism. But the ethnographic hero (Leatherstocking or Jaguar Paw) does not view the chase as the occasion for the demonstration of social prowess in a climate of social hierarchy and comparison. In the European feudal or aristocratic order it is possible to suggest that this is the case when the quarry is discarded, as in fox hunting. Instead, the hunting practice of the ethnological Other hunt appears, from the outside, as the occasion for something like Baudrillard’s “exchange of

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<sup>49</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 134.

<sup>50</sup> For example, note the invocation of Lévi-Strauss and the Bororos in *Simulacra and Simulation* (131).

<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 131.

significations” with nature.<sup>52</sup> The trope generally requires that the hunter “acknowledge” the “spirit” of the animal in a gesture or statement of gratitude or reciprocity (see fig. 166 and fig. 167). Like all the mass cultural attempts to imagine the practices of the Other, we may complain about its lack of ethnographic specificity or “veracity,” or even protest a certain naïve sentimentalism. Yet that fact remains, I contend, that these narratives betray a smaller, more intimate form of historical nostalgia that indeed is part of the larger phenomenon under discussion here. The scenes of the sublime buffalo hunt in *Dances with Wolves*, the quarry of the New Age Utopian commune in *Easy Rider*, and even the humble act of killing the elk in *Brokeback Mountain* (which finally severed the Utopian enclave from the lower *société de consommation*) all emitted the weak signals of this trope.



Figure 166 *The Last of the Mohicans*: “We are sorry to kill you Brother”

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<sup>52</sup> See note 40, chapter 2 above.



Figure 167 *Avatar*: The ritually equilibrated “clean” kill

The tapir hunt then introduces the spectator to the life world of the rainforest tribe of Jaguar Paw (see fig. 168). As Malick confronted the spectator with the world of the Powhatan without any form of colonial mediating figure, so Gibson attempts to conjure the Rousseauist world of this unnamed tribe without an unwitting proto-ethnologist. By this stage, the thematics I have surveyed of the Rousseauist “microsociety” should be largely self-evident: a “unanimous people” “protected from corruption” (*OG*, 134), within “earshot” (*OG*, 281) of one another and subject only to emergent forms of domination and differentiation (again there is no doubt evidence here of patriarchal domination and a corresponding division of labour). Rather what I wish to put the accent on here is the climatic shift. It is perhaps no surprise that these final two visions seem to gravitate towards the rainforests of Meso-America (or more specifically a “hyper” Amazon rainforest, as I will read the planet “Pandora” in *Avatar*). In the vocabulary of the Rousseauist metaphysic, the “South” is the climate hospitable to self-presence<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology* who paraphrases Rousseau’s argument: “Thus the original language and society, as they arose in warm countries, are absolutely pure. They are described closest to that ineffable limit where society is formed without having begun its degradation; where language is instituted but still remains pure song, a language of pure accentation, a sort of *neume*” (*OG*, 262).

(for Derrida, Rousseau’s “birth of society” is the moment at which “The South passes into its own North”<sup>54</sup>). Where a film figures the Frontier in the North, the sheer climatic presence of extreme cold tends to make the world inherently hostile to human life and as a result, the film will struggle to successfully envision any form of Utopia in the wilderness. The problem will come to haunt Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* (2015). The climate of the North “dislocates presence,” presumably because the demands of survival institute a stronger form of the reality principle into human life, bringing with it the reign of “*differance* and delay” (OG, 280). But when the Frontier is in the South, it becomes a climate of unbroken *jouissance* where a fecund environment meets human needs and the gap between desire and pleasure remains minimal.



Figure 168 *Apocalypto*: The Rousseauist village

On the night of the hunt we are given the image of the festival once again (in which the people “consume” themselves “in presence” (OG, 262)) as the collectivity assembles around the village fire (see fig. 169). This is the scene of

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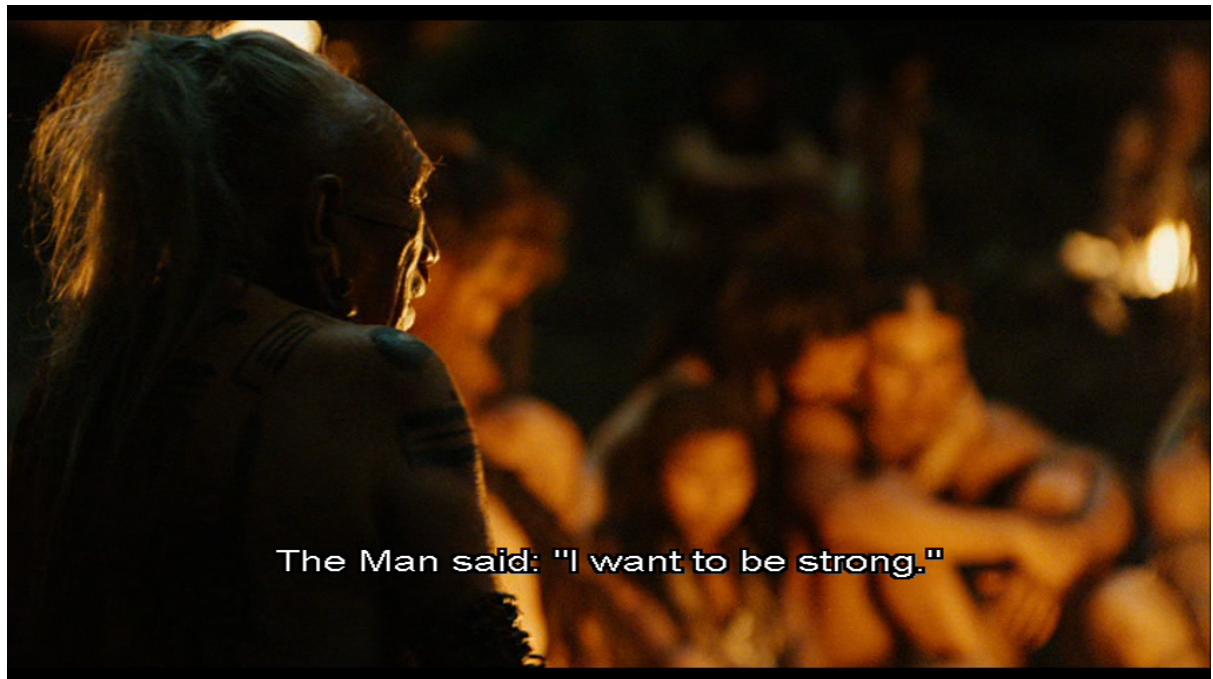
<sup>54</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “This birth of society is therefore not a passage, it is a point, a pure, fictive and unstable, ungraspable limit. One crosses it in attaining it. In it society is broached and is deferred from itself. Beginning, it begins to decay. The South passes into its own North. Transcending need, passion engenders new need which in turn corrupt it” (267).

collective narrative consumption as the tribal elder relates a “myth” (see fig. 170). This myth, it will turn out, portends the ensuing narrative. The people are orchestrated socially and temporally by this event, and it suitably dramatizes the tableau of narrative first emerging as the “central function or instance of the human mind” (*PU*, xiii). The elder relates a vision:

I saw a hole in the Man...  
Deep like a hunger he will never fill...  
It is what makes him sad and what makes him want.  
He will go taking and taking....  
Until one day the World will say:  
“I am no more and I have nothing left to give.”



Figure 169 *Apocalypto*: The festival



The Man said: "I want to be strong."

Figure 170 *Apocalypto*: The collective function of narrative

Now of course at this point all manner of largely self-evident resonances may be detected in such personifications of the “World” as a sentient entity. But what we can detect here is that these visions of radically Other forms of human existence turn around hypothesizing the historicity of the gap between *desire* and *need* (that the gap could be entirely eliminated is, to be sure, a mirage for Derrida, but this does not prevent us imagining a radical reduction in the gap, if not its elimination (*OG*, 185)). It appears that the tribal elder here is invested with the ability to foretell the future: to predict the profound stimulation of all manner of chasms between need and desire, or alternatively desire and power, that characterize our own epoch and its historical, essentially consumer, forms of imagination.<sup>55</sup> For the contemporary spectator, the elder now speaks the

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<sup>55</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*:

It [the imagination] animates the faculty of enjoyment but inscribes a difference between desire and power. If we desire beyond our power of satisfaction, the origin of that surplus and of that difference is named imagination. This permits us to determine a function of the concept of nature or primitiveness: it is the equilibrium between reserve and desire. An impossible equilibrium, for desire cannot awaken and move out of its reserve except by the imagination, which also breaks the equilibrium. This impossible thing— another name for nature— therefore remains a limit. According to Rousseau, ethics, “human wisdom,” “the path of true

contradiction of a “future history.” He is able to foretell a future that has superseded the old “equilibrium of significations with nature”<sup>56</sup> and has passed over into what Baudrillard diagnosed as the “catastrophic lack” of the *société de consommation*.<sup>57</sup> With this prophecy in place, Gibson gives us an extraordinary image: the unity of the tribe, assembled around the campfire for a final night, in anticipation of the impending metaphysical catastrophe that penetrates the Utopian enclave the following morning. It is Derrida’s “primitiveness” itself: that (impossible) moment of metaphysical integrity in which an “equilibrium between reserve and desire,” human potentialities and imaginative capacities, remained in historical alignment.

The next morning, the *scandalon* arrives in the form of the Mayan raiding party (see fig. 171). By now it is clear that Jaguar Paw will serve as the romance hero. He has already been figured as possessing an extraordinary sensory capacity: he detects the presence of the refugees in the forest before they are visible. As the privileged character of the narrative, Jaguar Paw awakes early, disturbed by the appearance of the refugee figure that knows an entirely new historical form of “fear” in his dream. This brief temporal gap between one form of history and another is just enough for Jaguar Paw to stow his family in a natural womb-cave of the earth before the scene of the inaugural “holocaust”. I have already suggested in discussing *The New World* that this wholesale destruction of the indigenous life world— always from *without*— takes the form of the expulsion of the collectivity into homelessness, the breaking up of self-presence as catastrophic, historic degradation. The electrifying jolt of Otherness and Difference that is invested in the raiding party is that it appears to be defined by an entirely different sense of *jouissance*<sup>58</sup> to the rainforest people. These beings

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happiness,” consists, then, in staying as close as possible to that limit, and in “decreasing the difference between our desires and our powers. (*OG*, 185)

<sup>56</sup> See note 40, chapter 2 above.

<sup>57</sup> See note 177, chapter 1 above.

<sup>58</sup> The term *jouissance* (broadly translated as “enjoyment” or “pleasure”) has a long theoretical history. I employ it in relation to Rousseau’s oeuvre following Derrida (who uses the terms repeatedly in *Of Grammatology* (see 249, 280, 296)

find their mastery, their sense of power (*puissance*) and indeed exhilaration in a vocabulary of pain inscribed upon the body. One senses that to call it “cruelty” would be to mistakenly encourage an anachronistic sense of ethical judgment that would undermine this characterization as a spectacle of sheer *Difference*: this is violent domination which flourishes because it does not yet know an ethical regime that would repress or negate it. This is a thoroughly Nietzschean proposition that emerges in the figuration— the frightening thrill of unfettered domination— and a thematic to which I will return in the concluding comments.



Figure 171 *Apocalypto*: The Mayan raiding party

So the narrative institutes the forced march of the captives from the province of the rainforest to a surprising destination: the capital of the Mayan civilization. Hitherto, no representation of the indigenous peoples of North America has had

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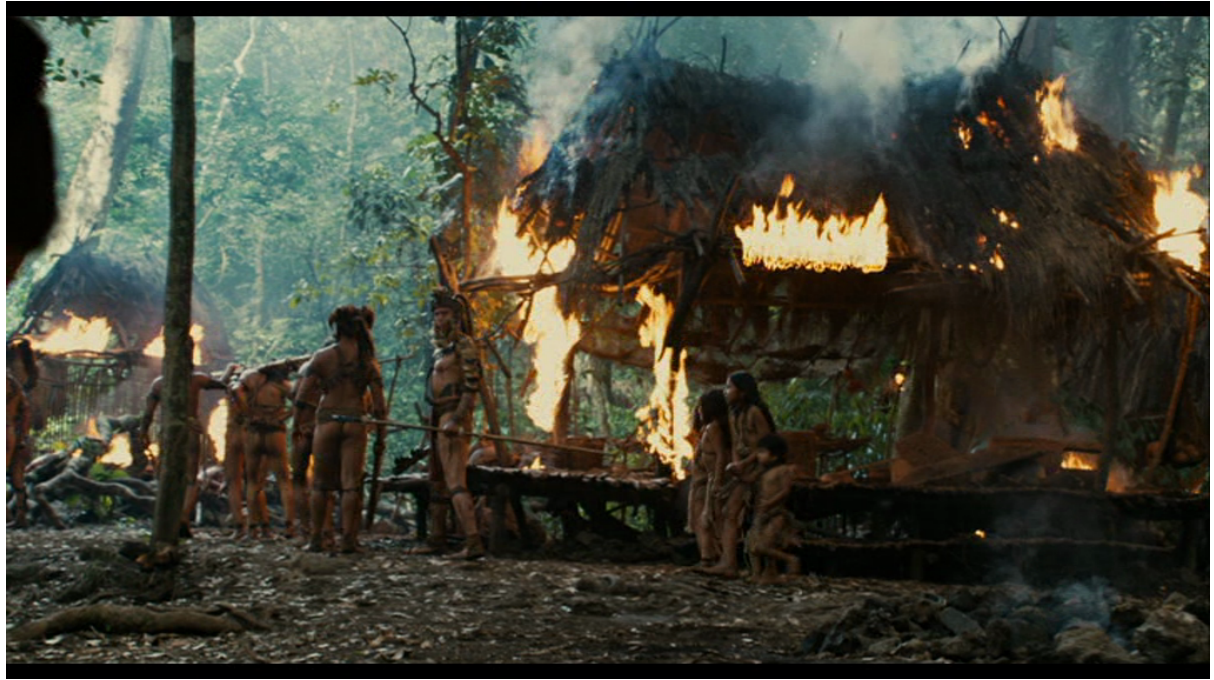
and in which it is translated as “full pleasure” and “delight”). The English translations here fail to convey to degree to which *jouissance* in contrast to *plaisir* carries something of an ecstatic, euphoric or orgasmic overtone as a state or experience that is held to surpass and transcend mere physical pleasure and encompass the mind and spirit. See Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 263.



to contend with a “capital” or anything resembling a “city” as such.<sup>59</sup> This means that for *Apocalypto*, the *scandalon* of history as sequence of intensifying forms of domination is imagined as *external* to the Rousseauist life world, but *internal* to the Americas within a global context. The Western always imagined that “civilization” arrived with European colonial domination. But for this film, Meso-America already incubated forms of society in which domination has begun to take on radically new forms (the “degradation” of society has already begun, as Derrida might have characterized it). So *Apocalypto* inverts the traditional Hollywood ethnological encounter in which the colonizer is expelled from the centre of civilization to the periphery of the known world. Instead, an emissary from the province arrives in the centre and experiences the psychic assault of witnessing something like the future in the present. Jaguar Paw witnesses the passage of society out of the “genuine youth of the World” (*SD*, 167) and into a world characterized by new and intensifying forms of political domination.

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<sup>59</sup> The relation between the province and the capital is now another set of terms in the Rousseauist vocabulary which correspond to self presence and supplementarity respectively in *Of Grammatology*: “Almost all the significations that will constantly define the figure of evil and the process of its degeneration are recorded there: a simultaneously violent and progressive substitution of servitude for political freedom as freedom of the living word, dissolution of the small democratic and autarchic city, preponderance of articulation over accentuation, of consonant over vowel, of northern over southern, of the capital over the province” (200).



**Figure 172** *Apocalypto*: The Holocaust

I have already suggested that *Apocalypto*'s spectacle of Difference contains the possibility of re-expanding our historical imagination, nourishing the simple ability to imagine ourselves into radically other forms of human historical reality. In order to "read" the ensuing *mise-en-scène*, I will have recourse to the classical Marxian historical schema of the modes of production. But it should be understood that this is not intended to perpetuate an ethnocentric violence upon the society depicted. Such societies demand archaeological and anthropological characterization on their own terms. It is rather intended to illustrate the categories by which the Western spectator might attempt to "decode" the images presented to them. It is indeed quite possible that the very act of imagining the Other always already contains ethnocentric formulations. In other words, the mere act of *imagining* the Other is itself, inescapably "racist." So whilst acknowledging the critiques of these films for perpetuating "stereotypes,"<sup>60</sup> the caveat that I wish to temporarily place upon the denunciations of post-colonial criticism is to be found in Jameson's doctrine of the political unconscious. For Jameson, recognizing the profoundly ideological or ethnocentric nature of any image of cultural difference:

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<sup>60</sup> See note 74, chapter 3 above.

