The Social Basis of Root Metaphor:
An Application to
Apocalypse Now and *The Heart of Darkness*

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This essay explores the influence of social structure on the creation and use of meta-phors. Pepper's analysis of world hypotheses and their foundation in root metaphors is compared to Douglas' identification of the relationship between cultural cosmologies and social structure. The evident parallels between the Pepper and Douglas typologies reveal a rich and useful method of determining the relations between social structure, logic, and cultural belief systems. Metaphor and other figures of speech (tropes) play a central role in the transaction which establish these relationships. In turn, attention to the influence of social structure on experience contributes to our understanding of how and why a metaphor may or may not work within a statement or narrative. The conceptual framework which results from the above analysis is applied to an interpreta-tion of Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now*. It is argued that fundamental changes in social structure account in part for the failure of Coppola to transfer the key metaphor in Conrad's turn of the century story, to Coppola's contemporary film.

Metaphors point to or assert similarities and in that way make new connec-tions or create new meanings. As Searle (1979) has argued, however, the meaning of the metaphorical sentence is never entirely contained within the sentence but requires a context of material knowledge or assumptions on the part of the speaker and the listener. This is apparent in our ability to distin-guish between literal and figurative statements. For example, if a speaker says, "It is getting hot in here," he or she can mean literally the ambient tempera-ture of the room is becoming uncomfortable; or figuratively, that the discus-sion is becoming intense and people are losing their temper. What the sentence means is not contained entirely in the sentence but requires a knowledge of the intentions of the speaker. The speaker's intentions can only be discerned by reference to the context. The success of the communication depends upon the sharing of that context, whether physical, social, psycholog-ical, or historical.

If we must share a context of assumptions and knowledge, how can it be argued that the metaphors create new meaning (Black, 1979)?[1] If a metaphori-

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[1]Searle (1979) argues against the interactionist view of metaphor associated with I.A. Richards and, more recently, Max Black. I will not consider here Searle's argument, but it is apparent that I find the interactionist view is basically correct if far from worked out in its particulars. Indeed, the perspective has deep roots in American sociology going back to the "symbolic interaction-ism" of George Herbert Mead.

cal statement is to be understood, it requires the listener to, first, comprehend the literal sentence, second, to understand that the speaker did not intend it to be taken literally, and third, to be aware of the context within which the sentence is uttered. However, the context in which one statement is uttered is not necessarily the only context to which the statement refers. The metaphor, by identifying a similarity, can initiate an interaction between two or more contexts. The similarity legitimates, if you will, the consideration of a word, phrase, or meaning within new contexts. This process can expand, enrich, or merely alter the meaning of a phrase. It can also connect spheres of meaning (contexts) which were not heretofore joined. For example, Schön discusses the effort of engineers to develop a paint brush with artificial bristles. Their effort had been frustrated as long as they thought of a paint brush as an instrument used to disperse paint. Finally, someone said, "You know, a paint brush is like a pump." This simile at once re-oriented the engineers, who redefined the problem by refering it to a new context—a context within which the problem was solved (Schön, 1979, pp. 257-260).

The same process is also involved in poetry and social thought. When Walt Whitman wrote that grass ". . . is the handkerchief of the Lord," he can change the way we perceive the world.

> A child said *what is the grass?*
>   fetching it to me with full hands,
> How could I answer the child? I do
>   not know what it is any more than he.
>
> I guess it must be the flag of my
>   disposition, out of hopeful green
>   stuff woven.
>
> Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
> A scented gift and remembrance designedly
>   dropt,
> Bearing the owner's name someway in
>   the corners, that we may see and
>   remark, and say *whose?*   (Whitman, 1950, pp. 27-28)

We are at once in the midst of sensations, memories, and ideas which convey, simultaneously, mystery and familiarity. The Lord enters the everyday world with a name embroidered on a handkerchief, perhaps like a dandy he is pleased with the effect it creates in his breast pocket; or as a working man, tossing down his handkerchief redolent with the sweat wiped from his neck. The mundane but sweet experience of spring grass is amplified and extended, confirming a sense of order, giving its mysterious pleasure a name. It is not a matter of awe or reverence before a terrible God or brutish nature but

friendship and affection in a familiar world. The sacred is made familiar, the familiar is made sacred. If the metaphor speaks to us, it joins contexts which may have been separated and now may be involved in our reconceptualization of God on the one hand, nature on the other, ouselves in the process.

It may also occur that a principle lacks persuasive force because it has not found its metaphor. I have found when teaching social theory that American students have a characteristic response to Marx and Engel's idea that society should be organized according to the principle, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Students not only tend to disagree with the last phrase of this statement but are simply incredulous that anyone could take it seriously. When it is pointed out that this is basically an advocacy of community as it was traditionally understood, the idea becomes somewhat more plausible. However, it is only when one suggests that Marx and Engels were proposing that society should be like a family, that the principle becomes thinkable. Clearly, the idea, "to each according to his need" is commonplace within the family and the organizational principle can be applied elsewhere. One may still not agree with it; after all, families are in many important ways different from large, complex societies, but the simile sufficiently credits the principle so that it receives serious consideration and raises the possibility that it may find at least limited use. The point here, however, is simply that the trope sets off an interaction between two ideas and areas of experience. By changing the contextual assumptions of one statement by reference to another, we potentially change the meaning of both. We also connect and prospectively integrate two otherwise disparate aspects of our life world.[2]

However, using metaphors to make connections and draw comparisons is not *necessarily* meaningful. We recognize there are well and poorly made metaphors and that there is a craft of metaphor making. One of the tasks of criticism, whether aesthetic, philosophical, or social, is not only to examine the implications of metaphor, but to discover why one "works" and another does not, why one makes sense and another is senseless. The term "to make sense," of course, suggests that the symbolic transaction that we call a metaphor is rooted in sense, in our experience in some fundamental way. If this is so, whatever shapes our experience will also shape our metaphors. A metaphor makes sense when it is consistant with shaped experience. In turn, the metaphor may reinforce and deepen experience; or by revealing the shape of experience, permit it to be reshaped.

