

APOCALYPSE NOW:
PRO-WAR SENTIMENTS IN AN “ANTI-WAR” FILM

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN
AND THE INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS
OF BİLKENT UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

By
Baran Daniş
May, 2007

I certify that I have read this thesis and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Dilek Kaya Mutlu (Principal Advisor)

I certify that I have read this thesis and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

Assist. Prof. Geneviève Appleton (Co-Advisor)

I certify that I have read this thesis and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

Assist. Prof. Andreas Treske

I certify that I have read this thesis and that in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Gürata

Approved by the Institute of Fine Arts

Prof. Dr. Bülent Özgüç, Director of the Institute of Fine Arts

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

BARAN DANIŞ
Signature:

ABSTRACT

***APOCALYPSE NOW:* PRO-WAR SENTIMENTS IN AN “ANTI-WAR” FILM**

Baran Daniş

M.A. in Media and Visual Studies

Supervisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Dilek Kaya Mutlu

Co-Supervisor: Assist. Prof. Geneviève Appleton

May, 2007

In this study, the film *Apocalypse Now* is analyzed in terms of its ideological function and messages by using the textualist approach of screen theory. The film is examined as both a pro-war and anti-war film which reveals the U.S.’s ambivalence toward the Vietnam War both politically and cinematically. Although *Apocalypse Now* seems to oppose the war and is generally considered an anti-war film, the visual style of some scenes and certain discursive constructions of the film allow a pro-war reading. The film is analyzed especially in terms of its mythic structure, the subject positions it creates for the spectator, and the ideology of realism within it.

Keywords: *Apocalypse Now*, Screen theory, Ideology, Ambivalence, Pro-war, Anti-war.

ÖZET

***APOCALYPSE NOW:* “SAVAŞ KARŞITI” BİR FİLMDE SAVAŞ YANLISI DUYGULAR**

Baran Daniş

Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar

Yüksek Lisans

Tez yöneticileri: Yard. Doç. Dr. Dilek Kaya Mutlu

Yard. Doç. Geneviève Appleton

May, 2007

Bu çalışmada, screen teori'nin metinsel yaklaşımından yararlanılarak *Apocalypse Now* filmi ideolojik işlevi ve mesajları açısından inceleniyor. Film, Amerika'nın Vietnam Savaşı karşısında hem politik hem sinematik bağlamda sergilediği bölünmüş ve kararsız duruşun bir dışa vurumu olarak, hem savaş karşıtı hem de savaş yanlısı bir film olarak değerlendiriliyor. *Apocalypse Now* savaş karşıtı gözükmese ve savaş karşıtı bir film olarak görülmesine rağmen, bazı sahnelerdeki görsel tarz ve filmin içerdiği bazı söylemsel inşalar savaş yanlısı bir okumaya da olanak tanıyor. Film, özellikle mitik yapısı, izleyici için yarattığı özne konumları ve içerdiği gerçeklik ideolojisi bakımından inceleniyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Apocalypse Now*, Screen teori, İdeoloji, Kararsızlık, Savaş yanlısı, Savaş karşıtı.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Assist. Prof. Dr. Dilek Kaya Mutlu and Assist. Prof. Geneviève Appleton for their invaluable supervision, patience, support and help, without which this thesis would have been a much weaker one. Their vision, guidance, criticism and continuous care enabled me to pursue my efforts and let this thesis come to an end.

I would also like to thank Assist. Prof. Andreas Treske and Assist. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Gürata for accepting to read this thesis and also for their valuable comments and suggestions.

It is my real pleasure to express my appreciation to Bülent Eken for his comments and suggestions and also to Carley Piatt from BilWrite for her proofreadings.