... should not encourage us too rapidly to conclude that a "value-free" and henceforth "scientific" historiography is capable of freeing us from the binary opposition of Identity and Difference, and of piercing such ideological representations in order to replace them with an "objective" account of the realities of the ancient world. Perhaps on the contrary we need to take into account the possibility that our contact with the past will always pass through the imaginary and through its ideologies, will always in one way or another be mediated by the codes and motifs of some deeper historical classification system or *pensée sauvage* of the historical imagination, some properly political unconscious.<sup>61</sup>

So whilst post-colonial critiques often agitate for "objective" accounts of other cultures, it is towards the "codes and motifs" of this "historical classification system" that this project is oriented. If this is the case and accessing some ultimate "objective" account or vision of this lost historical reality is deeply problematic, one must recognize the necessity of employing categories such as those offered by the Marxian modes of production. For example, Kelsey poses the criticism that the spatial parameters of the forced march through the Mayan capital "shrink" it in such a way as to minimize the "significance" of Mayan civilization.<sup>62</sup> I would pose an alternative explanation that in order for the passage to achieve its goal of electrifying the spectator and expanding their historical imagination, the various structural compartments of the Mayan economy must be glimpsed functioning altogether, as a total synchronic system, as a political economy and a mode of production. Within the constraints of Hollywood filmmaking practice, this means that the metropolis must be powerfully condensed so that within the frame or the sequence, the spectator can relate this political economy with the degree to which lived human experience itself is radically transformed by it and under it. The condensation of the Mayan capital is then less a neo-colonial attempt to deny Meso-American civilization its historical claim to significance than a device required to allow us

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<sup>61</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Historicism*, 152

<sup>62</sup> See Villa, Smith and Kelsey, "Introduction," 130.

to *feel* historicity as the tension between outer, suprapersonal forces of collective organization (“society” as a set of social facts that coercively confront and shape the subject<sup>63</sup>) and an inner, psychic experience of existence.

With this caveat in mind, it is possible to trace such a “historical classification system” at work in Gibson’s *mise-en-scène*. The first alien life world encountered on the edge of the Mayan civilization appears to be a slave world in which coerced labour is required to manufacture the requisite lime for temple construction (see fig. 175). In this world, a new form of painted body has replaced the aesthetic and totemic circuitry of the forest tribe— the white dust of the lime effaces the slave body. The “otherworldly” quality of the image suggests an earlier precedent, *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), which aggressively revealed radical Difference in the slave mode of production of ancient Rome. Fellini’s description of his vision as a “science fiction of the past” is equally apt I think for Gibson’s film.<sup>64</sup> Each aims at a spectacle of the essential otherness of the past as a way of unsettling our complacency about the present, a stimulating revival of the sense in which historical forms of human relation are not “obvious,” “natural” or “given”. This applies equally to the core of the Mayan complex which is characterized by the presence of a “master” or even aristocratic class identifiable by their costumes (which are clearly coded as “sumptuary”: the conspicuous class display of sartorial luxury) and apparent enjoyment of leisure time. A beggar is collecting alms and holds a vessel up before a group of aristocratic young women, fanning themselves with elaborate

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<sup>63</sup> I employ the expression “social fact” here in the sense established by Durkheim as “ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him,” (3). See Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, ed. George E. G. Catlin, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John M. Mueller, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1938).

<sup>64</sup> Fellini is quoted (116) in Jon Solomon, “In the Wake of ‘Cleopatra’: The Ancient World in the Cinema since 1963,” *The Classical Journal* 91, no. 2 (1995-1996): 113-140. For discussion of Fellini’s phantasmagoric spectacle in relation to more conventional re-imaginings of Ancient Rome see Elena Theodorakopoulos, “*Fellini Satyricon*: ‘Farewell to Antiquity’ or ‘Daily Life in Ancient Rome,’” in *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2010), 122-144.

featherwork fans. Rather than giving to the poor, the trio looks on contemptuously and one uses it instead as a spittoon (see fig. 174).



Figure 173 *Apocalypto*: The slave mode of production



Figure 174 *Apocalypto*: The “master” class



Figure 175 *Apocalypto*: The slave auction

These initial spectacles of Difference (including the slave auction, see fig. 175) culminate in the ritual of human sacrifice which is surely foremost amongst those cultural practices that confront the post-Enlightenment, liberal, humanist, bourgeois, Western spectator as “barbaric.” Human sacrifice and its apparent “terrors” present extraordinary challenges to the *Verstehen* anthropologist. The passage through a painted tunnel into the temple complex demarcates the ritual from the mercantile spaces. In the temple complex, the density of ethnographic data within the frame increases dramatically, and the ability of the spectator to interpret this alien space is diminished by the pace of cutting. A certain jumping ritual takes place but we are not permitted the shot long enough to decode its significance (see fig. 176). A collective howl is unleashed by the mass in response to a gesture by an unseen priest. We cannot know its precise meaning. Totemic masks and forms of bodily adornment so graphically complex defy the spectator’s ability to grasp how they function. In the revelation of the alien life world of *The New World*, Malick’s pacing invited the spectator to participate in the activity of hypothesizing the “meaning” of cultural practices of the Other. The interpretive anthropologist (following Clifford Geertz) tries to assess how an act is meaningful from a certain culturally specific standpoint. This perspective

insists that all symbolic social and cultural acts have their own “logic.”<sup>65</sup> But here the sheer accumulation of alien practices overwhelms the spectator and the possibility of assimilating the Other to merely yet another “Self” is temporarily disabled. There is then something of the full drama, the complete electrifying dynamics of ethnological contact restored in this passage. Gibson, somewhat audaciously, is willing to admit the fundamental empirical assault of the alien life world upon the ethnologist. This is the most radical scene of ethnographic Otherness in the films surveyed, and surely amongst the most radical in the Hollywood tradition.



Figure 176 *Apocalypto*: Ethnological spectacle

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<sup>65</sup> See notes 27 and 34, chapter 4 above.



Figure 177 *Apocalypto*: Human sacrifice

This moment of crisis, with Jaguar Paw stretched out on the granite block preparing to receive the obsidian dagger (see fig. 177), is the pivot around which the film's narrative turns (yet another simulacrum of death and resurrection) from tightening collective and historical anxiety to the restitution of "self presence." Jaguar Paw is another privileged subject who comes to know and feel the historical contrast between the two modes of production. The eclipse appears to the Mayan priest as an omen that the desired equilibrium in the cosmos has been re-established and the remaining captives are no longer required. They are now de-sacralized and led to a killing court (beyond which lies the forest) where they serve for target practice. Gibson has stated explicitly that in conceptualizing the film, he was searching for a narrative structure that could function as a pure form of cinematic chase— the simple, unifying and quintessentially cinematic act of moving the body in space and time in relation to an overarching goal. The repulsion away from the world of the Mayan and the attraction towards the erotic world of the forest become the twin charging polarities of the chase.

So the collective forced march of the colonial holocaust inverts into the solitary return of the hero to the Rousseauist forest world. Back in the jungle, the scene



of his own sense of historicity, of knowledge and *habitus*, Jaguar Paw enacts a sequence of wish-fulfillment revenge acts upon the Mayan emissaries. At first, the forest is given an agency to intervene in the form of “omens” (the Mayan pursuers increasingly come to realize the “truth” of the prophecy uttered by the little girl). A jaguar first pursues Jaguar Paw only to substitute a Mayan antagonist at the last minute as its victim. Then a viper bites another member of the pursuing party. But slowly Jaguar Paw recovers his own agency. The medicinal bark of a tree is applied as a salve to the wound from the killing field. The waterfall jump (also taken from Mann’s *Last of the Mohicans* amongst other similar epics and bequeathed to Jake Sully in *Avatar*) is the turning point for Jaguar Paw’s recovered agency (another simulacrum of death, see fig. 178) and is signaled by the ritual statement of recovered identity (“I am Jaguar Paw. Son of Flint Sky... I am a hunter. This is my forest.”). Jaguar Paw’s quest is punctuated by yet another symbolic death and rebirth— he falls into an invisible pool of black quicksand (a re-enactment of that old staple of the Hollywood “jungle adventure” B-movie such as the *Tarzan* franchise). He is subsumed entirely by the liquid but re-emerges, covered in a cloak of mud, making him a spectral presence in the forest, symbolically enacting the totemic jaguar. It is again punctuated by another ritual statement of identity, this time accompanied by the critical release from the new forms of historical anxiety he has encountered (“I am Jaguar Paw. This is my forest. And I am not afraid,” see fig. 180). This hypothesized mastery over fear and anxiety as an existential condition is the key to the savage psyche which knows self-presence, and was bequeathed in a kind of patriarchal lineage to Jaguar Paw by his father in the opening scenes. Flint Sky’s (Morris Birdyellowhead) retains a radical degree of composure as his throat is slit by a member of the raiding party and appears to suffer no anxiety at his impending death (see fig. 179).



Figure 178 *Apocalypto*: The waterfall jump



Figure 179 *Apocalypto*: Flint Sky's radical composure at the moment of death



Figure 180 *Apocalypto*: Recovered identity

The technologies of the forest tribe now become the subject of cinematic pleasures and arousal. Firstly, a wasp nest serves as a deadly weapon. Then Jaguar Paw (his superior sensory capacities restored as an index of his ability to recuperate the older form of erotic, sensory being) spies a brightly coloured toad under a log. With the toad in tow and a few monstrously large thorns of a jungle vine, Jaguar Paw fashions a makeshift poison dart apparatus (see fig. 181). One by one, the Mayan pursuers are dispatched by increasingly ingenious methods. The last confrontation and wish fulfillment gratification offered by the film is the neutralization of the figure in whom the original *scandalon* was invested. The patriarchal orchestrator of the holocaust of the Rousseauist world, Zero Wolf (Raoul Trujillo), is impaled by the technology of the tapir trap.



**Figure 181** *Apocalypto*: The technologies of the forest

The final spectacle is the film's second instance of ethnological and colonial "contact" (see fig. 182). Jaguar Paw and the two remaining antagonists hurtle out onto the beach only to find Spanish ships anchored in the bay. On the boats making their way to the shore men bear an utterly alien sign: a large cross held aloft. The trio are momentarily rendered speechless as they behold yet another being of sheer Difference. Our own knowledge of the "future history" of the moment tells us that their astonishment is not misplaced: their world will be utterly transformed before long. But the proposition of this film is that the "perfidy" of history that ruptures certain Utopian climates of the pre-Columbian peoples in the Americas does not come from without. Instead history was already present within the New World at the moment of Columbian contact.



Figure 182 *Apocalypto*: The psychic assault of contact

Jaguar Paw saves his wife (Itandehui Gutierrez), son and newborn child from the womb-cave just as his wife is giving birth (the scenes of the Rousseauist world are replete with the maternal central-core imagery of female anatomy, in contrast to the decidedly patriarchal inflection given to Mayan society). “What are they?” his wife asks, “Should we go to them?” Jaguar Paw replies in the negative: “We should go to the forest. To seek a new beginning.” Jaguar Paw’s turning away from the gravitational pull of the ethnological Other signals the final wish fulfillment gesture of the narrative to turn away from the inevitability of history and attempt the restoration of the Utopian Rousseauist life world from an ever smaller “islet of resistance”<sup>66</sup> (see fig. 183). The gesture is no doubt utterly futile, but its Marcusean value lies in its *refusal*, its symbolic protest and the attempt to shelter a privileged life world that will, henceforth, only be available as a fantasy image. This collective desire to spurn the empirical

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<sup>66</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “Two motifs in the concluding lines: on the one hand, as with Rousseau, the theme of a necessary or rather fatal degradation, as the very form of progress; on the other hand, nostalgia for what preceded this degradation, an affective impulse toward the islets of resistance, the small communities that have provisionally protected themselves from corruption... a corruption linked, as in Rousseau, to writing and to the dislocation of a unanimous people assembled in the self-presence of its speech” (134).

movement of history will find even greater expression in the film to which I now turn.



Figure 183 *Apocalypto*: The retreat to the forest

#### 4.4 Ethnographic Nostalgia and Digital Phantasmagoria: *Avatar* (2009)

James Cameron's *Avatar* surely needs little by way of introduction and is undoubtedly a contentious object of study. It belongs in the lineage of *Dances with Wolves* and those narratives of ethnological contact in which the romance polarity is heavily accented. As such, a certain scholarly embarrassment attaches to its discussion. At the mere mention of its name, the conventional objections line up to register their disapproval. It is, according to Schuller, "a stunning example of the neoliberal culture industry," representing the "very worst aspects of Hollywood commodification."<sup>67</sup> To such vehement criticisms I would add its participation in the reactionary "blockbuster" production environment of the post-Spielbergian era and the economics of late capitalism (cinema in league

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<sup>67</sup> Kyla Schuller, "Avatar and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema," *Discourse* 35, no. 2 (2013): 189.

with finance capital in the neoliberal era).<sup>68</sup> I would also nominate its clear commitment to certain melodramatic and sentimental sensibilities (the romance mythos always attracting the “disapproval” of the “guardians of taste and learning” as Frye pointed out<sup>69</sup>). I will return to these critiques, but save to say for the moment that Jameson assures us that the *pensée sauvage*, the political unconscious, “necessarily informs all of our cultural artifacts, from the literary institutions of high modernism all the way to the products of mass culture” (*PU*, 64). Therefore, in spite of the influential diagnoses of the “culture industry” made by the Frankfurt School,<sup>70</sup> I wish to follow Jameson in suggesting that the Utopian impulse might not be limited to the objects of high modernism, but actually flourish, virtually undetected in the “degraded” products of mass culture.<sup>71</sup> Jameson suggests that in our contemporary historical climate, the registers of mass culture (especially sci-fi) are far more conducive to speculative or Utopian visions of human history than the more “respectable” and reified forms of realism.<sup>72</sup> If this is the case, it is surely worth attempting a theory of the

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<sup>68</sup> Bron Taylor and Adrian Ivakhiv note this common criticism (387) in “Opening Pandora’s Film,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2011): 384-393; see also Elsaesser, “Auteurism Today: Signature Products, Concept-Authors and Access for All: *Avatar*,” 283.

<sup>69</sup> Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> See note 4, chapter 4 above.

<sup>71</sup> See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 334: “Still, it has not seemed self-evident to those who came after the Frankfurt School that its conception of some deep Utopian force and instinct—the longing for gratification and fulfillment, the Utopias of childhood and memory, the *promesse de bonheur* inherent in the aesthetic as such, what will later on be evoked in a distantly related sense as Desire—need be limited to the works of high culture and have no relevance at all to the ‘degraded’ products of media entertainment” (334).

<sup>72</sup> See Jameson’s argument in *Archaeologies of the Future*:

...that our own particular environment—the total system of late monopoly capital and of the consumer society—feels so massively in place and its reification so overwhelming and impenetrable, that the serious artist is no longer free to tinker with it or to project experimental variations. The historical opportunities of SF as a literary form are intimately related to this paralysis of so-called high literature. The officially “non-serious” or pulp character of SF is an indispensable feature in its capacity to relax that tyrannical “reality principle” which functions as a crippling censorship over high art, and to allow the “paraliterary” form thereby to inherit the vocation of giving us alternate versions of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even imagined change. (270)

inner dynamics of this film even if only to account for its sheer magnitude as an economic phenomenon. It remains, after all, the highest grossing film of all time.<sup>73</sup>

So it must be admitted that *Avatar* offers the current project, for better or worse, an extraordinary opportunity for restaging the current hypothesis at a higher level of articulation. But whilst I will frequently note the recurrence of certain tropes, it is the departures to be found in both the form and content of *Avatar* from the films surveyed thus far which reveal the new “historical ground” upon which it stands in postmodernity or late capitalism.<sup>74</sup> I suggested earlier that much could be gleaned by tracing the transformations of this ideologeme across distinct historical environments, to witness what happens, as Jameson puts it, when “plot falls into history... and enters the force fields of the modern societies” (*PU*, 117). The keys to this operation are four shifts: the generic shift from the Western to science fiction and fantasy,<sup>75</sup> the temporal shift from a historical past to a speculative future, the imagistic shift from the celluloid image to 3D digital animation, and above all, the ontological shift from the order of the Real to that of the *simulacrum*.<sup>76</sup> What I wish to speculate is that, where Malick’s John Smith

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<sup>73</sup> At the time of writing, *Avatar*’s international box office is reported to be USD2.788 billion and it is consistently rated as the highest grossing film of all time (not adjusted for inflation). See “All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses” on Box Office Mojo, last modified 20 February 2017, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>.

<sup>74</sup> I take this to be broadly accepted periodization of our time following Jameson in *Postmodernism*.

<sup>75</sup> Jameson identifies the deep Utopian tendency of science fiction in *Archaeologies of the Future* as a genre in which “the SF writer is obliged to invent an entire universe, an entire ontology, another world altogether— very precisely that system of radical difference with which we associate the imagination of Utopia” (101).

<sup>76</sup> See note 3, chapter 4 above. See also Chris Klassen, “*Avatar*, Dark Green Religion, and the Technological Construction of Nature,” *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2012). Klassen argues that in *Avatar*, “though all representations of nature are necessarily constructed, in this instance the lack of referential index is significant,” and that “a simple engagement with the spectacle of the imagery cannot lead to any real world engagement with nature as the imagery of *Avatar* has no referential index” (78), which I take to approximate the notion of a *simulacral* reality.



was figured as the first historical figure to feel the pull of ethnographic nostalgia, Jake Sully will be the putative *last* in human history. Messiah-like, he will un-do history, repair the accident or *scandalon* diagnosed by the Rousseauist metaphysic and expel the colonial incursion in order to leave a “privileged” civilization *intact*.