Metaphor and Systems of Thought

Stephen Pepper, in his study of philosophical systems grounds knowledge

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[2]This view of metaphor/simile obviously assumes that particulars carry some of their meaning intact from context to context. In fact, if this were not true, it is difficult to see how metaphors would work.

in *basic* or *root metaphors* (Pepper, 1961). Basic forms of thought such as mechanism and organicism are derived from an initial insight mediated by a metaphor and are developed and criticized by continued reference to the root metaphor. By making metaphor the source of knowledge, Pepper makes primary the moment when experience is characterized. Metaphor is limited by experience but is not merely its effects. The metaphor actively joins two experiences and joins them on terms which are important to the creator of the trope.[3] In this way, objects are related and, simultaneously, the subject is joined to its objects. The manner in which these relationships are drawn is, in general, limited. That is, the way in which a part or particular is related to its context can be conceived only in a finite number of ways if we expect to provide evidence for why one conception of that relationship is more plausible than another.

Pepper, in his original work, found only four basic systems of knowledge in Western thought. *Formism*—in which the basic operation is classification and the primary cognition is the relationship of the particular to the general—is a world hypothesis based upon the intuitive recognition of similarity. *Organicism* —in which the basic operation is to compose a structure and the primary cognition is the relationship of parts to a whole—is an hypotheis derived from the recognition that an organism is somehow more than the sum of its parts. *Mechanism* uses correlation as its basic operation, especially in the sense of causal implication: cognition identifies the relationship between particulars. Its metaphor is a simple machine, as in the lever. Finally, there is *contextualism*, in which the fundamental operation is the act of attention; cognition is concerned with figure-ground relationships. The basic experience from which contextualism is derived is the recognition that the identity of a particular thing or event is altered by its context. Pepper calls the root metaphor here "the historic event" in which it is recognized that the event is embedded in a complex network of facts and forces. The cognition of an event depends upon our separating its facts from the network in which it is embedded. At the same time, we recognize that if the context changes, the event changes or if we select different elements from the network for attention, if we change what is figure and what is ground, the meaning of the event changes. In this world hypothesis there are no stable, universal or exhaustive categories.

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[3] I am using "trope" here in basically the same way as Kenneth Burke (1962) and White (1973) who use it to refer to the following figures of speech: metaphor, metonomy, synecdoche, and irony. They define metaphor as a figure of speech which is representational or where one thing stands for another. Metonomy is reductionistic in that the part stands for the whole. Synecdoche is integrative in that a single quality characterizes the various parts. Irony is negational because what is said at the figurative level contradicts what is said at the literal level. Of course, the last three tropes can be seen as simply variations on metaphor. The distinction is intriguing, however, in that it suggests different tropes complement different thought modes. White relates the tropes to Pepper's world hypotheses as well as to modes of emplotment (romantic, tragic, comic, satirical) and modes of ideological implication (anarchist, radical, conservative, liberal).

In a later work, Pepper identifies a fifth world hypothesis, *selectivism*, in which action is the basic operation; means-end relationships are the object of cognition (Pepper, 1967). The source of this system is the recognition of the importance of the purposeful act. The question has been raised and debated as to whether selectivism is in fact a fifth world hypothesis, a perfection of contextualism, or a hypothesis which synthesizes the original four. I believe selectivism is not quite any of these, but a metahypothesis which describes the cognitive process out of which emerges any system of ideas including the world hypotheses.

Clearly, selectivism arises out of contextualism and an awareness of the problems of that perspective; but it seems to be sufficiently different to warrant a separate status. The purposeful act certainly requires acts of attention which will separate figure from ground, but the purposeful act will equally confirm or raise doubts about preconceived relationships. Selectivism does not synthesize the original world hypotheses but rather describes a cognitive framework within which it is possible to conceive and describe world hypotheses as independent and equally satisfactory systems of cognition. This does not count as a synthesis, since to be aware of similarities and logical contradictions between systems and how they may arise, does not necessarily indicate how they may be resolved, or even if they can be resolved.