I would like to thank all my friends, Cihan Ataş, Zeynep Sağım, Yavuz Tümer and my instructor Hakan Erdoğan in particular, for their morale support and valuable help.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank mom, dad and sister. Without their endless support, understanding and love I would never have been able to finish this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ÖZET.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Statement of the Purpose.....	4
1.2. Methodology	9
1.3. Definition of Basic Terms.....	10
1.3.1. Classical Hollywood Narrative.....	10
1.3.2. Ideology:.....	12
1.3.3. Subject:.....	13
1.3.4. Ambivalence:.....	14
1.3.5. Pro-War	15
1.3.6. Anti-War.....	15
1.4. Study Overview	16
2. FILM AND IDEOLOGY	17
2.1. Saussurian Linguistics and Structuralism	18
2.2. Christian Metz and Cine-semiotics.....	24
2.3. Lacanian Psychoanalysis.....	26
2.4. Psychoanalysis and Film.....	30
2.5. Althusser on Ideology	36
2.6. Apparatus Theory	40
2.7. Screen Theory.....	41
3. THE VIETNAM WAR AND VIETNAM WAR FILMS: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	54
3.1. The Vietnam War	54
3.2. The Official Ideology and Reasons Behind the War	59
3.3. The American Nation During the War	62
3.4. Hollywood's Treatment of The War.....	65

4. AN AMBIVALENT FILM: <i>APOCALYPSE NOW</i>.....	76
4.1. The Ideology of Realism and Spectator as a Subject Position.....	79
4.2. The Split and Lacking American Subject	82
4.3. Some Contradictions and Ambivalence.....	85
4.4. <i>Apocalypse Now</i> as a Modern Myth: The Naturalization of the Historical .	95
4.5. From Criticism of the War to War as Spectacle.....	100
4.6. Silences and Absences	104
4.7. What Is Really On the Screen?.....	106
5. CONCLUSION	108
REFERENCES	115

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War is the longest and most controversial military conflict in American history. During and even after the war, debates continued over the reasons and consequences of the war. The Vietnam War deeply divided the American nation into both pro-war and anti-war circles. It is also possible to observe the reflections of this social conflict in Hollywood. Parallel to the American nation's ambivalent attitude toward the war, Hollywood's response to the war was indecisive, inconsistent and divided. Hollywood films about the Vietnam War are numerous. These films can be classified as pro-war and anti-war. Like the war itself, films about the war have also created debates and controversies in terms of their statements about the war. This thesis focuses on one of these films, *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), which is one of the most controversial and most viewed films about the Vietnam War.

Apocalypse Now is a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, which tells the story of the journey of a ship captain Marlow, along the Congo River during imperialism in Africa. The novella is about Marlow's journey to find Kurtz, an ivory trader, whose intention is to bring the civilization to Africa and enlighten the African natives. Kurtz fails, as he cannot resist the jungle's savage temptations and eventually goes insane.

The film tells the journey of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), sent by the CIA into the jungle to terminate a United States Special Forces Colonel, Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando). Kurtz has established his own army and has been fighting a private, brutal war and has set himself up as the God of a tribe under his rule. Moreover, he is accused of giving the order for the assassination of four Vietnamese double agents. Willard travels up the river in command of a Navy patrol boat to find Kurtz. During this journey, Willard sees and experiences different aspects of the war and he acknowledges its absurdity and madness.

The original script for the film was written by Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius. The voiceover narration in the film was written by Michael Herr. The film was first released in 70mm format at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Golden Palm for best film. Later, it was also released in 35mm format with a different ending.

The film's initial reception by American critics was mixed and largely divided. The critics' responses alternated between love and hate. For example, in *Time* magazine, Frank Rich harshly criticized the film by describing it as "emotionally obtuse and intellectually empty." He remarked: "It [*Apocalypse Now*] is not so much an epic account of the grueling war as an incongruous, extravagant monument to artistic self-defeat" (qtd. in Cowie, *Coppola* 131). Similarly, for Rona Barrett, *Apocalypse Now* was a "disappointing failure" (qtd. in Schumacher 250). However, Newsweek critic Jack Kroll's opinion about the film was the opposite. He argued: "The most important thing about Francis Coppola is that he is a wonderfully gifted filmmaker,