Furthermore, the scholarly reception of *Avatar* is characteristically vexed by various ironies, paradoxes and internal inconsistencies. These are anchored in the central contradiction I have tried to bring to fore and that emerges clearly with the Western: the contradiction between savagery and civilization. It has been variously characterized as an anti-technology parable that is only made possible by the most “cutting edge” of cinematic innovations,<sup>77</sup> a profoundly ethnocentric film that masquerades as a critique of ethnocentrism,<sup>78</sup> a film which asks its audience to value an actually-existing world yet which retreats into pure fantasy (in the ultimate of all “infantile” gestures).<sup>79</sup> My initial contention would be that these observations express the difficulty that has been encountered in grasping that *contradiction* is at the heart of ethnographic nostalgia. The proliferation of these vexations suggests that it is a truly *dialectical* form of criticism that is here required. I have already made extensive use of Jameson’s dialectical proposition that it is possible, indeed imperative, to find both ideological impulses of domination and Utopian impulses of liberation or resistance concurrently necessarily at work within one and the same text. In this sense, the historical law of the dialectic was implicit in Lukács’ own focus on the contradiction at the heart of the Frontier. The “tragedy” of the Frontier was that

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<sup>77</sup> See Marsha S. Collins, “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s *Avatar* as Ecoromance,” *Mosaic* 47, no. 2 (2014): 10; Elsaesser, “Auteurism Today: Signature Products, Concept-Authors and Access for All: *Avatar*,” 297.

<sup>78</sup> Variations on this criticism abound. See for example, John G. Russell, “Don’t It Make My Black Face Blue: Race, Avatars, Albescence, and the Transnational Imaginary,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (2013): 211-213.

<sup>79</sup> Klassen quotes Slavoj Žižek’s criticism that “the end of the film should be read as the hero fully migrating from reality into the fantasy world— as if, in *The Matrix*, Neo were to decide to immerse himself again fully in the matrix” (83), in Chris Klassen, “*Avatar*, Dark Green Religion, and the Technological Construction of Nature,” *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2012): 74-88.

“those early colonizers who emigrated from England in order to preserve their freedom...themselves destroy this freedom by their own deeds in America” and the figures who “blazed the trails” of civilization found themselves “incapable of living in the conditions of this culture for which [they] had struck the first paths.”<sup>80</sup> This tragedy or contradiction, I argued, constituted something of the “dimly vibrating meaning”<sup>81</sup> at the core of the Western itself. To bring us full circle, Jameson has recently offered the striking proposition that it is in fact the Rousseau of the *Second Discourse* (in addition to being the origin figure for ethnographic nostalgia as a content) that indeed first discovers the necessity of the dialectic now not so much in the content of his philosophy, but rather in the form of his thinking, pre-empting the great discoveries of Hegel and Marx.<sup>82</sup>

So it is in a dialectical reversal that I will argue that the ultimate vocation of *Avatar* can be found. It has been conventionally assumed that in constructing the film’s fictional indigenous people (the Na’vi) Cameron speculates on actually existing colonized people subject to all manner of colonial conflicts around the globe. The post-colonial forms of critique then take this as the occasion to crystalize various ethico-political questions about representation (Cameron has made his desire to “raise awareness” of the plight of various Amazonian peoples, for example).<sup>83</sup> In other words, the film has been extensively interrogated for its relationship to and indeed complicity in very real forms of colonial domination. This, I will call following Jameson, its “ideological” moment (*PU*, 286).

But my proposition is that to read the film exclusively through a post-colonial critical lens misses the fundamental dynamic that I have attempted to illustrate in this dissertation. Through *Avatar* the (globalized) collective *pensée sauvage* now tries, in its hitherto fullest form, to figure through narrative a way out of the

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<sup>80</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 65.

<sup>81</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 145. See note 7, chapter 2 above.

<sup>82</sup> See note 72, chapter 1 above.

<sup>83</sup> Postcolonial critiques of *Avatar* abound: see as examples Schuller, “*Avatar* and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema,” 177-193; Gautam Basu Thakur, *Postcolonial Theory and Avatar* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Russell, “Don't It Make My Black Face Blue: Race, Avatars, Albescence, and the Transnational Imaginary,” 192-217.

“intolerable closure” of its historical situation (*PU*, 153) by speculating on a radically transfigured Self which can be only thought in the *guise* of an Other. Recalling that Lévi-Strauss argued that the ethnological encounter revealed the essential opacity of the Self to itself (or as he phrased it, the “I is an Other”<sup>84</sup>) Cameron, like Costner before him, will ask us to imagine a form of Other which becomes a transfigured “I”: a distorted figuration that carries within it latent speculations on a future form of Utopian subjectivity liberated from our current historical condition. *Avatar* as a fantasy system thus specifically addresses the “unhappy consciousness” of the age of “postmodernity” or late capitalism which has been variously diagnosed as one of deeply embedded *anomie* and *ennui*<sup>85</sup>; of alienating performances demanded by a suprapersonal capitalist political economy<sup>86</sup>; of the systemic diversion of the body away from or against its own drives; of the psychic dominance of quantifying and rationalizing mental functions<sup>87</sup>; of the dissolution of the “symbolic order” and the old exchanges of “signification” with “nature”<sup>88</sup>; indeed of the waning of historicity itself.<sup>89</sup> *Avatar* thus becomes the occasion for staging some of the most extravagant Utopian longings that have been implicit in the ethnographer’s nostalgia from the start. It hypothesizes in its own way the thoroughly scandalous proposition offered by Marcuse: that the “end” of human history— the Utopian institution of a form of society adequate to human potential— must appear somewhat paradoxically like the “beginning.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See note 133, chapter 1 above.

<sup>85</sup> *Anomie* is generally grasped as “an absence, breakdown, confusion, or conflict in the norms of a society,” see Scott and Marshall, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 19. For Durkheim’s influential discussions of the state of *anomie* as a misalignment between the individual and the system of social norms see Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, ed. George Simpson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952), 241-276.

<sup>86</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 89, 207, 208.

<sup>87</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 206.

<sup>88</sup> See notes 40 and 41, chapter 2 and note 49, chapter 4 above.

<sup>89</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*: “Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode [postmodernism] itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (21).

<sup>90</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*: “The only pertinent question is whether a state of civilization can be reasonably envisaged in which human needs are fulfilled in such a manner and to such an extent that surplus-repression can be eliminated.

As corroborating evidence for the Utopian function of *Avatar*, it is now useful to draw the reader's attention to a remarkable phenomenon highlighted in the literature. Holtmeier and Schuller call attention to the phenomenon of "Post-Pandoran Depression," an apparently overwhelming malaise that sets in for some spectators at the rolling of the credits of *Avatar*, and a corresponding compulsive desire to return to the sensuous realm of Pandora. Holtmeier describes the phenomenon in these terms:

The basic response of those who identified themselves as suffering from Post-Pandoran depression has been that, after viewing *Avatar*, their own world seemed lackluster... leaving the theatre is like waking up from a dream... The typical reaction to "re-immense themselves in the Pandoran World" and prolong the dream.<sup>91</sup>

The key repeated observation in the discussions of Post-Pandoran Depression is that spectatorship has the effect of inducing a neurotic failure of the psyche to successfully "re-accommodate" itself to reality. Schuller quotes "a fan named 'Mike'":

"Watching the wonderful world of the Na'vi made me want to be one of them. I can't stop thinking about all the things that happened in the film and all the tears and shivers I got from it. I even contemplate suicide, thinking that if I do I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora." Mike details the sensorial stimulation of sentimental cinema: the new image and the identification between the viewer's perceptive apparatus and that of the film's characters produce a familiar emotional reaction that trembles the frame and stimulates the passions. Other viewers

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Such a hypothetical state could be reasonably assumed at two points, which lie at the opposite poles of the vicissitudes of the instincts: one would be located at the primitive beginnings of history, the other at its most mature stage" (151).

<sup>91</sup> Matthew Holtmeier, "Post-Pandoran Depression or Na'vi Sympathy: *Avatar*, Affect, and Audience Reception," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2011): 416.

bemoan returning to a daily life that suddenly seems “gray,” “meaningless,” and “dying”— characteristics not dissimilar from the RDA station where Sully’s paraplegic body is bound. The end result of the new sensory engagements that parallel Sully’s experience on Pandora is less a feeling of sympathy than a sense of sensorial and emotional deprivation. The trauma of the response suggests a body that has been conditioned by the text to need precisely this form of sensorial stimulation and affective engagement...<sup>92</sup>

Here it is possible to detect the colloquial euphemisms for Freud’s great metaphysical conflict in the psyche between the pleasure principle and the reality principle: the former to be read in notions of “sensorial stimulation” of the “passions,” the latter to be read in the coerced “return to daily life,” the empirical weight of the bourgeois world as “gray” and characterized by “sensorial and emotional deprivation.”<sup>93</sup> The whole effect is predicated upon cinema as a privileged space for the stimulation of the pleasure principle. But the language of neurosis is now implicit in the newly “conditioned” demands of the psyche for “sensorial stimulation and affective engagement” after a “trauma”. In fact, the entire thematic is dramatically underlined by nothing less than Mike’s report of suicidal ideation. Undoubtedly the casual reports fail to meet the standards of positivistic psychology. But nevertheless, there is now the possibility, beyond mere personal assertion, that the stimulatory powers of

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<sup>92</sup> Schuller, “*Avatar* and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema,” 189.

<sup>93</sup> It is interesting to consider *Avatar* in relation to Lukács disapproval in *The Historical Novel* of narrative in which the past is imagined “decorative” and “exotic”:

What can art take from a past conceived in this way? This past appears, more so even than the present, as a gigantic iridescent chaos. Nothing is really objective and organically connected with the objective character of the present; and for this reason a freely roaming subjectivity can fasten where and how it likes. And since history has been deprived of its real inner greatness— the dialectic of contradictory development, which has been abstracted intellectually— all that remains for the artists of this period is a pictorial and decorative grandeur. History becomes a collection of exotic anecdotes. At the same time and again inevitably, as real historical relations are less and less understood, wild, sensual, indeed bestial features come to occupy the foreground. (182, see also 206)

Cameron's cinematic spectacle are quite significant indeed. My contention is that Schuller's hypothesis is misconceived and must be turned on its head. Schuller indicts the film for arousing such strong Utopian desires in the spectator to the point of "neurosis." Instead, I will argue, as with all these films discussed thus far, the ethnological spectacle functions to expand our historical imagination, helping us to conceive of radically different forms of existence and upon that basis, call into question the empirical present as we live it. In other words, the fantasy can be grasped as a standard in the light of which our present form of historical society stands condemned. For these purposes I will henceforth refer to the "Director's Cut" which contains certain scenes cut for theatrical release but which are indispensable to the analysis.

The film's first moments are purely aural: distant choral voices, followed by panpipes, call in a foreign language across the void of a black frame. We are introduced to the film's Leatherstocking-Westerner protagonist, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), in the opening aerial shot that immediately engulfs the spectator in an as-yet-unnamed "dream world" (as per Malick's *New World*) a mist-shrouded primordial rainforest which is derived from the formal conventions of the nature documentary (especially its recent innovations in high-resolution digital aerial cinematography, see for example, the BBC's franchise *Planet Earth* (2006), see fig. 184). The voiceover "dreams of flying" and is "free." We are also told that "Sooner or later, you always have to wake up." It introduces the relationship between the psychic mechanisms of the pleasure principle and its "dream world" which are now to be found in an inner realm fantasy and the wilderness, and the reality principle and the "resistance of the Real" which are now to be found in an outer realm of history and civilization, that will structure the film's vocabulary. This is but the latest guise taken by the Western's old dialectical interplay of the zones at the Frontier.



Figure 184 *Avatar*: Opening aerial shot

Sully's person is introduced crossing a street in a wheel chair. The setting is a scene that the Hollywood spectator knows well: a futuristic postmodern dystopia of the type most commonly associated with *Blade Runner* (1982)—the *société de consommation* in a hypertrophied form.<sup>94</sup> Sully moves through a pedestrian mall in this futurist metropolis, surrounded by a sensorium of consumer media images and simulacra, “freefloating signifiers” (*PU*, 78) which are now indistinguishable from the architectural fabric of the city. After his ejection from the bar, Sully looks up (enlivened by a violent encounter which is a derivative of the Western's saloon brawl) and witnesses a hallucinatory space of ephemeral consumer images, most notably (from the character's prone perspective) up into the genital zone of an animated female underwear model which appears unnaturally smooth and apparently sterile. It is a moment that speaks to the now familiar position of Barthes that in “the United States... sex is

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<sup>94</sup> See Wong Kin Yuen, “On the Edges of Space: *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell* and Hong Kong's Cityscape,” in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 98-111; Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke, “From Ramble City to the Screening of the Eye: *Blade Runner*, Death and Symbolic Exchange,” in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London and New York: 1997), 140-167; Scott Bukatmen, *Blade Runner* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 42-63.

everywhere, except in sexuality.”<sup>95</sup> The nature, function and structure of the genitals, I will come to suggest, will become increasingly integral to *Avatar*’s aesthetics.

Moreover, other early scenes support the proposition that the film is constructed very consciously in relation to the notion of the “simulacrum” of postmodernity. But now the regime of the simulacrum has escaped the limited confines of the image and colonized the body itself in the form of the “clone” (again the debt is to *Blade Runner*<sup>96</sup>). The fabric of the film is woven with “authentic fakes” now encoded in terms of biotechnology and genetic manipulation: in these opening scenes, Sully watches a nature documentary on the Bengal Tiger, brought back from extinction by cloning, in his decrepit bedsit. All of this is but the backdrop that (as per the brief scene of industrial immiseration of *Days of Heaven*) applies a metaphoric pressure on the ensuing narrative, to remind the spectator that the highest of stakes apply in the ensuing quest, the object of which is now the winning of a restored relation to human existence itself, amongst a degraded historical landscape, as the ultimate narrative “pay-off.” Sully is approached by two “men in black” and taken to identify his twin brother (the victim of urban violence) prior to his cremation. Shortly the issue of the “twin” figure will become of significant interest, but for the moment suffice it to say that the death of the twin clears the way for Sully to enter (passively, by sheer enervation and *ennui*) his own romance quest. So Sully accepts the invitation to “start a new life” on Pandora. The passage restages the moment of the historical emigration from

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<sup>95</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 29.

<sup>96</sup> Jameson posits this significance for *Blade Runner* in *The Archaeologies of the Future*: “*Blade Runner* then signals the passage from the classic or exotic alien to the representation of the alien other as the same, namely the android, whose differentiation from the earlier reboot secures a necessarily humanoid form. This may be said to be the moment of a kind of Hegelian self-consciousness or reflexivity in the genre, in which our attention and preoccupation as readers turn inward, and mediate on the “android cogito,” which is to say on the gap or flaw in the self as such” (141).



the Old World of Europe to the New, the passage from civilization to a simulacral wilderness, with the void of space now standing in for the Atlantic.<sup>97</sup>

The six year passage to Pandora in the coffin-like “cryo” capsule is the first simulacrum of death that Sully will perform. Its thanatic or deathly quality is subtly hinted at: “you don’t dream in cryo” (see fig. 185). Sully arrives on Pandora to learn of his new mission: he is to serve in the place of his deceased twin, as the “driver” of an “avatar,” a genetically engineered body combining the DNA of the “natives” with that of the “human” subject.<sup>98</sup> He is led into the

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<sup>97</sup> Fiedler notes in *The Return of the Vanishing American* that science fiction’s “space operas” were indeed well placed to envisage “a second, meta-America” in the form of an extraterrestrial encounter with a “New World” (27). *Avatar* would now surely be the supreme example of that phenomenon. Baudrillard also posits a relation between science fiction and the earlier colonial adventure narrative in *Simulacra and Simulation*, arguing that “Classical science fiction was that of an expanding universe... it forged its path in the narratives of spatial exploration, counterparts to the more terrestrial forms of exploration and colonization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (123).

<sup>98</sup> The Na’vi now represent the fusion of two major characterological developments or strategies: the figuration of the Native American Other and the development of the alien Other in science fiction. The latter process is described by Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*:

You may be aware that that it is only during the period of the emergence of SF into intellectual maturity in the 1960s, that the initial focus of Golden Age and pre-Golden Age narratives on space adventure and technology or science is displaced by and expanded to a larger concern with sociological and anthropological issues. This can be seen vividly in the history of the motif of the alien, which in the earlier period (and in the great B Science Fiction and horror films of the 1950s) remains an isolated monster, a kind of life aberration. It is not until the late 1960s that the representation of the alien comes to include a much more interesting ambition: the attempt to represent entire alien cultures or societies, to imagine what a whole alternative form of collective life might be like. It is the difference and distance between brain-eating pod people or carnivorous vegetable and the anthropological visions of a Le Guin or of Niven and Pournelle’s classic novel, *The Mote in God’s Eye* (1974). (323)

The Na’vi are surely amongst the most fully realized examples of an attempt to fully render a “whole alternative form of collective life.” For an extended discussion of the phenomenon see Albert Wendland, *Science, Myth, and the Fictional Creation of Alien Worlds* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Ziauddin Sardar, “Introduction,” in *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction*

laboratory towards this new body (see fig. 186). Here the logic of the twin or the simulacrum of the self (an “authentic fake” or a “real reproduction”) announces itself properly. The avatar body is, in fact, a “double twin” of the Self: a “copy” of his twin, who was himself a copy of Sully. Baudrillard ascribes this theoretical significance to the figure of the twin in *Simulacra and Simulation*:

Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.<sup>99</sup>



**Figure 185** *Avatar*: “You don’t dream in cryo”

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*Cinema*, ed. Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 1-17.