In a thinker of Pepper's quality and thoroughness it is almost inevitable that an idea like selectivism will emerge because it is hard to avoid the question, "from what cognitive perspective are the world hypotheses understood?" If three hypotheses are understood from the perspective of the fourth, then the assertion that they are all equally adequate is contradicted. Or put another way, if one can comprehend the others but not be comrehended by them, then *that* world hypothesis would be basic. Pepper also insists that each of the world hypotheses are separate and independent from the others, each is equally valid, and that they cannot be successfully mixed or synthesized. Consequently, it cannot be argued from Pepper's point of view, that each world hypothesis can comprehend each of the others. The world hypotheses cannot, in succession, become sub-systems of one another because they are qualitatively distinct.[4]

It appears that Pepper invented selectivism in order to get beyond an exploration of the logical implications of root metaphors and into an analysis of the process which leads to the formulation of salient tropes. Through the purposeful act, the awareness of constraints in action, and the imaginative characterization of the experiences which are the consequence of action, we can formulate a basic understanding of our life world. In turn, the metaphor

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[4]As in all systems of knowledge which hope to be exhaustive, the problem of reflexive understanding arises. I cannot deal with that issue here.

directs subsequent action, and influences the interpretation of the resulting experience.[5]

Pepper's framework provides a useful perspective from which to consider the nature of society. One of the most difficult conumdrums of human behavior is even more manifest in the consideration of social institutions: beliefs and behavior are conditioned by society while at the same time they condition the social order. In language, and particularly figurative expressions, we find an important mediating site. If social relationships are a condition of individual experience, then we might expect them to influence the formulation of both limited and root metaphors. Most of us are familiar with metaphors used to describe society: society is a machine, an organism, even a computer which utilizes feed-back loops. Can we, however, describe social structures in a sufficiently simple and fundamental way that we can usefully draw a relationship between those structures, the world hypotheses, and the root metaphors on which they depend? I believe we can with the help of a typology developed by Douglas, an anthroplogist.

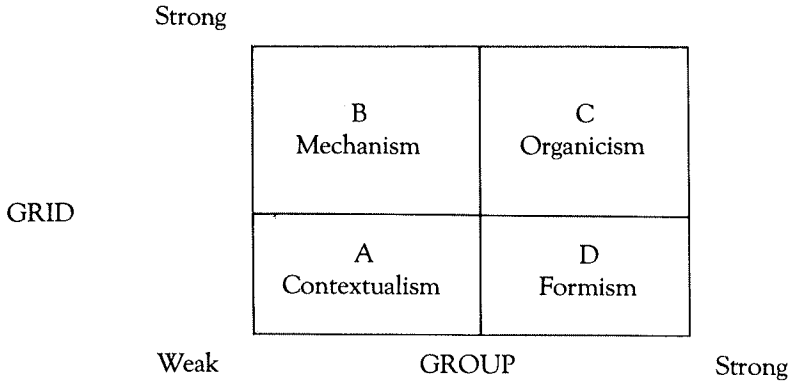## Social Structure, Metaphor and Systems of Thought

Douglas has developed a theory of cosmologies based on the nature of social structure (Douglas, 1966, 1970, 1978). The four types of social structure she identifies and the cosmology she associates with each, can be correlated fairly closely with Pepper's four original world hypotheses. The basic terms of Douglas' theory are "grid" and "group." The primary question in a group is whether an individual is or is not a member. This determination requires that a boundary be defined so that living within a group involves the day to day intellectual, ritual, and behavioral definition of that boundary and the control of persons or things which might attempt to cross it. Of course, a group boundary may be very strongly or only weakly defined. In the weak group, where the entrance and exit of individuals is not a matter of great concern, the location of the boundary may not be entirely clear.

Grid refers to a network of ego-centered roles. Socially defined expectations constrain the behavior of individuals according to supposedly impersonal laws or principles. Individuals can be interdependent and interdeterminate without being members of a common group. A strong grid system is high in ascribed roles; as the grid weakens, the individual has greater autonomy and control.

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[5]The wider implication of the use of the purposeful act in thought systems is very interesting but beyond the scope of this paper. Works which discuss this issue are numerous. Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971, is one of the best.

With these definitions it is possible to develop the following typology:

Strong

B Mechanism	C Organicism
A Contextualism	D Formism

GRID (to the left of the table)

Weak   GROUP   Strong

I have indicated within the appropriate cells of the diagram, the world hypothesis one would expect to dominate in a social type. Below, some of the major cosmological elements associated with the social types are described.

D. Strong group, weak grid:

1. Strong sense of boundary around the social group; role relationships within are weakly or ambiguously defined.
2. The cosmos is divided between good and evil, inside and outside, light and dark.
3. The body which is a "natural symbol" for the social body, is good or pure inside. Keen sense of the body as a boundary and an inclination to guard the orifices against intrusion from the outside. Thus, food taboos and purifying rituals performed on foodstuffs before consumption. Anxiety about ambiguous phenomena at the boundary, e.g., menstrual blood is dangerous or dirty.
4. Conflict emerging from ambiguously defined roles is not likely to be seen as an internal structural flaw but explained as the result of impurities or evil entering from the outside.
5. Inclined toward belief in witchcraft, i.e., evil which has entered the body from the outside, and will, in turn, contaminate the social body.
6. Nature is outside and not social and is divided between the vulnerable that can be incorporated into society (lambs or domestic animals) and the predatory (wolves or wild animals) which cannot be incorporated.
7. If the parallel to formism is correct, the particular is illusory—only the encompassing form/group is real (Plato); if the particular is credited, it nevertheless takes its ultimate meaning from the form (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas). Movement toward the classification of the particular in relation to the general, the whole, or the form, represents movement toward organicism (Pepper) and strong grid, strong group

depiction (Douglas). Movement toward the clarification and ordering of the particular with deemphasis on form, is movement toward mechanism and strong grid, weak group.