and the miracle is that after all this madness he has brought as a stunning and unforgettable film” (qtd. in Lewis 50). Critics were also divided in terms of the film’s comprehensibility or incomprehensibility. Most of the critics seemed to be in consensus about the first two-thirds of the film, which was “fine” and “worth to applaud.” However, the final third and the ending, according to some critics, were “unsatisfactory.” For example, Gene Siskel from the *Chicago Tribune* argued that the first two hours of the film was “mostly stunning,” but the final twenty minutes was a “muddy mess.” According to Siskel, “many people seemed confused” because of the incomprehensibility of the film (qtd. in Schumacher 250). In addition to these mixed responses from the critics, an interesting incident occurred during the screening of *Apocalypse Now* at the White House organized for President Jimmy Crater and his fifty friends. In that screening, president and his friends gave the film, in Michael Schumacher’s words, a “very, very mixed reaction” (249). While the president applauded at the end of the film the others sat in silence (Schumacher 249). Before the official release of *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola set up another special screening for a select audience at San Francisco’s Northpoint Theater. During the screening, Coppola distributed a questionnaire to the audience. The written responses of the audience showed that their opinions about the film were mixed and divided too (Schumacher 249).

1.1. Statement of the Purpose

This thesis will attempt to unveil the ideological discourse of the film *Apocalypse Now*, which is generally considered an anti-war or anti-Vietnam War film.¹ Instead of accepting the film as purely anti-war, it will be argued that the film has an “ambivalent” discourse with regard to the pro-war versus anti-war dichotomy. Although the film seems to oppose the war, it also includes some discursive elements which allow a pro-war reading. In this respect, *Apocalypse Now* can also be regarded as a cinematic reflection of the dividedness of the American nation between both pro-war and anti-war circles during the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

By taking up this research, this thesis will contribute to the literature on the ideological function of cinema as an institution. It will explore how mainstream films, in this case *Apocalypse Now*, constructs reality, produces particular meanings, and, thus, offers symbolic solutions for social anxieties.

This thesis focuses specifically on *Apocalypse Now* among many other Vietnam War films for a number of reasons. First of all, since the film was released in 1979, only four years after the war, it may be regarded as one of the first and most immediate responses to the Vietnam War. Secondly, the film has a distinct production and exhibition life compared with other Vietnam War films. *Apocalypse*

¹ See Peter Cowie. *The Apocalypse Now Book*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. 36; Jeremy M. Devine. *Vietnam at 24 Frames a second: a critical and thematic analysis of over 400 films about the Vietnam war*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1995. 195; Rachel C. Kranz. “*Apocalypse Now*. *The Deer Hunter* The lies aren’t over.” *Jump Cut* 23 (1980): 18-20; Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross. *The Motion Picture Guide*. Vol.1. Chicago: Cinebooks, 1985. 85; Peter Huck. “Hollywood Goes to War.” *The Age* (16 September 2002) 7 April 2007 <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/09/14/1031608342634.html>.

Now is not just a film which was released at a certain time and then shelved. It was re-edited after its first montage. This led to two different endings. Moreover, in 2001, it was re-released as *Apocalypse Now Redux*, which included some extra scenes omitted from the original film. A documentary about the meandering production process of *Apocalypse Now*, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper, 1991), which describes the film and illuminates the ever-changing intentions of the filmmakers was also made. These actions (re-editing / director's cut and the documentary), can be seen as "words" / "statements" about the original film, which are not very common in cinema. Another important characteristic of the film is that it was financed by the director through his own company, Zoetrope² to increase his creative control over the film. Thus, the film might be expected to differ from other Vietnam War films produced by big Hollywood companies in its arguments about the war. All of these make *Apocalypse Now* a dynamic text and a meaningful source in addition to making it an extraordinary film.

It could be said that *Apocalypse Now* exhibits ambivalence even at its production stage. It is not a Hollywood film, because it is not produced by a big Hollywood company but by Coppola's independent production company Zoetrope. However, although Zoetrope was established with good intentions to bring a radically new, alternative studio concept free from Hollywood (i.e. the industry), for Jon Lewis, Coppola's relationship to Hollywood has always been ambivalent (15). Coppola became a successful film director especially with the release of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) in "New Hollywood," which refers to Hollywood

² In *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, Zoetrope is defined as a "filmmaking company outside of the Hollywood system."