<sup>99</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 95.



Figure 186 *Avatar*: The techno-womb

The avatar is undoubtedly a distinct form of biological being: larger than human, blue, covered in markings, and with a feline tail. But the face is the key and there is a mild degree of the uncanny when the spectator is able to map the “real” face of Sully onto that of this new blue being. It is clear that all manner of strategies have been employed by Cameron’s team of concept artists to avoid the “uncanny valley” in which simulations of the human face become increasingly unsettling and repulsive as they move asymptotically towards appearing “real.”<sup>100</sup>

I would contend that the uncanniness of the image in which Sully first gazes upon his own avatar derives largely from the new technological capacity of digital image production to stage (in a somewhat literalized form) that radically destabilizing conceit that Lévi-Strauss read in the ethnological encounter: here we see the splitting or duplication of the Self into what will become an inner “natural” being and an outer “historical” being, now organized according to the logic of historical alienation and antagonism in the psyche. Sully’s Other will turn

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<sup>100</sup> See Yi-Hua Lin, “The Uncanny Valley on Technology and Modern Life,” *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2013): 455-460; James R. Hamilton, “The ‘uncanny valley’ and spectating animated objects,” *Performance Research* 20, no. 2 (2015): 60-69.

inside out, as it were, to become his Self. The “real” (human) Sully will remain enmeshed in the alienating regimes of civilization whilst the “unreal” (Na’vi) Sully, the “authentic reproduction,” will be offered the possibility of escaping those regimes. But the image suggests even further resonances with the hermeneutical scheme advanced so far: the avatar is first sighted slumbering in the amniotic fluid of a technological womb and as yet “born” or “awoken” into consciousness. This is of course the environment in which Freud tells us the foetus exists in blissful ignorance of the reality principle and the need to defer gratification. In the Freudian (and Marcusean) metaphysic, this primordial state of complete and unbroken gratification grounds both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic narratives of human existence: the climate of the womb in the case of the biological individual, and the climate of prehistory in the species.<sup>101</sup> The drive towards Utopia is anchored in and validated by the memory of unbroken gratification. It is then that childhood correspond symbolically to savagery: the state of emergence into being, where the reality principle is present, to be sure, but has not yet assumed its most oppressive functions, let alone its modification or hypertrophification according to the processes of history. For Derrida, both childhood and savagery belong to *non-supplementarity*, which is to say are Utopian states. So it is possible to map this image at the same time with Marcusean speculations, Baudrillard’s conception of the twin-double and the Lévi-Strausseau ethnological dialectic of the Self and the Other. Sully’s transfiguration will proceed precisely according to this dialectical process: his encounter will reveal a revived sense of “intimacy of the self” to a new form of

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<sup>101</sup> Jameson argues along Marcusean lines in an extraordinary passage of *Marxism and Form* that:

It is because we have known, at the beginning of life, a plenitude of psychic gratification, because we have known a time before all repression, a time in which, as in Schiller’s nature, the elaborate specializations of later, more sophisticated consciousness had not yet taken place, a time that precedes the very separation of the subject from its object, that memory, even the obscured and unconscious memory of that prehistoric paradise in the individual psyche, can fulfill its profound therapeutic, epistemological, and even political role: its “truth value” lies in the specific function of memory to preserve promises and potentialities which are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which are never entirely forgotten. (113)

Self and corresponding sense of alienating “strangeness” from an old form of Self.<sup>102</sup>

The film must perform one final manoeuvre before it can begin to roam outside the realm of the colonial mining settlement of “Hell’s Gate” and into the environment of Pandora. Colonel Quaritch’s (Stephen Lang) opening monologue rekindles the memory for the spectator of that oppositional ideologeme to which Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* overtly addressed itself— the Hobbesian spectacle of the state of savagery as the apotheosis of human immiseration. In this ideologeme, so central to any political philosophy descended from the British tradition (and subtly present in Pippin’s reading of *The Searchers*), Hobbes’ infamous dictum of “pre-civilized” life (the old conception of savagery which has of course been overturned by subsequent anthropological learning) as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” served as the alibi for the legitimation of the monarchical State itself (the “Leviathan”).<sup>103</sup> But in Quaritch’s monologue, it serves as a legitimation of civilization *qua* capitalist expansion, production and domination felt altogether as Marcuse’s “Promethean” heroism. The Colonel informs the newly arrived personnel that:

If there is a Hell, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora. Out there beyond that fence, everything that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes.

The speech not only co-ordinates the Hobbesian vision of the reactionary imaginary, but suffuses this with the old seventeenth century Puritanical ideologeme of the demonic wilderness beyond the Frontier as the land beyond the reach of God— Nature prior to its redemption at the hands of human praxis as the very realm of Satanic theology (according to Quaritch, the Na’vi retain this

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<sup>102</sup> I have suggested that we have already seen Baudrillard’s notion of the “imaginary power and wealth of the double” as the site at which “the strangeness and at the same time the intimacy of the self to itself are played out” through the Ethan-Scar relationship in *The Searchers*. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 95.

<sup>103</sup> See note 60, chapter 1 above.

Satanic charge: they use a neurotoxin that will “stop the heart in one minute,” and “they are very hard to kill”). Here is the second ideologeme (after the hyperdystopian *société de consommation*) against which the ideologeme of ethnographic nostalgia will perform its work.

With these two ideologemes structurally in place, the film can turn its attention to breaching the boundary of the Frontier. But the old spatial conceptuality of the Frontier is now duplicated in a bodily form: Sully must be encased in another coffin-like structure to “enter” his avatar body, whereby consciousness will come to know a new form of embodiment. The fact that this constitutes yet another simulacrum of death and rebirth alerts the spectator that they will now need to recall the entire apparatus of the romance mythos.<sup>104</sup> The symphonic ascent of James Horner’s score cues the spectator to the importance of this moment of transfiguration. Sully wakes as a “patient,” configured by science and its epistemological ally medicine, in a laboratory where the body will be quantified, rationalized and diagnosed. But Sully reacts instinctively against such regimes, and amongst the most electrifying sequences of the film is that in which Sully registers, for the first time, this transfigured sense of embodiment. Sully flouts the systemized sequence of biometric testing and instead stumbles outside into the daylight of Pandora, which is revealed for the first time at the human level. Enraptured, he sprints, bounds, leaps, jumps and swerves. He partakes in movement with no instrumental value except sheer sensory pleasure (in outright

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<sup>104</sup> Cameron’s re-articulation of the romance mythos as a Utopian vision in the science fiction genre would not have surprised Frye who notes in *The Secular Scripture*:

The great exception, the literary movement that was expected to seize on technology as its central theme, was assumed to be science fiction. But the way in which science fiction, as it has developed from the hardware fantasy into software philosophical romance, has fallen into precisely the conventions of romance as outlined here is so extraordinary that I wish I had the time and the erudition to give it a separate treatment. Visions of utopias, or properly running communities, belong to its general area; but, in modern science fiction, anti-utopias, visions of regression or the nightmarish insect states of imaginative embarrassment, must outnumber the positive utopias by at least fifty to one. (180)

defiance of protocol: Norm exclaims “We’re not supposed to be running”). Cameron saves the close-up to punctuate the revelation: Sully digs his toes into the earth (see fig. 189). The score clears out and the aural sensorium of the natural world floods in: this “hyper-earth”<sup>105</sup> “sings” through its birdlife and “hums” through its insects. It is the newly augmented or simulated Nature of Pandoran ecology heard by the ears for the first time. Dr. Grace Augustine, the head of the mission’s anthropological-cum-scientific operations, (Sigourney Weaver) already knows of the sensory ecstasy of the first avatar embodiment and tosses him an indigenous fruit, which can be taken as a subtle gesture towards the origin point of the gustatory libido as well as our immense visual libido as biological anthropology now hypothesizes that colour vision evolved in response to the chromatic signals emitted in the archaic evolutionary environment by fruits and flowers.<sup>106</sup> The aesthetic qualities of Cameron’s digital image— its saturation, clarity, its kinetic qualities and indeed the 3D spectacle itself— are deployed in the service of a singular goal, the sheer re-discovery of the originary fullness of the senses themselves after their long history of diminution. The spectator, if the reports are correct, is enraptured.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of Pandora as a “hyperreal” Earth see Klassen, “Avatar, Dark Green Religion, and the Technological Construction of Nature,” 81-86.

Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation* that the “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1).

<sup>106</sup> See Sarah Bunney, Steve Jones, Robert Martin, and David Pilbeam, eds., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Evolution* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 112.

<sup>107</sup> For reports of affective experiences of the film see David Denby who reflected in his review in *The New Yorker* of January 4, 2010 that “James Cameron’s *Avatar* is the most beautiful film I’ve seen in years,” republished in *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 63; Collins, “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s *Avatar* as Ecoromance,” 110; Taylor and Ivakhiv survey various reports of spectatorial “ecstasy” in “Opening Pandora’s Film” (391); Cynthia Erb, “A Spiritual Blockbuster: Avatar, Environmentalism, and the New Religions,” *Journal of Film and Video* 66, no. 3 (2014): 9; Miriam Ross, “The 3-D Aesthetic: Avatar and Hyperhaptic Visuality,” *Screen* 53, no. 4 (2012): 394; Elsaesser, “Auteurism Today: Signature Products, Concept-Authors and Access for All: *Avatar*,” 293.



**Figure 187** *Avatar*: The first experience of the senses



**Figure 188** *Avatar*: Wonderment at embodiment





Figure 189 *Avatar*: Terrestrial existence

Of course, the film maintains an alibi for Sully's ecstatic euphoria: his paraplegia. The invocation of yet another contentious historical form of experience—the “disabled” subject—is another site for some to critique the ethics of representation.<sup>108</sup> But this narrative justification of Sully's sensory rapture is surely the alibi for a far more compromising speculation. Marcuse argues that capitalism has historically required the systematic divestment of the body's capacity for pleasure in order to extort the requisite social and economic performances. The result has been that the whole bodily *dispositif* has itself been historically dulled, desensitized, and diverted from its inherent capacities for pleasure and drives towards gratification. I have also noted repeatedly that for Derrida, Rousseauist savagery is the state of both the first language and the first passions. But to this we must surely add, as evidenced by this scene, the experience of joy at the registration of first bodily sensations, of sheer wonderment at sensory capacity itself (see fig. 187 and fig. 188). Recalling that one of the most scandalous colonial observations in the Age of Discovery was of

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<sup>108</sup> Schuller, “*Avatar* and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema,” 182-186.

the apparent integrity, strength and health of the “savage” body,<sup>109</sup> I suggest that we are seeing a fantasy spectacle of the body newly liberated from the constrictive *habitus* of post-industrial capitalism (precisely at a time when we are discovering the degree to which “white collar” working conditions are a major source of mass metabolic dysfunction across the “developed” global populations<sup>110</sup>).

The next day, Sully’s helicopter excursion into this simulacral environment, the Pandoran rainforest, is a montage of effects that play on the old aesthetics of the natural sublime (the mountain environment, the waterfall, the epic animal migration and other tropes).<sup>111</sup> But I would rather foreground another feature of this excursion. Whilst Grace and Norm collect data for the scientific mission, Sully wanders off to have a private encounter with Pandoran biology on a smaller scale: he wanders into a grove of spiral-form plants whose fronds are decidedly alien in form (although apparently based on the tubeworm, a form of ocean-dwelling creature). They are also an unusual orange-pink colour, given that they invite categorization as a plant (see fig. 190). The colour and receptivity to touch suggests that they are instead a highly vascular tissue optimized for maximum sensory receptivity. In fact, both Pandora’s fauna and flora everywhere display a kind of pan-genitality whereby structures, even whole bodily structures, take on the qualities of the genitals themselves.<sup>112</sup> Almost

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<sup>109</sup> See note 78, chapter 1 above. Rousseau notes in the *Second Discourse* that: “The reports of travelers are filled with examples of the strength and vigor of men from the barbarous and Savage Nations; they scarcely praise their skill and agility any less, and since it takes only eyes to observe these things, there is no reason not to trust what eyewitnesses report on this score.” (*SD*, 194)

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Sharon Parry and Leon Straker, “The contribution of office work to sedentary behaviour associated risk,” *BMC Public Health* 13, no. 1 (2013): 296-306; Chu, A. H. Y., Ng, S. H. X., Tan, C. S., Win, A. M., Koh, D., Müller-Riemenschneider, F., “A systematic review and meta-analysis of workplace intervention strategies to reduce sedentary time in white-collar workers,” *Obesity Reviews* 17, no. 5 (2016): 467-481.

<sup>111</sup> See note 47, chapter 3 above.

<sup>112</sup> Due to his history with the *Alien* franchise, Cameron would of course be familiar with H.R. Giger’s designs which equally display a genital quality, however, in that diegetic world, the forms of the alien appears thanatic or dedicated to death and pain rather than pleasure. See Clarke, “Aliens 1986,” in *The Cinema of James Cameron*, 57-74; see John L. Cobbs, “‘Alien’ as an Abortion

every leaf on each plant species is characterized by a protrusion, depression, fold or membrane designed to exchange sensory stimulation. The membranous features of the various animal species appear to serve the same function. Wings, fans, flaps, bulbs, webbed structures and sheer glistening, naked, amphibious skin abounds. Marcuse suggests that stimulation becomes “pleasure” when the structure receives that sense-data that it was “designed” (or evolved) to receive in order to serve the prolongation of life.<sup>113</sup> Pleasure here is then something like an original biological “language” of organic communication. The simulation of Nature on Pandora (as a vision of the West, of the Americas) envisions a biological object-world in which every surface appears inherently erotic. The body (not only of the Na’vi but all species in its ecology) in Pandoran nature retains its “original” capacity as an object of *cathexis*, a structure for the reception of pleasure. This supplemented nature, I contend, constitutes a collective fantasy of a form of inherently pan-erotic or pre-genital form of experience, which preceded our own “civilized” historical experience of genital sexuality and might re-emerge again in a Utopian future. This is one of the strongest loci of Marcuse’ Utopian speculations about the future body:

No longer used as a fulltime instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized. The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become

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Parable,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990): 198-201; Russell, “Don’t It Make My Black Face Blue: Race, Avatars, Albescence, and the Transnational Imaginary,” 194.

<sup>113</sup> See Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*:

The culture-building power of Eros is non-repressive sublimation, Freud’s definition of Eros as striving to “form substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development” takes on added significance. The biological drive becomes a cultural drive. The pleasure principle reveals its own dialectic. The erotic aim of sustaining the entire body as subject-object of pleasure calls for the continual refinement of the organism, the intensification of its receptivity, the growth of its sensuousness. (211)

an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed— an instrument of pleasure.  
(*EC*, 201)

Such a vision appears to be preserved in this fantasy of Pandoran nature and more specifically, as I shortly demonstrate, in the body of the Na'vi.



**Figure 190** *Avatar*: A vascular, alien plant species

The primacy of the plant and Pandora's simulated "hyper-botany" which displays a tendency towards libidinal exchange (or *cathexis*) gestures towards another pervasive structure within this fantasy system and its image vocabulary. The entire allegorical content of *Avatar*'s narrative can be understood as organized around another pair of symbolic terms— botany and metallurgy. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida identifies the significance of the botanical order for the Rousseau's metaphysic:

That botany becomes the supplement of society is more than a catastrophe. It is the catastrophe of catastrophe. For in Nature, the plant is the most natural thing. It is natural life. (*OG*, 148)

In the speculative historical anthropology of the *Second Discourse*, the society that has yet to find lack in the world of the botanical does not yet know this “catastrophe” of history, of extreme domination and alienated labour. Therefore it is crucial that in the fantasy mode that the Na’vi (as one tribe of the “species” of the Omaticaya) finds its foods, technologies and medicines in the forest and its botanical resources. Cameron repeatedly figures the Na’vi in a complex, ritualized and symbolic relation with the botanical resources of the forest which appears to meet Na’vi needs entirely. This is encapsulated in the image of “Hometree,” as the botanical order provides even the necessary architecture to shelter, integrate and unite the people into a single functioning and symbolic collectivity.