C. Strong grid, strong group:

1. Strong sense of boundary, role relationships within the group are clearly defined. This is the type of social structure which European and American social science has rather uncritically associated with traditional society. Feudalism understood within the theological, ritual, and moral framework of the Catholic Church is a salient example.

2. An elaborate array of ritual and symbolic mechanism which sustain and clarify the group boundary and internal role relationships. These same mechanisms can be used to occasionally adjust social relationships. An outsider is suspect and dangerous but there are ritual means which can be used to incorporate the outsider into the inside.

3. Rational in the sense that it is believed that the self-conscious manipulation of symbols has real or empirical consequences, i.e., magic. Purification and reincorporation into the community can be accomplished by the ritual act of consuming the host, by eating God and/or the community.

4. Misfortune is understood as a consequence of misdeeds, especially the error of neglecting ritual.

5. The appetites, and the mortality of the body make the body suspect, but there is confidence that it can be ritually contained. Lust and greed must be carefully watched but become dangerous only when the perpetrator ignores or refutes the rituals which will limit, control, or neutralize these contingent acts.

6. The social order is highly regulated, the part is defined by the whole.

B. Strong grid, weak group:

1. The universe is dominated by things rather than persons. The cosmos is manipulated, not a source of regulation.

2. The universe is basically benign, the power which can dominate it is available to anyone for the grasping. Courage, determination, and cunning are respected virtues and the basis of personal success. Yet there is no rational explanation of how one earns or deserves this advantage. Success and failure are not linked to a moral system.

3. Those who are unsuccessful will express resentment—however, the resentment will never be directed toward a powerful or wealthy class or the social system itself. Rather, the resentful will attempt to make the rules and conditions of competitive transactions more equitable.

4. Social conventions may be brushed aside and the individual placed in opposition to society. The concept of nature is assimilated to the individual; society is not natural but artificial. The body is an instrument with which we may succeed (performance principle).

     5. Ritual is not valued.
A. Weak grid, weak group:
     1. Social relations are minimally structured.
     2. The cosmos is experienced as benign, but sufficient to justify faith in the inner purity and goodness of the human individual. The body is sensual, the emotions are valued and individual expressions of these states are encouraged.
     3. There is little sense of sin.
     4. Little interest in crystalizing states of mind in ritual forms.
     5. Little sense of opposition between inside and outside; minimal obligation to impose an inwardly perceived pattern on the external environment, or vice versa.

Douglas argues that it is useful, for analysis, to proceed from social structure to cosmology; but she is not assuming that the former causes the latter. She is much influenced by the phenomenological and contextualist perspective, and assumes that intelligent actors are confronting a particular context, motivated by a desire to solve certain practical problems of survival, comfort, and meaning. Douglas argues that cognitive dissonance is a natural source of discomfort with the result that an effort is made to make each aspect of life consistent with all other aspects. This effort over time, contributes to an emerging coherence among the various parts of everyday life: social relationships, conceptions of good and evil, conceptions of nature and the body, notions of space, time and logic, and even dress and cuisine. To the extent that each aspect of life can be mirrored and reinforced by every other aspect, our sense of order, control, and meaning are enhanced. At the same time, each social structure and its respective cosmology carries with it certain contradictions.

For example, a strong group gives a sense of community and identity; impurity, danger, chaos, and evil are associated with those outside the group. If strong group is associated with weak grid, then the conflict which is likely to attend ambiguous role relationships within the group will be interpreted as the dark and mysterious penetration of the essentially good by external impurities or enemies. If the internal conflict is especially grave there is likely to be an intensive hunt for witches or scapegoats which must be exorcised—a process which is not likely to identify the relevant internal problems and bring them to resolution. If the sense of group boundary is sufficiently strong, the internal conflict sufficiently profound, combined with a reason to believe that, in fact, external and powerful agents are attacking the community from the outside, the results may be especially tragic. The consequence may be to release the pure spirit and the pure community from the powerful contingent forces which threaten it by a collective sacramental and sacrificial act, as in the collective consumption of Kool-aid laced with arsenic at Jonesville.

In a strong grid/weak group situation there will be a sense of identity but it

will be narrowly defined. One will be dependent on others but the relationship will be instrumentally understood. One may use others but be used in turn without a covenant or shared moral commitment which will limit the exploitation of one by the other. Difficult times will be faced alone. If one loses in these transactions, personal isolation increases. As you move down grid, individual autonomy increases, but the bases of cooperation and the sources of meaning become tenuous. Problems of identity and alienation emerge.

Logically, in the strong grid/weak group situation, problems are understood in terms of instrumental correlations—if I do x, then y. Indeed, y validates the operation x; thus, to argue that x should be done regardless of the consequences is deemed irrational or mad. As we move down grid, the separation of the particular from its context, figure from ground, becomes increasingly difficult. The problem of identity emerges in which the person, thing, or event changes with each context. Comparisons are difficult, perhaps impossible. If the person or figure completely loses a sense of identity and has no awareness of boundaries, it may give rise to a type of "oceanic" experience sometimes associated with mysticism. Pepper argues that if an effort is made to base a system of knowledge on this experience, there can be no rules of evidence. Consequently, he places mysticism among the *inadequate* world hypothesis.