filmmaking between the 1960s and mid-1970s. In this period, Hollywood was vastly influenced by European art films and avant-garde films, especially in terms of visual and narrative characteristics (Buckland 169). In the classical Hollywood cinema, narratives are concrete and coherent. During the New Hollywood period, narratives became more open-ended and loosely structured. Moreover, for many critics, New Hollywood films, unlike classical Hollywood films, are not based on a psychologically motivated cause-effect relation (Buckland 167). Furthermore, the visual style of the film is more important than the film's narrative complexity. The New Hollywood period was also marked with a new mode of production where the power shifted from studio producers and executives to film directors. While film studios became only financing and distributing units, directors became the sole creative controllers of their films, like auteurs. Independent producers put together stars, story and production and then the film was distributed by a studio. This situation led to the impression that there was an independent film production in New Hollywood. However, according to Douglas Gomery, independent production was nothing more than a flexible and less costly way of filmmaking for studios. There was no production without the approval of the studio head, whether the director was an auteur or not (Gomery 249). Thus, the studios kept their all-powerful position. Similarly, according to Lewis, the power shift from studio executives to auteurs was brief and superficial. It was hard to mention a total independence of directors in Hollywood, because participation and financing of Hollywood studios continued (2). It could be argued that although New Hollywood cinema aimed to bring an alternative production mode and film form, it could not break the controlling power of studios and become something more than "arty" films which imitated European films.

In parallel to the general atmosphere of the New Hollywood, Coppola desired to make big important films as an auteur to keep his creative autonomy (Lewis 11). According to Coppola, the success of auteur films in the 1970s would increase the auteur's access to film financing. However, directors then became more dependent on studios to finance and distribute "big" films (Lewis 22). *Apocalypse Now* was distributed by United Artists, one of the biggest companies in Hollywood. United Artists invested \$7.5 million, which ensured it not only the distributing rights in the U.S. but also the right to influence it. Thus, *Apocalypse Now* is not a typical studio film, but it was produced as a part of the system.

At first glance, *Apocalypse Now* may seem to be different from other Hollywood films also in terms of its narrative characteristics. It does not have an exactly classical Hollywood narrative. It even has a self-reflexive scene, which is used often in avant-garde films. However, although the film does not use exactly a classical Hollywood narrative, many other conventions of Hollywood can be found within it: it uses conventional techniques of identification through point of view shots and voice-over, and identification itself is already a Hollywood convention. Thus, it creates a particular viewing position for the spectator like other Hollywood films. Its editing is not so different from conventional continuity editing. Continuity editing is used to create the illusion of realism and avoid spectator alienation. In addition, like a classical Hollywood narrative, the film tells the story of an individual who has a particular desire and goal. It is his decisions, choices and actions which give direction to the narrative. Finally, in the film, there are famous Hollywood actors. In short, it could be argued that *Apocalypse Now* is a commercial film with its huge budget more than \$150 million box-office receipts worldwide, its classical film

techniques and wide distribution channel. Coppola's epic film *Apocalypse Now* is described as a "mammoth" project, a super production with its huge \$31 million-plus budget (Bergan 59), as opposed to independent films, which are usually made with much lower budgets. Moreover, before its release, the film was already famous due to its troubled and long production period. The newspapers regularly announced news from the set, especially about the production difficulties. Thus, the film became a myth before its release. Thanks to the media, people were already saturated and teased about the film. In this respect, *Apocalypse Now* can also be compared to a blockbuster film.

Considering war films in terms of the pro-war versus anti-war dichotomy is not something new. As a recent example, *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) is considered both a pro-war and anti-war film in the journal *Film & History*.³ Moreover, Vietnam War films, especially the ones that are considered anti-war, have always created debates about their critical attitude, in other words, about how anti-war they really are. This thesis will not bring a very new perspective in this sense. Rather, it could be said that this thesis is an application of screen theory to a Vietnam War film. It will attempt to produce an original textual analysis of *Apocalypse Now*. In this respect, it will enhance the debates, particularly around *Apocalypse Now*, and bring a new perspective with its textual analysis. There have been other attempts to discuss *Apocalypse Now* as an ambivalent film. For example, Frank P. Tomasulo has analyzed the film in the light of Lévi-Strauss's discussion of "myth" and argued that the film, as a "modern myth," "reveals a national ambivalence toward the Vietnam

³Robert Brant Toplin. "Hollywood's D-Day From the Perspective of the 1960s and the 1990s: *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*." *Film & History* 36.2 (2006): 25-29.