However, in order to function as a sign system, the botanical order must be organized in an antagonistic relation to the mineral or metallurgical order. Derrida continues:

The mineral is distinguished from the vegetable in that it is dead and useful Nature, servile to man’s industry. When man has lost sense and the taste of true natural riches—plants— he rummages in the entrails of his mother and risks his health. (*OG*, 148)

Derrida continues by quoting Rousseau on the relation between historical alienation and metallurgy:

The Mineral kingdom has nothing in itself either amiable or attractive; its riches, enclosed in the breast [womb—*sein*] of the earth, seem to have been removed from the gage of man in order not to tempt his cupidity; they are there like a reserve to serve one day as a supplement to the true wealth which is more within his grasp, and for which he loses his taste according to the extent of his corruption. Then he is compelled to call in industry, to struggle, and to labor to alleviate his miseries; he searches the entrails of earth; he goes seeking to its center, at the risk of his life and at the expense of his health, for imaginary goods in place of the real good

which the earth offers of herself, if he knew how to enjoy it. He flies from the sun and the day, which he is no longer worthy to see.... (OG, 148)

Derrida continues:

And let us not forget that the violence that takes us toward the entrails of the earth, the moment of mine-blindness, that is, of metallurgy, is the origin of society. For according to Rousseau, as we shall often confirm, agriculture, marking the organization of civil society, assumes the beginning of metallurgy. (OG, 149)

The Na'vi are marked by this metaphysical and originary state of "savagery"—human existence prior to metallurgy and agriculture (whilst they appear to be "hunter gatherers" they do also practise animal husbandry). On the other hand, the form of society that has lost "sense" in the moment of "mine-blindness," that knows extreme forms of domination and alienated labour is the order of the multinational (now extraterrestrial) corporate capitalism. This symbolic vocabulary contextualizes the narrative's alibi (or equally its "MacGuffin," the empty object-goal that motivates its *agon*) for the insatiable *telos* of colonial domination, capitalist expansion and the production principle: "Unobtainium" as a parody symbol for the *fetish* of metallurgy (see fig. 192). Returning briefly to *The New World*, it was apparent that this vocabulary was implicit in American historicity from the outset (see fig. 191). As soon as the colony of Virginia was founded, mining began and failed. There are of course corresponding motifs in the narratives of Hispanic colonial domination (for example, the mirage of "El Dorado").



Figure 191 *The New World*: The failure of the mining operation



Figure 192 *Avatar*: The fetish of metallurgy

Yet at this stage of the narrative (as we have not met the Na'vi yet) the sense in which the wilderness of Pandora is an outer “demonic” realm has not yet been fully negated. After meeting the first species of alien plant, Sully is pursued by a predatory “thanator” (a beast that appears as an amphibious panther and whose name announces its symbolic relation to death and predation). He is separated

from the party, must jump, headlong, off the cliff (a simulacrum of death trope directly taken from *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Apocalypto*, see fig. 193) and becomes lost in the forest. The environment of Pandora now displays a dual orientation that can be explained by reference to Frye's study of the romance mythos (recalling that I have suggested all along that the romance mythos provided the literary structure onto which the encounter with the Native American Other in the wilderness has been grafted). It appears to be both a "higher" dream world of sublime simulacral nature, heightened sensory stimulation and erotic intensity. But when night descends, it inverts into a "lower" or demonic world of nightmares and anxiety in which Sully's survival is deeply precarious (see fig. 194).<sup>114</sup> For a certain brief moment, the night-forest of Pandora appears to approximate the vision of a "Godless" wilderness of seventeenth century Protestantism.<sup>115</sup> A pack of "viperwolves" "haunts" Sully. These are encoded as "demonic," in the sense they appear to combine the ethical category of "evil" with the object category of "animal". Much like the thanator, their surface is calculated to inspire sub-cognitive affect charges of repulsion and disgust. In this primordial forest of renewed existential anxiety beyond the Frontier, (as per Tompkins observation) the sheer drive to survive demands everything of the Westerner-hero, and Sully takes up a torch in a vain attempt to drive off a predatory and hostile nature.

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<sup>114</sup> See Frye, *The Secular Scripture*: "On the lower reaches of descent we find the night world, often a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows where the forest has turned subterranean, and where we are surrounded by the shapes of animals. If the meander-and-descent patterns of Paleolithic caves, along with the paintings on their walls, have anything like the same kind of significance, we are here retracing what are, so far as we know, the oldest imaginative steps of humanity" (111).

<sup>115</sup> See note 33, chapter 2 above.





**Figure 193 *Avatar*: The waterfall jump**



**Figure 194 *Avatar*: Hostile and predatory entities in the night-forest**

It is in this moment of narrative crisis, that we first encounter an “authentic” member of the Na’vi. Sully is at first “hunted” by Neytiri, the daughter of the tribal leaders of this band of the “Omaticaya” and therefore analogous to the figure of Pocahontas (played by Zoe Saldana). It is, of course, abundantly clear that the Na’vi rewrite the Hollywood representation of various pre-Colombian

peoples in a fantasy or science fiction register: they display features of the North American First Nations, indigenous Amazonian peoples and also the various Meso-American civilizations (notably the Mayan and the Aztec). As the emissary of the indigenous society, Neytiri goes to execute Avatar-Sully. But a delicate botanical entity intervenes and touches upon the tip of her arrow, at which point Neytiri decides to intervene and save him from the viperwolves. Having dispatched the viperwolves, the forest begins to turn inside out, as it were, yet again: with the torch forcibly extinguished, Sully is inducted out of the demonic night-world into an enchanted scene of radical bioluminescence. Neytiri, in killing the final yelping viperwolf, returns the scene to familiar territory—the symbolic order that constitutes the relation between the human and the animal Other. In dispatching the beast with a knife to its heart, Neytiri speaks to it (subtitles are strategically denied to us). The Na’vi appear also to practise a form of ritual engagement with Nature that would always seek to equilibrate its relation by an exchange of “significations.”<sup>116</sup>

I have already suggested that a key aspect of the ethnographic vocabulary that renders it amenable to transcription into the codes of the romance mythos is the apparent “enchanted” quality of the indigenous life world. The ability to read the “text” of the environment manifests to reified Western consciousness as an opaque, and even “magical,” ability. In the speculative realm of science fiction and fantasy, this suspicion develops into a relation between the Na’vi and a sentient Pandoran biology in which botany “speaks” in the form of “signs” or omens (see fig. 195). Where the landing of the wood sprite on the arrow tip saved Avatar-Sully from execution, the motif is repeated some minutes later on the tree limb. Sully’s body forms a beacon upon which the wood sprites converge and rest. Sully’s outstretched arms now encode the character in unmistakably Christ-like imagery (reminiscent of Dunbar’s martyrdom in *Dances with Wolves*).<sup>117</sup> The signal functions analogously to the old “magical” prophecies and

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<sup>116</sup> See note 40, chapter 2 above.

<sup>117</sup> This is a highly contentious and indeed scandalous image for many as it evidences a certain “white messiah complex,” an ideological narrative pattern which colonial heroes appear as salvational figures in colonial struggles. For examples of this criticism, see Taylor, “Opening Pandora’s Film,” 387; Russell,

oracular proclamations of the romance mythos in its classical and feudal incarnations, endorsing Sully's narrative with future significance from the outset. The "will of Eywa" (the name given to Pandoran ecology personified in the form of a figurative deity<sup>118</sup>) requires interpretation and avatar-Sully must be presented before the "people," but not before his capture at the hands of the homosocial band of Na'vi "warriors."



Figure 195 *Avatar*: The "sign" of Nature

Meanwhile, the social world of the dystopian, hyper-capitalist corporate entity that is colonizing Pandora is characterized by the hypertrophification of all those processes that made up "civilization" in the Western, but Weber's processes of bureaucratization and rationalization appear even more pronounced.<sup>119</sup> The

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"Don't It Make My Black Face Blue: Race, Avatars, Albescence, and the Transnational Imaginary," 211; Elsaesser, "Auteurism Today: Signature Products, Concept-Authors and Access for All: *Avatar*," 291-292.

<sup>118</sup> Collins interprets this figuration as related to the "Gaia hypothesis" and a contemporary "ecological consciousness," in "Echoing Romance: James Cameron's *Avatar* as Ecoromance," 104; for a further discussion of the spiritual figuration of the Na'vi see also Klassen, "*Avatar*, Dark Green Religion, and the Technological Construction of Nature," 74-88; Erb, "A Spiritual Blockbuster: *Avatar*, Environmentalism, and the New Religions," 3-17;

<sup>119</sup> See notes 20 and 105, chapter 2 above. For Weber's canonical discussion of the characteristics of bureaucracy as a mode of organizing human collective

*mise-en-scène* of the operation control room is invested with all the spatial and architectural strategies of corporate bureaucracy (combined with the radial plan and surveillance strategies derived from Jeremy Bentham's "panopticon" in which the neoliberal managerial class on a central platform can survey the working surfaces of employees in all directions,<sup>120</sup> see fig. 197). But a telling element appears in the office of the head of the mining operation, Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi). Scattered about the room are the kind of vitrine that one finds in the natural history museum organizing and classifying Na'vi material culture (bodily adornments, weapons, etc.) under glass (see fig. 196). This invocation of the spatial and architectural language of the post-Enlightenment museum gestures towards that climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in which capitalism has dissolved even the possibility of a "symbolic order."<sup>121</sup> In this climate, Baudrillard claims that:

...mummies don't rot from worms: they die from being transplanted from a slow order of the symbolic, master over putrefaction and death, to an order of history, science, and museums, our order, which no longer masters anything, which only knows how to condemn what preceded it to decay and death and subsequently to try to revive it with science.<sup>122</sup>

It is not the mummy that "rots" or suffers a symbolic death from such a transplantation to the order of the museum, but the old libidinal, artisanal artifacts as the material trace of the life world of the Na'vi. The spatial strategy of

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activity see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, Hans Gerth et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 956-958.

<sup>120</sup> For Foucault's well known discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a disciplinary structure see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), 195-230; see Anne Brunon-Ernst, ed., *Beyond Foucault: New Perspectives on Bentham's Panopticon* (Farnham and Burlington VT: Taylor and Francis, 2012).

<sup>121</sup> For a discussion of the historical development and ideology of the museum see Steven Conn, "Between Science and Art: Museums and the Development of Anthropology," in *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 75-114; Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>122</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, 10.

the vitrine is mirrored on a larger scale in the colony's detention facility. In the contemporary cinematic imaginary, the dystopian space designed to deny the liberty of the body (to condemn it too to "death and decay") is no longer the dank and dark feudal dungeon, but the brightly-lit, terrarium-like observation cell or vitrine in which the body is held within a grid drawn from the visual vocabulary of Francis Bacon.<sup>123</sup> The vitrine and the dungeon-terrarium lead inevitably back to the anthropological museum itself—the encasement of the simulacrum of man within a vitrine, the condemnation of man to an Enlightenment order of death and decay. I have already suggested that the ethnographic "naturalism" of *The New World* and *Apocalypto* is to some extent descended from this form of colonial spectacle.<sup>124</sup> But where the ethnological tableau of the natural history museum (the American Museum of Natural History in New York City stands as the archetype, with its "Hall of the Plains Indians," amongst other tableaux) was static, the cinematic image puts the life world *in movement* and this is a key innovation of the history of the image of the ethnological Other. The association brings a revived sense of hesitation and suggest the degree to which that the cinematic image is but a new form of "vitrine" that safely "neutralizes" the Other.

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<sup>123</sup> Consider the appearance of this architectural motif in other popular, recent Hollywood films such as *Skyfall* (2012), a recent installment of the "James Bond" franchise, in which the villain, Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem), is held in a brightly-lit glass prison.

<sup>124</sup> For a reflection on the politics of the contemporary anthropological museum spectacle, see Huhndorf, "Rituals of Citizenship: Going Native and Contemporary American Identity," in *Going Native*, 199-202.



Figure 196 *Avatar*: The museum vitrine



Figure 197 *Avatar*: The control room

On the other hand, Na'vi sociality is imagined very much along the lines I have traced in the films discussed so far. It is a Rousseauist micro-society of a people united within earshot of the privileged “crystalline” speech. The voice is always paramount and writing is absent. Upon the arrival of the bulldozers, Dr. Augustine is told “You do not speak here.” Sully later proclaims “I am Omaticaya.

And I have the right to speak.” It is defined by its social transparency: the refrain that governs Na’vi sociality is to “see” the Other, as a symbolic recognition of the integrity of a “true,” authentic Selfhood of the Other. Sully comes to know a village life which coordinates the metabolic and social functions— sleeping, eating, hunting and one presumes sexual activities— by incorporating them into a social field (the spaces and rituals of life within “Hometree”) of equilibrated collective performances that have not yet been strategically dismembered, rationalized and privatized into reified spheres of the “personal” or “private” and “public.” Sleeping, for example, still takes place in a space of the collective, in hammocks amongst the branches, as it did in the tipi of the Sioux in *Dances with Wolves*.



**Figure 198** *Avatar*: The integrated social field of Hometree

Once he is inducted into Na’vi sociality, Sully’s transmogrification can begin. It is the Old West’s ability to warp the proto-ethnologist’s subjectivity under the climate of the indigenous life world now writ large. It was often noted in the time of the film’s release that it “merely” re-wrote *Dances with Wolves*, and the observation contains a degree of truth. Dunbar’s ethnological transformation is the prototype for what takes place here in a critical montage. The images cut together the spoken language lesson (“The language is a pain,” see fig. 199), the

new regimes of bodily movement and coordination (“My feet are getting tougher”), the “re-wiring” of the sensory apparatus to “fit” the object world of the forest (“Everyday it’s reading the trails, the tracks at the waterhole, the tiniest scents and sounds”) and the reduction in antagonism between psyche and body (“I have to trust my body to know what to do.”). Most tellingly however, Sully’s days start to “blur together.” The insertion of the Self into the savage order retrieves the experience of time felt as *flow* and *jouissance*, time undivided by memory and anticipation, the time of Rousseau’s “reveries” (*OG*, 249). The narrative prepares the groundwork for the dramatic revelation of latent identity by a chiasmatic structure. Sully reports to the videologue (yet another Rousseauist “confession” of an unwilling ethnologist): “Everything is backwards now. Like out there is the true world, and in here is the dream.... I barely remember my old life. I don’t know who I am any more” (see fig. 200). It is in this passage that the film comes closest to evoking that greatest and most impossible of Rousseauist dreams: to return to a time and form of being before the arrival of the climate of history and alienation, shedding the old, wounded and solitary ego damaged by civilization and re-constituting an originary, inner “natural” Self as something like Adorno’s notion of *Versoehnung* (reconciliation).<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See note 95, chapter 1 above. Collins appears to agree with this reading, observing that of *Avatar* (as appropriate to romance) “ends on a joyous upswing of *anagnorisis* (discovery), recovered or rediscovered identity, and the satisfying restoration of family, community, and cosmic order— homecoming on a grand scale,” in “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s *Avatar* as Ecoromance,” 116.





Figure 199 *Avatar*: The language lesson



Figure 200 *Avatar*: The Rousseauist "confession"

The ability to hunt and make a "clean kill" (ritually equilibrated by acknowledging the spirit of the animal) clears Sully's ritual progression to the next phase of Na'vi being: the erotic-totemic relation to the banshee through *cathexis* or libidinal exchange (the banshees are encoded according to the triple categorization of dragon (feudal or medieval Romance), dinosaur (positivistic

science), and Quetzcoatl (Meso-American mythology)).<sup>126</sup> It is surely noteworthy that the film entertains, apparently in clear view, erotic relations between species through the phallus-like, sensory capacities of the hair braid structure (“*tsaheylu*,” see fig. 201). But just as the interspecies relation of predation must be equilibrated in the hunting rituals of the Na’vi, so too the erotic relations of animal husbandry are not those of simple domination. Sully’s ritual of forging *tsaheylu* with his own banshee is itself apparently “equilibrated” (the banshee also performs an act of choosing) and the ritual itself balances the erotic with the thanatic (the banshee’s erotic “choice” will be expressed in the defensive strategies of the undomesticated animal that knows only undivided self-preservation instincts). Sully aptly sums up the negotiation (“Let’s dance”) but the ritual veers unmistakably close to an act of sexual violence. The forging of *tsaheylu* is sealed with a moment of orgasmic union, the pupils of the animal-subject dilate, the iris colour flares and the intake of breath is sharp. The horse husbandry vocabulary of the Western (which was always totemic), and its transporting, euphoric, kinetic potential is now apparently rewritten as erotic dragon-husbandry.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The hike to the cliff-top rookery of the banshees now functions as an “ascent” sequence as appropriate to the romance mythos according to Frye’s scheme in *The Secular Scripture*: “Romance, in any case, eventually takes us into the great Eros theme in which a lover is driven by his love to ascend to a higher world. This ascent is full of images of climbing or flying, of mountains, towers, ladders, spiral staircases, the shooting of arrows, or coming out of the sea on to an island” (151).

<sup>127</sup> See Tompkins, *West of Everything* for a sensitive appreciation of the role of horse husbandry in the Western (89-110).



Figure 201 *Avatar: Tsaheylu*

Moreover, the Na'vi appear to corroborate a hypothesis offered earlier, namely that the savage order is imagined through an “aesthetic-erotic” body that is “painted.” In fact, in the hyper-ecology of Pandora, nature itself appears painted, addressing its surfaces to the eye, to the pleasure principle and the visual libido. We already saw that in *The New World* the warrior-figure is painted with ritual markings from the swamp (see fig. 202). But the hyper-nature of Pandora has a somewhat psychedelic aesthetic to it: the aesthetics of the 1960s and the hallucinatory LSD experience in digital iridescence, the explosion of “unnatural” colours (glowing turquoise, electric cerulean blue, acid yellow, chartreuse green, and violet) which in art are themselves dependent on the discovery of the petrochemical pigments of modernity, but already occur in the iridescent structures of biology (the butterfly wing, the bird-of-paradise, etc.). This biological surfacehood that solicits the attention of the visual libido is now continuous with a cultural surfacehood of painted skin which is continuous with or an extension of the object order of Pandoran Nature. The “augmented” design of the Na'vi skin expresses this essential contiguity: the Na'vi are “naturally” imbued with a graphic regime inscribed upon the body in a subtle pattern of tiger-like stripes. They then overlay this surface with the body painting of totemic significance. Sully is painted in Keith Haring-esque patterns when he is

initiated (“born again”) and becomes “Omaticaya” (see fig. 203). Even Pandoran meteorology is equally rendered as a digital painted surface (in the manner of “New Age” psychedelic folk art of the cosmos) with Polyphemous as a giant graphic figure in the sky, and flaming digital sunsets seem to be answered by the fire-pattern figuration of the Great Lenopteryx (see fig. 204).