If I am correct about the parallels between these social structures and the world hypotheses, then root metaphor can be understood as a tie between social properties and logic. The logical elaboration of the metaphor can serve logical criticism. Both processes confirm or deny the salience of the root metaphor. I take art to be an occasion, often a peculiarly intense or condensed occasion, where these relationships are worked on and worked out. In this sense, art is always representational—not in the sense that art self-consciously attempts to represent the object "out there" or as a thing in itself—but in the sense that it represents the transactions between subject and object and the constraints placed on those transactions. Jackson Pollock's inwardly looking drip paintings comment on the nature of society as much as the most political work of Goya or Siqueiros.

This would all be simple enough if we could identify and isolate one social structure, associate with it an appropriate logic and demonstrate how a root metaphor has tied them together. However, as Pepper has pointed out, a world hypothesis even with its inherent imperfections is rarely realized as some perfect oak but comes to us in a contingent state: stunted, contradictory, and mixed with other world hypotheses. Also, a world hypothesis is often found to be in transition toward another world hypothesis.

Just as a world hypothesis is a refined version of common sense cognitions, Pepper's theory of world hypotheses further refines the hypotheses themselves and our understanding of cognition. Douglas attempts the same clarifi-

cation by linking social structure to cosmology. Her theory of the two bodies is especially interesting. She argues that the body is a natural symbol in the sense that it is readily available and especially salient as a source of metaphors with which to comprehend the social body. Out of this interaction of the physical body and the social body there emerges a congruence between our cognitions of social structure and our cognitions of the physical body. If we can successfully link Douglas with Pepper, we can hope to comprehend the relationships between social structure, the body, and logic and the way in which these relationships are mediated by the intiutive force of metaphor.

I will attempt to illustrate this process by way of an analysis and comparison of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

Social Structure and Metaphor in
The Heart of Darkness and *Apocalypse Now*

I am especially interested in the most frequent observation about Coppola's film, namely that it fails toward the end, particularly in the scenes involving Marlon Brando as Kurtz. I agree with this assessment, but I also agree with Stewart when he says, ". . . for all its extravagant lapses, [*Apocalypse Now*] is an American movie of risk, extraordinary impact, and rare challenge" (Stewart, 1981, p. 455). In a sense, it is the flaws in such a powerful film that sustain our interest and, on reflection, deepen the impact it has on us. This is true, I believe, not because Coppola failed to find in his visual medium a means to convey the moral turmoil of Conrad's Kurtz, but because the turmoil experienced by Kurtz—and observed with some irony by Marlow— no longer speaks to the experience of the late twentieth century. As powerful as is the interaction between Conrad's story and Coppola's film (Kinder, 1977-80), the film can also be fruitfully compared to the work of Kafka. It is the difference between these perspectives which is the source of some confu- sion: but it is the consideration of this difference that makes *Apocalypse Now* so useful as we consider our culture and the relationship of the Vietnam war to our culture.

Conrad's story is concerned with crossing boundaries, from the known and the relatively secure to the unknown and the dangerous, from light to dark: from civilization to savagery, from the domesticated world under social control to the wild, chaotic, natural world. There is the hubris of Kurtz and the European on the one hand, and on the other, the absurd union of pride and fear revealed by the French man-of-war lobbing shells into the African bush and the "pilgrims" blindly squirting lead into the jungle from the deck of Marlow's steamboat. There is the crossing of a boundary from the well- defined self, the soul, the domain of order and grace, into the unchartered abyss of the appetites, the crossing over from prudence to greed and lust.

The sense of being within a social and personal boundary of righteousness supports the pride (ethnocentrism) which permits the association of material wealth with personal grace and civilization. It permits the confusion of greed with progress. Marlow perceives this confusion and understands how it threatens to unhinge the bearers of progress, to bring down the boundary itself (to shatter the form). He understands also that Kurtz has confused truth with power; that his fragile control over the natives is maintained by fear grounded in force, a brittle and unreliable source of order.

The Heart of Darkness is not basically about Africa, nor is it merely a witness to the darker side of human nature. It is about Victorian England in conflict and the comprehension of this potential disaster within the limits of its root metaphor. The primary cognitive process is the making of distinctions or determining similarity. This formist exercise is expressed sociologically by a preoccupation with group boundaries: family, community, church, class, nation. The internal conflict within these groups is perceived as an invasion from the outside, from beyond the boundary of the moral order.

The historical source of these social and cultural developments can be traced to the English reformation and the rise of mercantilism. Douglas associates the reformation and its emphasis on faith and internal purity, its suspicion of ritual, with the breakdown of structural relationships (grid). MacFarlane (1970) has shown that witchcraft accusations increased as England analogously developed an increased sense of national identity accompanied by internal social and economic conflict. Williams has suggested that the ideology of mercantilism attempted to resolve these conflicts within a cultural framework which emphasized community responsibility (Williams, 1966). On the one hand there is the emerging quest for riches through the avenue of trade along with the medieval sense of noblesse oblige. Since the world's goods were assumed to be finite, the internal struggle for riches and the disorder created by poverty must be resolved by taking the wealth of those who were outside the boundaries of the good society.