Figure 202 *The New World*: The aesthetic body



Figure 203 *Avatar*: Becoming Omaticaya



Figure 204 *Avatar*: Pandoran nature appears “painted”

By these twin features of structural genitality and painted surfacehood, Desire appears to be profoundly “liberated” in this simulacrum of Earth, to flow through and animate Nature in a somewhat erotic fashion. *Tsaheylu* (not just transpecies) is possible with the botanical order too: Sully and Neytiri enter into sensory relations with the “Tree of Souls” which now is the structure by which they detect the transhistorical social “data” of Na’vi ancestors decrypted as crystalline voices that chant from the past. Quaritch implicitly understands this pan-biological, and pan-social, eroticism. His “intel” on the “Tree of Souls” gives him the power of threatening castration (He will have the Na’vi “by the balls”). So it is then appropriate that Cameron rewrites the Pocahontas narrative at the Tree of Souls by figuring the erotic union of Sully and Neytiri. Cameron must now go some way to negotiating the degree to which gender domination is present in his fantasy anthropology. Neytiri states that Sully may now “choose a woman.” The initial suggestion is that Na’vi historicity knows patriarchal domination. She lays out options. Ninat is a “good singer,” a skill coded feminine. However, the next option is Peyral, a “good hunter,” a skill coded masculine. But the transformation of Sully into the order of the fantasy savage has rekindled in Sully’s subjectivity an intuitive Utopian ethics of gender reciprocity and equilibrated social exchanges. He replies that he has already chosen, but that “this woman must also

choose me.” This time *tsaheylu* takes on most obvious erotic charge. It is, as we suspected, a structure by which heterosexual coupling is achieved. Erotic relations for the Na’vi are then also “supplemented.” Presumably there is some form of genital contact, but the process is augmented by the additional *cathexis* of *tsaheylu*. The attachment of the Cooper-Smithian figure of Sully with the Pocahontas figure of Neytiri is the structural midway climax of the film’s narrative— there are “mated for life before Eywa”<sup>128</sup> (see fig. 205). But just as Smith introduced the ruse and perfidy of history into the crystalline monogamy of his captivity (and thereby into the Powhatan life world), so will Sully introduce the ruse and perfidy of the “lie” into the crystalline sociality of the Na’vi. It must be noted that the arrival of history comes with the insertion of adultery into Na’vi social relations, as Sully ruptures the kinship system by which Neytiri and Tsu’tey (the preeminent warrior of the tribe, played by Laz Alonso) were themselves to be mated.

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<sup>128</sup> This is the final example of a non-repressive monogamy or *Eros* in which desire has not yet been riven by the wandering vagaries that moves from object to object, attaching and detaching itself (analogous to the experience of time as flow), see note 35, chapter 4 above. It is interesting to note that the figuration of the Pocahontas narrative joins forces with another trope identified by Jameson in science fiction, the erotic relation between man and alien in *Archaeologies of the Future*: “But the moment of the android is also the moment of the emergence or intervention of a new narrative twist or fold, namely that of the love interest between human and alien. It is this which will be perpetuated in the third moment I hypothesize here, when in the mid-eighties... or in the nineties.... The SF plot veers into perversion, and sexual intercourse with the alien becomes a figure for everything non-normative or deviant or taboo in human society” (141).



Figure 205 *Avatar*: The fantasy of a crystalline monogamy

Once the relation between Sully and Neytiri has been consummated, the full bad consciousness of the colonial emissary dawns, as the Lukácsean and thoroughly dialectical realization of the Frontier hero: Sully realizes that the paths he struck will now allow civilization to destroy the “freedoms” he has come to enjoy. His allegiance must now switch from the culture of the Self to the culture of the Other, the colonial force must be neutralized. But where there was no such neutralization was available to the *pensée sauvage* in the narrative of *Dances with Wolves*, *Apocalypto* or *The New World* (both Dunbar and Jaguar Paw retreat to ever smaller “islets” of anti-colonial resistance), the transplantation of this content to the generic structure of fantasy-science fiction, now thoroughly *speculative* in its narrative operations, allows for a new wish-fulfillment function to emerge: the full negation of the order of civilization, the overturning of history as the inexorable and violent passage from one mode of production to another. I argued earlier that such a proposition could never arise into lucidity in the classical Western, it was quite literally *unthinkable* to the genre, except in the deepest recesses of generic nostalgia and in the paradox of being “saved from the blessings of civilization.” But it is to such an end that the narrative *denouement* of *Avatar* will work through a cascading sequence of what Aristotle would call *peripeteia*, or dialectical reversals in plot.

The first such reversal occurs when Sully inadvertently makes a confession to the Quaritch and Selfridge in the videologue: “They’re not gonna give up their home. They’re not gonna make a deal. For what? Light beer? Blue jeans? There’s nothing that we have that they want.” The failure to stimulate consumer desire in the Other now kindles a deep anxiety in the colonial culture of the Self by revealing the historicity and contingency of those desires (which were not at all “natural” after all, but as Marxist theory would suggest, they are the result of historical “programming,” mere decoys or “substitute gratifications” for otherwise intolerable injuries to being). If this is correct, the ideological legitimization narrative for new forms of globalized colonial domination (the relentless “modernization” of all peoples, everywhere) under the banner of expanding global capitalist productivity turns out to have been an ideological ruse all along. Meanwhile, the revelation of Sully’s fore-knowledge of colonial destruction inserts the betrayal, the ruse, the perfidy of the lie as false sociality into the climate that does not know the false utterance, in which “seeing” the Other is ritually affirmed as the basis of sociality (Having revealed his mission to infiltrate the Na’vi life world and having been ex-communicated, he reflects he states reflectively: “Outcast. Betrayer. Alien. I was in the place the eye does not see.”) He is unmasked by Tsu-tey as a “demon in a false body.” The relation to Neytiri is ruptured. The apparently unbreakable social bond of Sully’s Omaticaya identity is broken by the dawning awareness of the qualitative nature of Sully’s betrayal. In fact, Na’vi sociality requires now the absolute social expulsion of the alien being by ritual execution, as the next scene shows Grace and Sully upon the scaffold, bows at the ready.

Following the insertion of a new form of historical perfidy, the destruction of Hometree now rewrites the holocaust trope we have already seen in *The New World* and *Apocalypto*. Genocidal arson is the chosen weapon in the violent transition from one mode of production to another forcing the radical dislocation of the people to an inner islet of resistance at the “Tree of Souls.” Quaritch’s glee at the spectacle of the destruction of Hometree from atop his helicopter of course plays upon the grisly Vietnam-era geopolitical ironies inscribed in the iconic



“Ride of the Valkyries” sequence of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*.<sup>129</sup> Civilization appears poised to extinguish the life world of the colonized peoples as it did in our own empirical history.



**Figure 206 Avatar: The Holocaust scene**

But the narrative has already set up the mechanism by which Sully’s “betrayal” might be overcome or remedied: a totemic, ritualized equilibration in the form of *tsaheylu* with the “Great Leonopteryx” (this plot point rewrites the potentially apocryphal “ruse” with which Cortes apparently infiltrated the Aztec civilization. Montezuma is said to have believed that Cortes was Quetzcoatl, the Serpent God, incarnate<sup>130</sup>). Upon his reappearance at the Tree of Souls as Toruk Makto (“Rider of Last Shadow”), Sully is readmitted into the collective and addresses it a final time in the crystalline speech of the Rousseauist micro-society, in which all members of the Na’vi are assembled in self-presence, within earshot of the voice. Certain post-colonial readings indict the film for perpetuating narrative

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<sup>129</sup> In discussing Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993), Jameson argues that helicopters have functioned as “the very symbols of war and death, of human devastation” (210) since the Vietnam War. See Fredric Jameson, “Altman and the National-Popular, or, Misery and Totality,” in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 205-220.

<sup>130</sup> Collins, “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s *Avatar* as Ecoromance,” 109.

figuration in which the colonial outsider renews the possibility of hope by calling for what the Na'vi apparently cannot: social solidarity with the other Omaticaya clans (at this point, the appeals to Eywa look hopeless and ineffective as mere religious "mystification").<sup>131</sup> In the climactic final sequences, the film's narrative apparatus marshals its entire libidinal charge of energy to stage an alternate, taboo speculative history in which the Na'vi and associated Omaticaya clans (as "First Nations") successfully unite and repel colonial intervention. This is where the ideologeme's generic leap from the Western to science fiction is of essential import. There is no question, in the internal logic of the Western's diegesis, of escaping the inevitable and binding empirical history of the constitution of the United States as a corresponding annihilation of the life worlds of the indigenous peoples. But no such constraint now impedes the narrative of *Avatar*, and the speculative capacities of the romance mythos to envisage the continuation of a privileged life world, sheltered from the historical passage to other more alienating forms of historical existence, appears liberated.

However, it is not even Sully's call to social solidarity amongst Omaticaya that will allow the narrative to surmount the forces of colonial invasion. It is instead the agency given to the bio-religious figuration of "Eywa" (surely a figure of Baudrillard's "sign of Nature" as a "metaphor of freedom and totality"<sup>132</sup>). Only a pan-biological or trans-species solidarity is able to effect this collective wish-fulfillment function. The antagonistic relation between humanoid order of the Omaticaya and the animal order is temporarily overcome by Sully's appeal and the animal order apparently now fights to neutralize the arrival of a new form of history. The thanator offers itself to Neytiri (see fig. 207). The moment is significant because if we can detect in this narrative an embarrassingly obvious figuration of the Freudian metaphysical conflict between Eros and Thanatos, the very emblem of the death drive temporarily suspends its operation and supplicates itself to acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of Eros (now the privileged term of the binary) as organic life that strives to "form living

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<sup>131</sup> It is here, no doubt, that the charges of a "white messiah complex" advanced by many postcolonial readings of the film appear to find their traction. See note 117, chapter 4 above.

<sup>132</sup> Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 56.

substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development” (EC, 211).



Figure 207 *Avatar*: The Thanator supplicates itself before Neytiri

Finally, the conflict with Quaritch is critical to the ideological configuration of the narrative. As in the Western, the final climactic “showdown” is between two forms of being that both have access to a “martial” form of self-presence— which I have already suggested manifests as a psychic mastery over pain, anxiety and death. In fact, Sully’s receptivity to ethnological transformation lay in his prior history as a marine (a disfiguration of the old social function of “warrior” in an alternate historical climate). Sully is encoded as a Westerner-hero according to Wright’s ethico-metaphysical schema, *good: strong: outside society: wilderness*. Quaritch is coded differently to the old Outlaw who remained outside society. The adversary of the Westerner-hero is now *bad: strong: inside society: civilization*. He adopts the fetishized, augmented, metallurgical and mechanically-supplemented body that must be read in relation to Cameron’s *Terminator* franchise<sup>133</sup>. And so, in order to be symbolically neutralized he cannot be

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<sup>133</sup> For discussions of the Terminator as “cyborg” see Hassan Melehy, “Bodies without Organs: Cyborg Cinema of the 1980s,” in *The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004), 315-319; Doran

dispatched by the metallic knife but rather with a brightly painted arrow from Neytiri's bow, the object by which the Native American announced its spectral presence in the Western.



Figure 208 *Avatar*: Quaritch dispatched by the arrow

So it is that this “drift” in narrative registers from the Western to fantasy-science fiction allows the apparent inevitability of imperial capitalism’s annihilation of various global indigenous life worlds to be shrugged off and that moment in history—savagery as an imagined, metaphysical “originary identity of being” which Derrida admitted is only *nearly* impossible<sup>134</sup>— is allowed to continue, free of that “fatal accident” of history that Rousseau diagnosed in the *Second Discourse*. In 1755 Rousseau prophesied, before all the learned inhabitants of a

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Larson, “Machine as Messiah: Cyborgs, Morphs and the American Body Politic,” in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 191-204; Clarke, “The Terminator (1984)” and “Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991),” *The Cinema of James Cameron*, 35-56 and 89-102.

<sup>134</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “They speak [pages of the *Reveries*] the sorrow of time torn in its presence by memory and anticipation. The pleasure [*jouissance*] of a continuous and inarticulate presence is a *nearly* impossible experience.... Rousseau experienced this nearly impossible state on the Island of St. Pierre.” (OG, 249)

cosmopolitan Paris in a society utterly unprecedented in human history, that man would come to entertain a new notion:

You will look for the age at which you would wish your Species had stopped. Discontented from your present state, for reasons that herald even greater discontents for your unhappy Posterity, you might perhaps wish to be able to go backward; And this sentiment must serve as Praise of your earliest forbears, the criticism of your contemporaries, and the dread of those who will have the misfortune to live after you. (*SD*, 133)

*Avatar* now enacts, before a global audience, just such a fantasy of “stopping” the species. The expulsion of the colonial forces from an entire planet stages the great Utopian fantasy gesture of “delinking” or secession from the movement of empirical history (see fig. 209).<sup>135</sup> The Na’vi, having expelled the colonial force with their society intact, escape the glass coffin of the vitrine, but, of course, not the ontological frame of the cinematic image itself. They come to resemble Baudrillard’s distinctly Rousseauist parable of the Tasaday, by which he negatively diagnoses the regimes of our own historical era of postmodernity:

Ethnology brushed up against its paradoxical death in 1971, the day when the Philippine government decided to return the few dozen Tasaday who had just been discovered in the depths of the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries without any contact with the rest of the species, to their primitive state, out of reach of colonizers, tourists and ethnologists. This is at the suggestion of the anthropologists themselves, who were

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<sup>135</sup> Jameson posits this significance for the act of “de-linking” in the Utopian travel narrative in *Archaeologies of the Future*: “Whatever else it does, travel narrative marks Utopia as irredeemably other, and thus formally, or virtually by definition, impossible of realization: it thus reinforces Utopia’s constitutive secessionism, a withdrawal or ‘delinking’ from the empirical and historical which, from More to Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, problematizes its value as a global (if not universal) model and uncomfortably refocuses the readerly gaze on that very issue of its practical political inauguration which the form promised to avoid in the first place” (23).

seeing the indigenous people disintegrate immediately upon contact, like mummies in the open air.

In order for ethnology to live, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being “discovered” and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it.<sup>136</sup>

The unique *frisson* of *Avatar*'s narrative must come from the fantasy that the grasp of civilization (late capitalism, but also “science” and its ensuing form of death, the death of the symbolic order) could be heroically eluded. Such a transcendence of death itself (the Utopian moment) is implicit in the film's final scene of Sully's transubstantiation.

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<sup>136</sup> See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*:

It is against this hell of the paradox that the ethnologists wished to protect themselves by cordoning off the Tasaday with virgin forest. No one can touch them anymore: as in a mine the vein is closed down. Science loses precious capital there, but the object will be safe, lost to science, but intact in its “virginity.” It is not a question of sacrifice (science never sacrifices itself, it is always murderous), but of the simulated sacrifice of its object in order to save its reality principle. The Tasaday, frozen in their natural element, will provide a perfect alibi, an eternal guarantee.

The Indian thus returned to the ghetto, in the glass coffin of the virgin forest, again becomes the model of simulation of all the possible Indians from before ethnology. This model thus grants itself the luxury to incarnate itself beyond itself in the “brute” reality of these Indians it has entirely reinvented— Savages who are indebted to ethnology for still being Savages: what a turn of events, what a triumph for science that seemed dedicated to their destruction! (7)



Figure 209 *Avatar*: Expulsion as Utopian “de-linking” or “secessionism”

Sully’s confessions end in a final videologue transmission that is presumably a communication without a receiver. Lévi-Strauss speculated that the anthropologist’s “confession” (reminiscent of Freud’s radical postulate of the “talking cure” as the path to stabilizing a neurotic psyche) is an exercise in self-unravelling (*JF*, 36). Derrida calls it a “literary suicide” (*OG*, 143). The narrative has already prepared the scene with the attempted resurrection of Grace in the form of her avatar body (in this first instance, the ritual fails). The ritual by which consciousness is transubstantiated from one body to another is now a moment of reconciliation with “Eywa.” The “disenchanted,” scientific consciousness of Grace longs to be dialectically re-enchanted, re-colonized by a science that has inverted back into a bio-religion (she reports at the moment of reunion, “I’m with her Jake. She’s real,” see fig. 210) The camera flies over into the rocky grotto of the Tree of Souls where the ritual takes place: the people are re-integrated into a “whole” transpersonal structure, now rhythmically undulating in concentric circles, a figuration surely that tries to grasp Freud’s notion of religious experience as that “oceanic feeling” whereby the ego dissolves

and its subsumption into collective “energy” is felt as sheer existential relief.<sup>137</sup> The historically alienated form of Sully dies and an “authentic reproduction” is born (the “plenitude of presence returning to itself”<sup>138</sup>) into the body of the savage “twin,” the ethnographic Other.

Baudrillard suggested that the twin, the double or the *doppelgänger* was in fact already the apparition of death:

Everyone can dream, and must have dreamed his whole life, of a perfect duplication or multiplication of his being, but such copies only have the power of dreams, and are destroyed when one attempts to force the dream into the real.<sup>139</sup>

Sully’s “authentic copy” has, in the logic of the film, left the realm of the dream and indeed become (hyper)real. Sully’s final subjection to Na’vi ritual and the (maternal-spiritual) powers of the collective perform the Utopian transfiguration that had been so desired since those first ethnological observations of the Age of Discovery: the rediscovery of a body, a society, a political economy in which human consciousness once again felt itself to be “at home,” and which is now only available to our own epoch as an image, a hallucination, in the form of an “aesthetic anthropology.” Sully’s transubstantiation is the logical conclusion to the extended sequence of death simulacra that we have seen and makes the implicit desires of ethnographic nostalgia clear (see fig. 211). For now it is the very figure of resurrection itself, rebirth into another form of being, a Utopian vision built from the old structures of the romance mythos and the new historical content of ethnological encounter that dares to venture a vision of a

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<sup>137</sup> See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 8-14. Freud describes it as “a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole” (9).

<sup>138</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “Essence is presence. As life, that is, as self-presence, it is birth. And just as the present goes out of itself only to return to itself, a rebirth is possible which, furthermore, is the only thing that permits all the repetitions of origin. Rebirth, resurrection, or reawakening always appropriate to themselves, in their fugitive immediacy, the plenitude of presence returning to itself” (310).

<sup>139</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 95.



“future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced” (*PU*, 96).<sup>140</sup> The narrative is replete with dialectical dynamics: the order of the simulacrum has inverted to become a recuperated form of Real, a colonial history has become a salvational future, a state of immiseration has been unmasked as one of plenitude, an order of botany has been salvaged from an order of metallurgy, Eros itself has re-asserted itself over Thanatos, and the process of dying has turned inside out to become a form of metaphysical re-birth.

In fact, the figure of the alien-savage comes to represent an ingenious solution to an old problem in Utopian thought for our present moment. Jameson articulates, in the context of the generic development of science fiction, a “fundamental Utopian dispute about subjectivity”:

...namely whether the Utopia in question proposes the kind of radical transformation of subjectivity presupposed by most revolutions, a mutation in human nature and the emergence of whole new beings; or whether the impulse to Utopia is not already grounded in human nature, its persistence readily explained by deeper needs and desires which the present has merely repressed and distorted. As we have implied in some of the preceding chapters, this is a tension which is not merely inescapable; its resolution in either direction would be fatal for the existence of Utopia itself. If absolute difference is achieved, in other

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<sup>140</sup> Jameson is discussing Frye’s theory of the romance mythos:

Frye’s theory of romance, as has been suggested, is the fullest account of this genre as a mode. Romance is for Frye, a wish-fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced. Romance, therefore, does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality (as in mystical experience, or as might be suggested by the partial segments of the romance paradigm to be found in the idyll or the pastoral), but rather a process of transforming ordinary reality: “the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality.” (*PU*, 96)

words, we find ourselves in a science-fictional world such as those of Stapledon, in which human beings can scarcely recognize themselves any longer... On the other hand, if Utopia is drawn too close to current everyday realities, and its subject begins too closely to approximate our neighbours and our politically misguided fellow citizens, then we slowly find ourselves back in a garden-variety reformist or social-democratic politics which may well be Utopian in another sense but which has forfeited its claim to any radical transformation of the system itself.<sup>141</sup>

The hybrid figure of the alien-savage now allows the narrative to figure a form of being that negotiates this central tension as yet another “character solution” to the otherwise insoluble contradictions identified in the Western. As ethnological Others, they are recognizable as a form of human subjectivity. They are figuration of an imagined past that makes itself known to us through the aching, archaic demands of those “deeper needs and desires which the present has merely repressed and distorted.” Yet as aliens, they are also “whole new beings,” that like all extraterrestrial humanoids, seem to come from the future as a “mutation of human nature.” For Sully, that is where his world ultimately lies and from which we are precluded by the impenetrable act of transubstantiation. In other words, they invite an inherently contradictory type of categorization as simultaneously “Self” and “Other,” past and future, Identity and Difference. And so, it is my contention that the laboratory of the imagined ethnological encounter, which dramatically enacts the interpenetration of these categories with which we began, has been unmasked for what it was all along: a privileged space for witnessing the extraordinary Hegelian spectacle of *contradiction*, or the ultimate Identity of the terms identity and non-identity.<sup>142</sup> The terms Self and

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<sup>141</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 168.

<sup>142</sup> In this extraordinary passage of *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson parses the “most momentous single reversal in Hegel’s entire system”— the revelation of contradiction— in these terms:

Thus in the most famous chapter of the *Greater Logic*, Hegel tells us how to handle such potentially troublesome categories as those of Identity and Difference. You begin with Identity, he says, only to find that it is always defined in terms of its Difference from something else; you turn to

Other have finally inverted such that the Other has become a Self and the Self has become an Other (see fig. 212). This Utopian vision of a future subjectivity turns around the contradiction between the Self and Other that is first revealed by Rousseau: that these categories cannot, in fact, be held stable as separate dispensations.<sup>143</sup>

This proposition is no doubt scandalous and decidedly ambiguous when laid bare. It has been characterized as nothing less than the insertion of the colonizer's body into the body of the colonized and therefore redolent of all manner of noxious colonial violence.<sup>144</sup> And so we must return to the ultimate structural necessity of the co-mingling of the Utopian and ideological impulses at work within the same text, as the Utopian vision can never be imagined directly. The proposed transformation of subjectivity must quite literally, remain unthinkable. Derrida appears to corroborate this dialectical thesis with his

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Difference and find out that any thought about that involve thoughts about the "identity" of this particular category. As you begin to watch Identity turn into Difference and Difference turns back into Identity, then you grasp both as an inseparable Opposition, you learn that they must always be thought together. But after learning that, you find out that they are not in opposition; you find rather, that in some other sense, they are one and the same as each other. At that point you have approached the Identity of identity and non-identity, and in the most momentous single reversal in Hegel's entire system suddenly Opposition stands unveiled as Contradiction. (454)

<sup>143</sup> A final quotation of Lévi-Strauss' momentous reading of Rousseau is in order:

This methodological rule which Rousseau assigns to ethnology [that "one must first see differences in order to discover characteristics"] and which marks its advent also makes it possible to overcome what, at first glance, one would take for a double paradox: that Rousseau could have, simultaneously, advocated the study of that particular man who seems the closest— himself; and secondly that, throughout his work, the systematic will to identify with the other goes hand in hand with an obstinate refusal to identify with the self. These two apparent contradictions, which resolve themselves into a single reciprocal implication, must be resolved, at one time or another, in every ethnological career. (*JF*, 35)

<sup>144</sup> Schuller, "Avatar and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema," 186, 190.

insight into the *Second Discourse* that the most vehemently *anti-ethnocentric* text is in fact indistinguishable from the most profoundly *ethnocentric*.<sup>145</sup> I have tried to suggest that the implacable ethical denunciations of existing critiques fail to grasp that *Avatar* speaks to a time when we have all become, as Baudrillard suggests, “living specimens in the spectral light of ethnology, or of antiethnology, which is nothing but the pure form of triumphal ethnology.”<sup>146</sup> My contention is that in the future, *Avatar* might come to be regarded as a moment in which our now global collective *pensée sauvage* sought around in desperation for any available form of figuration by which it could imagine itself out of from under the sheer empirical weight of our contemporary “unhappy consciousness,” the “intolerable closure” of the historical moment of late capitalism.<sup>147</sup>



Figure 210 *Avatar*: “I’m with her Jake. She’s real.”

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<sup>145</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: “One wonders if Rousseau, conforming to a schema that we now know well, does not criticize ethnocentrism by a symmetrical counter-ethnocentrism and a profound Western ethnocentrism: notably by claiming that harmony is the evil and the science proper to Europe” (212).

<sup>146</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 8.

<sup>147</sup> Jameson offers the supporting observation in *Archaeologies of the Future* that “Utopias are very much wish-fulfillments, and hallucinatory visions in desperate times” (233).



Figure 211 *Avatar*: The fantasy of transubstantiation



Figure 212 *Avatar*: The alien-savage as twin self-other

## 5. Conclusion: *The Revenant* (2015) and the Nietzschean Turn

*What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.*

— Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*

It is a theoretical commonplace nowadays to vehemently critique and resist the pull of any form of nostalgia: whether it is drawn on a scale that is personal, historical, or metaphysical. The argument runs that nostalgia is a kind of shelter from reality itself, from the implacable immediacy of the here and now and the necessity of facing up to its empirical sovereignty. In parsing *Avatar*, the analysis has come full circle and arrived back at those “defamations” from which I initially tried to distance the current project. From the beginning, the issue of the poetic preference for the savage order in the American imaginary has been haunted by the fear that ethnographic nostalgia nurtures a pathological and neurotic relationship with the reality principle (most notably in Leo Marx’s denigration of the “infantile” wish-fulfillment aspect of American “primitivism”<sup>1</sup>). It is seen to encourage an inability to “confront” the “resistance of the Real” and to accommodate the mind to the experience of our own fallen history as “what hurts” (*PU*, 88). It is seen to foster a corresponding retreat of the psyche into modes of fantasy and mystification (recalling Mike and his “post-Pandoran depression”). In *Avatar*, the fantasy-romance polarity is so heavily accented,<sup>2</sup> and the countervailing ideological functions of divestment, diversion and resistance so weak, that we may say that Cameron virtually removes the resistance and censoring functions of “the Real” altogether. This is evidenced by the fact that it begins to merge with, or resemble, children’s cinema in which it is far more

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Collins’ reading appears to corroborate the central function of the romance mythos. Collins, “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s *Avatar* as Ecoromance,” 103-119. However, I contend that Collins’ tendency to read the film in ethical terms, as a contest between “good” and “evil” (105), suffers from the weaknesses I identified earlier.

acceptable to forcefully suspend the reality principle.<sup>3</sup> Yet *Avatar* suggests that ethnographic nostalgia continues to manifest as a major ideologeme in the cultural life of our epoch with extraordinary results.<sup>4</sup>

But I have wanted to pose an alternate conception of nostalgia which views its powerful forms of affect from a somewhat different angle. Nostalgia, as the “ache” to “go home,” anchored in the memory of the past, can be grasped less as a mystifying illusion than as yet another “scanning device” (not dissimilar to Desire itself, by which Jameson suggested the text “scans” the resistant surface of the Real) by which it is possible to detect that the fundamental experience of loss and change are genuine, that history is, in fact, real. Nostalgia alerts us to the fact that historicity— whether of the individual and biographical type, or collective and civilizational type— involves the transition between radically different states, each characterized by extreme forms of lived, structural contradiction. Nostalgia informs us that as old forms of contradictions recede into the past and new forms of contradiction emerge into existence, certain aspects of subjectivity are indeed lost. Perhaps the great existential source of nostalgia is ultimately anchored in the experience of a personal, biographical form in which the subject feels joy and exhilaration at existence (*jouissance*) as a child, but loses it irrevocably in maturity in the pursuit of mastery and power (*puissance*).

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<sup>3</sup> *Avatar* brings this analysis very close to the related realm of children’s cinema, which has, unsurprisingly, yielded its own set of mass cultural objects that display a heavy investment in this ideologeme. It was, for example, noted in the popular press at the time of the release of *Avatar* that it displayed a particular debt to *Fern Gully* (1992), an animated children’s feature set in the rainforests of North Eastern Australia, which recoded ethnographic nostalgia back into the older language of “magical” creatures such as the “fairy.” In a national imaginary such as the Australian, in which the self-presence of the ethnological Other is unavailable, the generic language of “magic” re-emerges to serve the same structural function. But there are other notable examples, including Disney’s treatment of the ideologeme in *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Brother Bear* (2003) which focuses on a the interaction of an indigenous, pre-Colombian North American tribe and its mythical totemic animal-spirits.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that, at the time of writing, four forthcoming sequels will reportedly complete Cameron’s cycle of films.

It is this impression and its censoring function (the “defamation” of fantasy identified by Marcuse) that I have sought to suspend in order to uncover what might animate the “dimly vibrating meaning” at the “core” of this persistent figuration. But having done so, it is impossible not to return to the possibility that in parsing *Avatar*, Rousseau has come to stand for everything that is problematic and alarming about ethnographic nostalgia as both a Utopian impulse towards the future and a longing for the past. It appears as naïve, facile, sentimental, infantile, neurotic, “unreal,” and metaphysical.<sup>5</sup> Jameson himself has stated that Rousseau has been nothing less than an “embarrassment” for Marxism (as he has been apparently “for almost everybody else”).<sup>6</sup> No doubt spurred by the vehement accusations of post-structuralism, the traditions of Rousseauist critical discourse thus turn back upon Rousseau as a kind of liability in the intellectual marketplace (a reversal that would not have surprised the man himself, in his paranoid and relentlessly pessimistic years of later life). The fact that such figuration encourages fantasies about a selectively idealized past and a

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<sup>5</sup> A classical example of the scholarly denigration of Rousseau is furnished by Fiedler who observes in *The Return of the Vanishing American*:

Just as it can be shown that the clerisy of Spain was thrown into a missionary frenzy by the reports of the early explorers [in America], so it can be demonstrated that the French intellectual community was shocked into a kind of scientific cultural relativism by the first accounts of Indian life, that even in Montaigne (“*chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n’est pas de son usage...*”) the seeds of the *Encyclopédie* are already germinating. Reflecting on the Indians of “*la France Antarctique*,” which is to say, present day Brazil, he reacts like a true scientist confronted with a new subject for study; he recognizes, in fact, that the invention of America implies the invention of a new science: the systematic investigation of the other man, the other culture.

Like a good anthropologist, at any rate, he collects native songs and artifacts, engages in conversations with returned explorers and recently imported “native informants”— attempts finally to define and specify a difference without prejudging it. If anything, he leans over backwards trying to escape his own cultural limitations; he permits himself to become of a paradox which almost betrays him into the sort of sentimental self-hatred we associate with Rousseau: civilization is more savage, more barbarous than natural, natural man the real gentleman.  
(41)

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 231.



Utopian future renders it utterly unacceptable to the British philosophical tradition (Hobbes himself establishing such anti-speculative tendencies when he stated that “the present ought always to be preferred, maintained and accounted best; because it is against both the law of nature, and the divine positive law, to do anything tending to the subversion thereof.”<sup>7</sup>).

Therefore we must accept that the content I have discussed here stands as a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Ethnographic nostalgia, like “infantilism is... a Utopian trait, attractive as it is alarming.”<sup>9</sup> But I have also tried to convey a sense in which it also betrays our deepest collective longings and allows us to imagine, in a figurative form, something other than what empirically exists. In doing so, I have attempted to re-affirm the characterization of the “political unconscious” as a collective thought process by which the structural contradictions of lived experience which cannot be brought into abstract, lucid conceptualities must inevitably (at least for this moment of history) remain submerged within the semi-conscious realm of narrative or aesthetic representation (*PU*, 64-65). Yet I hope it has become clear that the Continental tradition with its dialectical embrace of contradiction offers us a plethora of conceptualities through which to apprehend this zone of cultural life in postmodernity. In the end, no amount of ethical castigation from non-dialectical thought appears to be able to critique it out of existence: the ideologeme appears to persist with a maddening durability and persistence. Instead, I have suggested that we need to grasp it as an ideologeme that draws its ongoing power from the structural and historical contradictions (the “paradoxes”) inherent in “civilization” itself.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 367.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Sinnerbrink who offers a reading of *The New World* as displaying a “knowing” rather than “naive” Romanticism as a way of negotiating this central tension. Robert Sinnerbrink, “From Mythic History to Cinematic Poetry: Terrence Malick’s *The New World* Viewed,” *Screening the Past* 26 (2009), accessed 20 February 2017, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2015/01/from-mythic-history-to-cinematic-poetry-terrence-malick%E2%80%99s%C2%A0the-new-world%C2%A0viewed/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 186.