The imperial venture from the shores of England can be seen, in part, as an effort to resolve internal conflicts within an otherwise select community. It is a social situation which emphasizes the importance of boundaries and the symbols of boundary. Jordan (1969) has documented the response of Englishmen to the early contact with black Africans. In the first place, there was the fascination and fear associated with the ultimate symbol of social boundary—skin color. Furthermore, there was the rich association of blackness with chaos, evil, dirt, and danger. Added to this is the perception of the African on the cusp, between man and ape, lustful and driven by the appetites, without manners or visible institutions of social constraint. The English projected onto the African what they most feared in themselves and their conflicted social order.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century there was a continuing struggle

between the mercantilist and laissez-faire view of society. The latter is, in part, a reflection of the declining importance of status groups and the belief that social policy can be used to maintain a stable definition of social boundaries and their traditional relations. The more formist philosophy of mercantilism is being replaced by a mechanist world view. Sociologically (strong grid, weak group), the egoistic orientation of this view whittles away at group status, loyalty, and cooperation. At the same time collective effort is necessary to protect one's interests. The estates are displaced by class cooperation: The workers attempt to move from being a *class in itself*, which is to say, from a position as isolated individuals selling their labor, to being a *class for itself*. Even within the philosophy of laissez-faire there is a constant appeal to nationalism, which is to say a larger sense of group identity and loyalty, in order to create favorable international conditions which promise to moderate internal conflicts. The egoism of the mechanistic world view constantly threatens the group boundary which is at the same time understood to be instrumentally important to survival and the expansion of wealth. Ideologies appropriate to one's conflicted and paradoxical condition emerge. Racism maintains a sense of class and national boundary which is less and less explained in terms of moral differences but rather is "scientifically" and "rationally" understood as objectively different individual properties of reason (intelligence) and motivation. Racism tries to sustain formist categories with mechanist logic; it attempts to maintain group solidarity with an essentially egoistic cosmology. The result is a volatile internal contradiction; egoism threatens to tear the group apart; racism maintains a sense of group identity which sustains the notion that beyond itself is chaos and evil. The contradiction feeds on itself and the conflict between individual and group interests can prepare a people to accept and amplify virulent scapegoating ideas. This internal conflict which undermines the social boundary can also be rendered by the notion of the unconstrained appetites which take over and destroy the source of personal order and identity, the self or the soul.

The late Victorian England familiar to Joseph Conrad manifests these contradictions. Social boundaries are under attack, class conflicts are especially important, and the relationship of England to her colonies is beginning to be questioned. England is in the midst of a political, economic, and cultural crisis which it is still inclined to see as an external threat. In Kurtz we have the personification of this condition; Kurtz partakes of a social perspective which can still imagine and appreciate a sense of community and moral order. The horror he perceives is the abyss beyond the boundary and perhaps the paradox that the pride which sustains the boundary can also be the instrument of its destruction. Nevertheless, the destructive seed is still seen as coming from outside of the community and the self, from the African savage and the darkest reaches of human nature.

Conrad looks upon this scene with irony. In part, this is because he has

himself been a kind of cultural pariah. While he can feel for and understand the dilemma of Kurtz, he has no illusions about the superiority of British and European civilization. As Collins, (1954) has pointed out, the wretches of *The Heart of Darkness*, both European and native, are socially displaced. The sane and coherent are sustained by social ties and the balm of orderly and useful work. Conrad can see the difference between illusion and reality, but his irony is infused with awareness of what is being lost. He can himself still imagine and identify with a relatively closed and moral community, if only the provincial and domestic harmony he associates with the life of a working sailor. Conrad, represented by Marlow, has promising insights but no real solution to the problem. Irony, as Nelson (1977) has argued, prefigures an understanding of the world in which the relationship between the word and its objects is constantly in doubt. As such, it is the natural trope of cognitive transition. Insofar as this is true of a particular context, irony tends to be joined with metaphor, with *doubt* serving the effort to sort the world into stable classes and relationships. That is, doubt is not merely ontological but epistemological, not merely a state of being, but a pre-condition of inquiry and knowledge.

This circumstance, perceived from Douglas' sociological point of view, represents the trauma of crumbling social boundaries joined to the effort to recreate new ones. We witness Marlow's irony but also his recognition that there is a place of balance and sanity. We see the trauma but also the hope in his allusions to the health of those with social ties and those who have useful work to perform. Indeed, within Douglas' framework there is an overarching irony that informs the substantive tension between irony and metaphor. This is the irony of the view that the deterioration of social constraints expands the scope of social freedom, just as it encourages the doubt which permits the conceptualization of alternative social arrangements. The new dispensation may create new social boundaries which are the foundation of identity, moral conviction, and personal meaning, but at the same time, narrow the scope of freedom and limit one's consciousness of alternative social arrangements.

It is unclear whether this is a specific historical dilemma or a human and cultural paradox within which we must learn to cope by means of some ironic mode of consciousness. The great danger in this situation is that the dialectical relationship between irony and metaphor can portend social and cognitive developments which move beyond metaphor to a literal and uncritical understanding of the world—beyond irony to despair and cynicism.

Marlow's irony keeps Conrad's story from the brink of despair by showing Kurtz's horrible revelation to be grounded in Victorian cultural arrogance and the hypocrisy of his civilizing mission. A mission which barely conceals under an ideology of progress a personal quest for power and wealth. However, in Coppola's film, both Kurtz and Willard, are beyond the point where a lack of fit between word and object is morally or rationally problematic. They are beyond the creative tension which this predicament can encourage. They

perform operations on conditions in order to complete a meaningless task, but because the operations are intuitively repulsive they raise profound questions about the legitimacy of the task. The task and the operations take on a horrible sense of necessity which the actors cannot control. It is not a dark and evil human nature which has captured them. Indeed, it is their residual humaneness that permits them to feel and it is through these feelings, however stunted, that they question their actions which reveal their competence to be corrupt and meaningless.