<sup>10</sup> If I am correct, this would be a rare instance of the global *pensée sauvage* trying to “think” the contradictions of “progress” and “development” as a

Yet very recently, the ideologeme appears to have taken a surprising turn in Alejandro G. Inárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), which organizes the entire generic vocabulary I have traced in extraordinarily new ways. Earlier I surveyed a number of theoretical rebukes to Rousseau and his metaphysic. It was thoroughly unacceptable to Derrida's project of uncovering and denouncing the covert presence of such "metaphysical thought," expressed as an uncompromising insistence on Nietzsche and *not* Rousseau.<sup>11</sup> Equally, Foucault argued that it was to Nietzsche and his "genealogical method" that one must turn in order to confront the speculative possibility that there is no "timeless and essential secret,"<sup>12</sup> nor corresponding metaphysical assurances. Instead he insisted on the necessity of following Nietzsche's example and the need to fearlessly "challenge the pursuit of the origin."<sup>13</sup> Finally, Lyotard insisted that the desiring body was always alienated within any form of political economy, there was no "sheltered region" as Rousseau and Marx would suggest. But if we do indeed turn in the Nietzschean direction in order to resist the temptations of the Rousseauist metaphysic and its nostalgia, something remarkable occurs in *On Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche, it turns out, is decidedly not anathema to the

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totalizing global capitalism, something Jameson is skeptical about in *Archaeologies of the Future*:

Thus we tend to think of the relations between countries in ethical terms, in terms of cruelty or philanthropy, with the result that Western business investments come to appear to us as the bearers of progress and "development" in backwards areas. The real questions— whether "progress" is desirable and if so which kind of progress, whether a country has the right to opt out of the international circuit, whether a more advanced country has the right to intervene even benignly, in the historical evolution of a less advanced country; in sum, the general relationship between indigenous culture and industrialization— are historical and political in character. For our literature to be able to raise them, it would be necessary to ask ourselves a good deal more probing and difficult questions about our own system than we are presently willing to do. (266)

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, "Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 292.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 142.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 142.

exercise of performing a speculative historical anthropology. In fact, he ventures his own vision of the “savage” in order to diagnose the moment at which history, with its own inexorable logic, inserts alienation into subjectivity. At this moment, for Nietzsche, the mind is unbearably encumbered with guilt, bad conscience and collective *ressentiment*. I would contend that it is in fact evidence of a thoroughly Nietzschean diagnosis of “discontent” with “civilization,” yet it is an altogether more confronting and compromising vision than that offered by Rousseau. Nietzsche envisages an archaic form of psyche that does not know compassion (Rousseau’s “*pitie*”) as its first acquisition upon becoming a subject but rather delights in the exercise of sheer power over the Other. It is a subject that is unencumbered by ethics. This final passage is worth quoting at length:

At this juncture I suppose that a tentative and provisional expression of my own hypothesis concerning the origin of “bad conscience” must be offered; yet it is not something easily put forward, and it requires prolonged, careful consideration on the part of the reader. I regard bad conscience as a serious illness to which man was bound to succumb under the stress of the most radical change which he has ever experienced— the change which occurred when he found himself finally imprisoned by the strictures imposed upon him by society to establish and preserve peace. Just as it was with marine animals, when they were to be compelled to become terrestrial animals if they were to survive at all, so must it also have been with these savages, perfectly adapted as they were to the wilderness, to war, to a nomadic existence, and to exploration— suddenly all their instincts were rendered useless. From that time forwards they had to walk on their feet, and were no longer borne by the water; their own weight, which they now had to bear, oppressed them. They felt inept and were unable to perform the simplest tasks; confronted with this new and unknown world they no longer could rely upon their guides, the regulative, unconscious instincts which had kept them safe; they were reduced, those miserable creatures, to thinking, inferring, calculating, to connecting cause and effect, and had to resort to using their most poorly developed, least reliable organ, their “consciousness.” I do not believe

there was ever in the history of the world such a feeling of misery, such an intense discomfort— and furthermore, those old instincts had not suddenly ceased making their demands! Only it was difficult and rarely possible to accede to them; in the main, they were compelled to gratify themselves in new and, as it were, subterranean ways.

All instincts that cannot be given external expression *turn inwards*— this is what I mean by the internalization of man, and with this we have the first appearance in man of what subsequently was called the "soul." The whole "inner world," at first so very minute, unfolded, acquiring dimension, depth, breadth and height, when man's external outlet became *obstructed*. These formidable defenses, used by the commonwealth to protect itself against the old instincts of freedom (various forms of punishment being among the primary means of defense), made man— wild, free, untamed man— turn all those instincts against himself. Enmity, cruelty, the delight in persecution, in attack, destruction, pillage— the turning of all these instincts against their owners is the origin of the "bad conscience."

It was man who, lacking external enemies and opposition, and imprisoned as he was in the oppressive confines and monotony of custom, in his own impatience, frustration and rage, lacerated, persecuted, gnawed, frightened and abused himself; it was this animal, which is supposed to be "tamed," which beat itself against the bars of its cage; it was this being who, homesick for that wilderness of which it had been deprived, was compelled to create, out of its own self, an adventure, a torture-chamber, an unknown and perilous wasteland— it was this fool, this despairing and desperate prisoner, who invented "bad conscience." Along with it, however, he introduced that grave, insidious illness from which mankind has not yet recovered, the suffering of man from the affliction called man, as the result of a violent break from his animal past, of being plunged into a new environment and new conditions of existence, of a declaration of

war against the instincts, upon which, up to that time, his power, his joy, his formidability rested.

Let us immediately add that this fact of an animal ego turning against itself, taking part against itself, produced something so unprecedented, profound, extraordinary, bewildering and momentous that the whole nature of the world was radically altered. Indeed, only divine spectators could have appreciated the drama that began then, and whose end cannot yet be seen— a drama too subtle, too wonderful, too paradoxical to be performed unseen on some absurdly remote planet!<sup>14</sup>

Here Nietzsche hypothesizes, in terms as grand as those of Rousseau, yet another origin point as the “secret identity” of man. We now confront the utterly nightmarish but conceptually bracing proposition that “Man” is in fact his own metaphysical affliction. Nietzsche’s invocation of “divine spectators” foreshadows the degree to which either extra-terrestrial or supernatural forms of external narrative perspective will be required to gain an effective vantage point from which to witness the transpersonal “journey” of human history.<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche’s countervision then suggests new directions for tracing this ideologeme as it inverts after its grand outing in *Avatar*. I wish to suggest that it emerged tentatively in the thoroughly scandalous representation of Mayan “cruelty” as *jouissance* in *Apocalypto* (see fig. 213). But it appears that just such an inversion already exists in an even more fully realized form in *The Revenant*. The hallmark tropes of the current project all reappear in the film’s *mise-en-scène*. Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) stands as yet another in the sequence of colonial emissary-turned-ethnographers. His marriage to a Native American woman and mixed race child speak back to the Pocahontas national ur-myth (see

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<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> For example, consider the cult around the marooned, alien “light being” of Alton in the recent science fiction *Midnight Special* (2015) as yet another possible distorted figuration of “non-alienated” being. The cult members that worship Alton are offered the opportunity of glimpsing a Utopia that exists in a “parallel dimension” through the beams of light that emanate from Alton’s eyes.

fig. 219). He experiences an extended sequence of crises akin to the romance hero's simulacrum of death. These include the bear attack, being "left for dead" in the cold, the immersion in the river, the headlong fall over the cliff, and the night spent in the body cavity of his horse (see fig. 214). He is "healed" in the ethnological encounter with a lone Pawnee, Hikuc (Arthur Redcloud), whose technologies and remedies of bodily recuperation "enchant" the extreme climate of a North American winter. Even the sublime spectacle of the bison herd reappears in homage to *Dances with Wolves* and the "sturmbest" hunt in *Avatar* (see fig. 215).



Figure 213 *Apocalypto*: Nietzschean *jouissance* as "cruelty"



Figure 214 *The Revenant*: Glass' simulacra of death



Figure 215 *The Revenant*: The sublime vista of the buffalo stampede

However, the film never crystalizes a vision of the savage order as a form of personal salvation. The Pawnee wander in and out of the *mise-en-scène* at certain points, somewhat oblivious to the degradations and conflicts of the colonial project. The older erotic-aesthetic spectacle, having reached a degree of unprecedented fullness, transforms into a “thanatic-aesthetic” spectacle. Where Cameron drove the ideologeme towards a sense of collective wish-fulfillment,

Iñárritu radically re-orient it back towards the order of the Real as all-encompassing form of immiseration. Where in *Avatar* the romance mythos is so dominant as to (quite literally) banish the order of the Real, in *The Revenant* the Real and the epic (the heroic founding of the national entity in which the past establishes the rights and privileges of the present) reign almost unchallenged. Every stage of Glass' journey is redolent of death itself, fetishizing the capacity of history to inscribe itself upon the body as sheer, unending pain. Fewer spectacles have illustrated more vividly Jameson's thesis that history is "what hurts" (*PU*, 88). The revelatory moment in *The Revenant* is the confrontation with death as that ultimate "darkness or hollowness."<sup>16</sup> The colonial rhetoric of savagery is turned inside out in the form of a placard nailed above the crucified body of Hikuc. On it is written the thoroughly Nietzschean anti-ethnocentric maxim, the ultimate speculation of the film: *On est tous des sauvages*<sup>17</sup> (see fig. 217). The Old West now inverts to become an extraordinary Nietzschean theatre. Its *frisson* is to be found in its compromising vision of "enmity, cruelty, the delight in persecution, in attack, destruction, pillage"<sup>18</sup> (see fig. 216). Iñárritu's vision offers no escape from an all-embracing and unbearably bitter experience of human history (see fig. 218). Yet the final moments of the film are given over to Glass' dying visions of his Native American wife (Grace Dove) (see fig. 220). The momentary erotic reverie rhymes directly with that of Malick's Smith in the Virginian forest (see fig. 221 and fig. 222). In this final shot the film returns to familiar ground: the American West has become a vehicle for trying to retain a collective memory of a profoundly libidinal space in the deeply unerotic climate of an ever-more globalized consumer capitalism.

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<sup>16</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> The placard translates: "We are all savages."

<sup>18</sup> See note 14, chapter 5 above.





Figure 216 *The Revenant*: A Nietzschean theatre of pillage and destruction



Figure 217 *The Revenant*: "On est tous des sauvages"

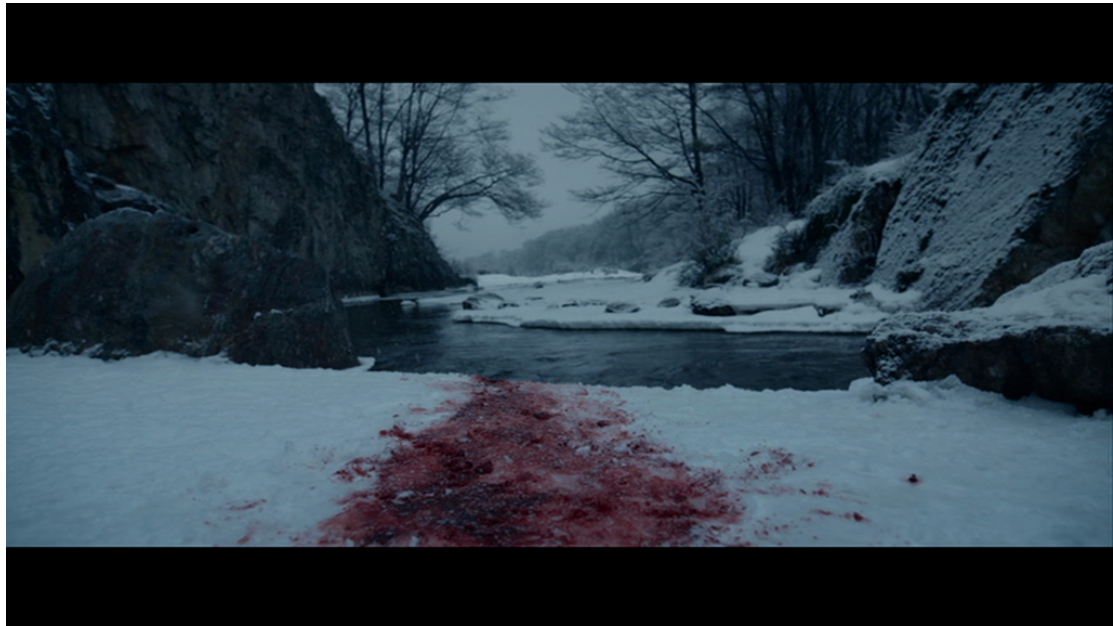


Figure 218 *The Revenant*: History as pain inscribed upon the snow

In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard offered the devastating diagnosis that our historical epoch would condemn us to a world radically severed from the older movements and dynamics of that supreme category of cultural production—“art.” He proposed the emergence of a form of dystopia in which the “dreamwork, the labour of poetry and meaning.... the grand schemata of displacement and condensation, the great figures of metaphor and contradiction” would be no longer available in a “perpetual springtime” of consumer simulacra.<sup>19</sup> I have argued, in tracing such patterns, that it has been possible to detect the dim pulse of this vital metabolic function in our culture— the collective projection of aesthetic solutions to lived contradictions— in a somewhat unlikely place. The commodified, mass objects of Hollywood appear to keep alive the vision of the Frontier as a Lukácsian “world-historical” encounter between two modes of production. Furthermore, I wish to suggest that in

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<sup>19</sup> See Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*: “The substance of life unified in this way, in this universal digest, can no longer have in it any meaning: what constituted the dreamwork, the labour of poetry and of meaning— in other words, the grand schemata of displacement and condensation, the great figures of metaphor and contradiction, which are based on the living interconnection of distinct elements— is no longer possible. The eternal substitution of homogenous elements now reigns unchallenged. There is no longer any symbolic function, but merely an eternal combinatory of ‘ambience’ in a perpetual springtime” (26).

cinema's power to revive alternate life worlds in the form of spectacle, it might be possible to recapture some small sense of the radical and profound forms of change that characterize human history. In other words, I mean to suggest that these cultural objects might allow us to retrieve a glimmer of that sense of "historicity" that has been dissolved by late capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Upon this basis it is my hope that in the future, cinema will be able to develop new and increasingly audacious vocabularies for refreshed meditations on that history we are condemned to live, whether such meditations lead us to speculate upon our archaic collective origins or upon the possible eschatological destinies that inevitably lie in wait for the human community. Perhaps in the last analysis, as Marcuse suggested, they are in fact one and the same thing. I would suggest that there is no greater speculation to be vivified in glorious, iridescent, cinematic spectacle than this.



Figure 219 *The Revenant*: The epic national family

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<sup>20</sup> See note 89, chapter 4 above.



Figure 220 *The Revenant*: Glass's dying moments



Figure 221 *The Revenant*: Glass' wife



Figure 222 *The Revenant*: Erotic reverie

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## Filmography

*8 ½*. Dir. Federico Fellini. 1963.

*À Bout de Souffle [Breathless]*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. 1960.

*Apache*. Dir. Robert Aldrich and Harold Hecht. 1954.

*Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.

*Apocalypto*. Dir. Mel Gibson. 2006. 1979.

*A River Runs Through It*. Dir. Robert Redford. 1992.

*Avatar* (Director's Cut). Dir. James Cameron. 2009.

*Badlands*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 1973.

*Ballad of Little Joe, The*. Dir. Maggie Greenwald Mansfield. 1993.

*Barry Lyndon*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. 1975.

*Black Robe*. Dir. Bruce Beresford. 1991.

*Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. 1982.

*Bonnie and Clyde*. Dir. Arthur Penn. 1967.

*Brokeback Mountain*. Dir. Ang Lee. 2005.

*Broken Arrow*. Dir. Delmer Daves. 1950.

*Brother Bear*. Dir. Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker. 2003.

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Dir. George Roy Hill. 1969.

*Dances with Wolves*. Dir. Kevin Costner. 1990.

*Days of Heaven*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 1978.

*Easy Rider*. Dir. Dennis Hopper. 1969.

*Fellini Satyricon*. Dir. Federico Fellini. 1969.

*Fern Gully*. Dir. Bill Kroyer. 1992.

*Geronimo: An American Legend*. Dir. Walter Hill. 1993.

*Grapes of Wrath, The*. Dir. John Ford. 1940.

*Hud*. Dir. Martin Ritt. 1963.

*Johnny Guitar*. Dir. Nicholas Ray. 1954.

*Jurassic Park*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. 1993.

*Knight of Cups*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 2015.

*Last of the Mohicans, The*. Dir. Michael Mann. 1992.

*Last Picture Show, The*. Dir. Peter Bogdanovich. 1971.

*Legends of the Fall*. Dir. Edward Zwick. 1994.

*Lonely Are the Brave*. Dir. David Miller. 1962.  
*Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The*. Dir. John Ford. 1962.  
*Midnight Special*. Dir. Jeff Nichols. 2016.  
*New World, The*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 2005.  
*Pierrot le Fou*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. 1965.  
*Pocahontas*. Dir. Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel. 1995.  
*Posse*. Dir. Mario Van Peebles. 1993.  
*Quick and the Dead, The*. Dir. Sam Raimi. 1995.  
*Red River*. Dir. Howard Hawks. 1948.  
*Revenant, The*. Dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu. 2015.  
*Ride the High Country*. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. 1962.  
*Searchers, The*. Dir. John Ford. 1956.  
*Shane*. Dir. George Stevens. 1953.  
*Short Cuts*. Dir. Robert Altman. 1993.  
*Skyfall*. Dir. Sam Mendes. 2012.  
*Stagecoach*. Dir. John Ford. 1939.  
*Thin Red Line, The*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 1998.  
*Tree of Life, The*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 2011.  
*Wild Bunch, The*. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. 1969.  
*Winchester '73*. Dir. Anthony Mann. 1950.

## **Television**

*Planet Earth*. Directed by Alastair Fothergill. 2006.  
*Twin Peaks*. Created by David Lynch and Mark Frost. 1990-1991.