Words, objects, relationships are literally and objectively true in the sense that they are given, empirical, present. They are a lie because they comprise a structure of which Kurtz and Willard are a part but within which they cannot conceive of an alternative beyond the technical requirements of the task. This is true, even while they are aware of the mean and destructive nature of their effort. It is a point where duty passes over into cynicism, honor into malaise.

Coppola finds it difficult to imagine the sense of community which informs both the negative and the positive elements of Conrad's story. Our experience in twentieth century America makes it difficult for anyone to imagine either the benefits of community life or the terrors which attend its loss. If the family is the prototype of such a bounded community, perhaps Coppola has most successfully portrayed our society in his *Godfather* films.

As I thought about *Apocalypse Now* and searched for some help in understanding its power as well as its failures, I found myself thinking not only of Conrad but more and more of Kafka. Rahv's description of Kafka's narrative tone comes close to describing the texture of Coppola's film: ". . . a lovingly exact portrayal of the factual world (combined) with a dreamlike and magical dissolution of it." Also, [Kafka] ". . . arouses in us a sense of immediate relatedness, of strong even if uneasy identification . . . because of the profound quality of his feeling for the experience of human loss, estrangement, guilt and anxiety—an experience increasingly dominant in the modern age." And finally, authority is no longer represented by the father in a world which we know, but ". . . has been removed from the family circle and generalized into an institutional power—hierarchic, remote, mysterious—such as the Law, the Court and the order of officials that reside in the Castle" (Rahv, 1952, pp. vii-ix, xxi).

At almost the same time (roughly the decade between 1914 and 1924) that Kafka wrote *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Max Weber was writing his major work on modern bureaucracy. He emphasized that in bureaucracy, authority was vested in rules and regulations and not in persons. These organizations were rational and impersonal; individual attributes were relevant only insofar as they were covered by the generalized rules. Fitness for office within the bureaucracy was determined by technical competence. Bureaucracy was a social machine which organized specialized skills, where policy was determined at the top and processed by a series of technical operations. The source

and purpose of policy need not be and often is not known by the operatives. Their jobs and careers depend upon the efficient completion of their assigned tasks (Weber, 1947, pp. 324-340).

Bureaucratic organization is often explained as an inevitable scientific and rational adaptation to modern problems of size, complexity, and technological sophistication. But it is also clear that these forms of organization were developed and encouraged by those who wished to wrest control from workers on the shop floor and citizens in the wards and neighborhoods (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979). This social form encourages mechanistic forms of thought not only with reference to nature but toward other human beings as well. In Douglas' terminology, it is the thought mode she associates with a strong grid/weak group society.

In "normal times" this condition may make work and political life merely pointless. In times of social crisis where the goals of organizations are clearly directed at a solution to the crisis, one's instrumental tasks can be accepted with a certain amount of equinimity and even pride. Even a sense of group identity, however abstract and transitory, may be sustained. But in times of crisis when the goals are not known, unclear, or unacceptable, the sense of being arbitrarily manipulated by some higher power is amplified. If in addition, as one performs one's technical tasks, this results in the apparent suffering and destruction of human beings, then personal competence becomes more neurotic and habitual than admirable. Yet within this form of social order, technical competence is virtually the only criteria of worth which is available. Coppola's Kurtz rebelled not because he was morally outraged by the war but because the constraints placed on him by higher authorities undercut his military skill. Even his admiration of the ideological fervor of the enemy was not based on an appreciation of the political and moral basis of their cause, but rather on how it permitted them to be more ruthless and effective soldiers. Willlard, his assasin, was sustained not by a sense of political or moral duty but by his own professionalism. The only measure which he could apply to himself was his ability to get the job done. His ability to do the job is only suggested in the early scenes but is forcefully demonstrated by his cold blooded murder of the wounded woman in the sampan, an instrumental act which avoids the delay necessary for her medical attention, and which might endanger his mission.

Technical competence as an end in itself can become a kind of perverse sport. Kilgore, a veritable John Wayne, mounted on flying steeds, destroys an entire village in order to clear a beach for surfing. In his skillful use of technical power he is convinced of his invulnerability. His skill also extends to an instrumental understanding of his image; like a Madison Avenue *savant*, he does only what is necessary to create the effect of compassion and heroism for consumption by the folks back home. Kilgore is oblivious to everything but his own cunning ability to manipulate the scene. He has become the perfect

technician because he is beyond feeling.

Perhaps the most Kafka-like scene in *Apocalypse Now* occurs when Willard and his crew, just before they enter Kurtz's territory, come upon a group of black soldiers in a trench. They are "dug in," reckless and numb with dope or despair. They have no commander, they have no mission of which they are aware, they are uncertain where they might be and what it is they are to do. They react pointlessly out of fear, contempt and lethargy. There is nothing with which to measure themselves, neither values nor a sense of competence. It is the only scene in which Willard seems to be truly alarmed: he leaves quickly.

What of the supposed failure of *Apocalypse Now* in its final scenes involving Kurtz and the Cambodian encampment? Stewart is not convinced that the film does waiver:

> Would the trouble most everyone notices toward the end of *Apocalypse Now* . . . have to do with the fact that Conrad is too good for Coppola's own good? Or is there a problem in Conrad's own ending for *Heart of Darkness* which Coppola tries to face up to and work through, not routinely borrowing his source so much as recapitulating it in yet a bleaker key? . . .
>
> Conrad's Marlow recounts a narrative of infectious evil which there is every reason to suppose he has told before and will tell again, a story inexhaustable, never exorcised, the oldest story of all: the truth about human nature that links in one unbroken narrative the corrupting power of Roman Colonization and the imperialistic pride of Victorian England. Coppola extends this historical line forward into American militarism . . . . [he] presses his symbolism a step beyond Conrad, turning the screw of cyclic history and spiral plotting one more notch into violent compensation—not only between national armies but between anti hero and villain, executioner and antichrist. (Stewart, 1981, p. 456)

Stewart is right, I believe, that Coppola found Conrad's ending weak and without the guidance he needed. But the reasons for this are different. In the first place, as I have indicated above, Conrad probably did not himself take seriously the boundary metaphor that associated human nature with evil, the savage, and darkest Africa. The metaphor was a kind of Victorian conceit. Yet the social basis of the metaphor was still sufficiently strong to give Conrad's story its haunting force. I might add, that even in society where the sense of boundary has become very weak, there are contexts in which it is felt and images appropriate to its expression tend to work. The situation of war is obviously one example—and the very real danger of that circumstance encourages the division of the world into qualitative groups. The tenacity of racism as an ideology and its exploitation in times of insecurity and danger is another instance. We saw this in the Vietnam war where the observation was often made that orientals do not value human life as we do in the occident. Michael Cimino in his Vietnam war film, *The Deer Hunter*, reinforced this ethnocentric and racist observation. It is perhaps appropriate that Cimino was preoccupied in this film less with the war than with the ethnic and community

solidarity of his characters.

Coppola also succeeds in placing us on the river, on the journey to the heart of darkness, in a way which even transcends Conrad's effort. The danger and nausea we feel on the river is palpable and, of course, the danger is real and poorly understood. There is no question that the force of those scenes borrows from a sense that we are crossing over into some darker reality. But finally we do not see the journey as a consequence of inherent evil but merely evidence of stupidity and human folly. That, of course, is problem enough, as Conrad says in a pessimistic letter to R.B. Cunninhame Graham: "You are misguided by the desire of the Impossible,—and I envy you. Alas! what you want to reform are not institutions,—it is human nature . . . not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly" (Wright, 1964, p. 15).

Neither Conrad nor Coppola succeeds in placing us in the heart of darkness. It is probably impossible to do since our very sense of it, our fear of it, is grounded in our ignorance. Its very "otherness" feeds on our ignorance. Consequently, Coppola's film is at its best when it anticipates Kurtz's stronghold but demonstrates the real problem through Willard's journey; or when he parodies the puerile and egocentric madness of military heroism through his portrayal of Kilgore; or captures the bizarre manifestation of a Bob Hope style entertainment of the troops. The fact that the show is there in the middle of the jungle is something of a technical marvel but morally and sensually it is merely obscene.

When we enter Kurtz's stronghold there is no sense of crossing a boundary. In Conrad, Kurtz's settlement is a wretched clutch of hovels, in Coppola's film it is closer to a Mayan ruin. The heads mounted on stakes are gory in a theatrical way but the natives suggest a pathetic gathering of unreconstructed acid-heads. The ritual butchering of the water buffalo stimulates an appropriate "yucçh!" but the savage ambience neither haunts nor convinces us. The sense of boundary necessary to the image of the preliterate culture as primeval and savage and therefore a manifestation of the darker side of human nature, no longer exists with sufficient force. This change in our conception of "primitive man" is not merely because we have benefited over the past half century from the field work and theoretical arguments of anthropologists. The *Golden Bough* displayed in Kurtz's living quarters is, in this sense, an anachronism. It is an anachronism because the nature of our social experience weakens this metaphor. Coppola was misled by Conrad's story; he could not give the metaphor life because it has been dead or moribund for nearly a half century.

Again, boundary metaphors have not entirely disappeared: there are contexts in which they assume real power. Racism reminds us that this way of thinking is still alive. But we are defensive about racism and the drawing of these boundaries, we deny that we draw them and are embarrassed if we are caught in such qualitative distinctions. In our time, it is difficult to believe that

Kurtz has come to know human evil through a knowledge of his own nature. Kurtz must first be revealed as the West Point prig he must be. Both Kurtz and Willard are bureaucratic heroes, professional killers doing their jobs as skillfully and dispassionately as they can. Their tragedy is that their humanity, their human nature, reveals to them the destructive consequences of their competence. They cannot imagine a world in terms other than their bureaucratic competence.

If this interpretation of *Apocalypse Now* is plausible then it can shed further light on another controversial scene in the film. Coppola has not only been criticized for the confusion of the final scenes but by his choice to destroy Kurtz's stronghold as the film ends and the credits roll. I beleive this final display of fire and destruction is crucial to the film and indicates that even while Coppola stumbled he basically knew what he wanted to say. It moves the film beyond the Vietnam War into a wider area and provides us with a powerful vision of the possible end of humankind. It at once shows the limitation and power of mechanical or technical reason. Its revelation is that a just and humane society is not obtainable with mere technical competence; we invite this outcome if we continue to believe that mechanical reason is the best that the species can contrive.

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