War” (147). Different from Tomasulo, this thesis will offer a multi-layered analysis of the film which extends beyond the structuralist approach.

This study will be predicated upon three main assumptions: 1. A film produces a meaning and a discourse. This is always ideological. 2. This discourse is more or less always veiled. 3. The “reality” and discourse suggested by the film are absorbed by the spectator through certain textual operations.

In this thesis, *Apocalypse Now* will be regarded as a mass cultural product. Like all the products of the “culture industry,” it produces ideology as an object. Ideology gains a form, a body in this way.

1.2. Methodology

As is stated above, when analyzing *Apocalypse Now*, screen theory and its method of “textual analysis,” which is at the same time an ideological analysis, will be used. To be able to understand the ideological function of the media in people’s lives and how media messages shape people’s views of the world, one needs to understand what meanings are produced by media texts (i.e. television programs, films, newspapers, magazines, radio programs), how they are produced, and which subject positions are created for readers / viewers. We will attempt to explore these questions with respect to *Apocalypse Now*.

Textual analysis presumes that film is a “site of systematically organized discourse rather than a random ‘slice of life’” (Stam 186). In other words, film is not a direct reflection of reality but an artificial construct. According to Christian Metz, textual analysis explores the integration of cinematic codes (i.e. camera movement, off-screen sound) and extra-cinematic codes (i.e. ideological binarisms of nature-culture, male-female) within a single text (Stam 188). Textual analysis opposes traditional film analysis / criticism, in that rather than dealing with such elements as characters, acting, and performance it explores the textual operations in a film by benefiting from psychoanalysis and structural linguistics (Stam 190-191).

1.3. Definition of Basic Terms

1.3.1. Classical Hollywood Narrative: Classical Hollywood narrative is one of the most important elements of the classical Hollywood cinema. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, throughout its history, cinema overwhelmingly used a single mode of narrative which is the classical Hollywood narrative. The Classical Hollywood narrative is based on mainly individual action. The action comes from individual characters as causal agents. Natural causes such as floods, earthquakes or social causes like wars, economic depression might serve as a catalyst for action, but the narrative inevitably and mainly centers on the individual’s choices, desires and traits (Bordwell and Thompson 82).

The narrative (the chain of actions) develops based on the protagonist’s goal and the problems he / she faces. The protagonist wants something and this desire sets up a goal and the events proceed toward the achievement of that goal. The protagonist

who has a specific goal is usually introduced at the very beginning of the film. The protagonist's goals are usually psychologically motivated rather than socially motivated. The protagonist encounters an obstacle which prevents him / her from achieving his / her goal. This creates conflict. The protagonist struggles to change or overcome the conflicting situation to achieve his / her goal.

Another important characteristic of the classical Hollywood narrative is a clearly structured beginning, middle and end. This is also known as the three-act structure. According to this structure, the first act introduces the characters and the world of normal order. The second act is the progression of that situation to a conflict and problems. Finally, the conflicts and problems are resolved in the third act. Most classical narrative films have a concrete ending without important loose, unresolved ends. The spectator learns the fate of each character and the answer to each mystery (Bordwell and Thompson 83).

This narrative style is supported with a particular editing style which is continuity editing. The most important goal of continuity editing is to make the cuts and the camera movements invisible. In other words, films are constructed so that the viewer will not be aware of the construction process. This is achieved by devices such as the shot / reverse-shot system and the 180 degree rule or the eye line match.

Apocalypse Now is not a classical Hollywood film, because it does not have all aspects of the classical Hollywood narrative, such as a concrete ending and the three-act structure. However, the film tells the story of an individual, that is Willard,

and his goal, that is finding Kurtz. The Vietnam War is the setting for this quest. *Apocalypse Now* uses continuity editing technique. Thus, it is not possible to say that *Apocalypse Now* is a classical Hollywood film, but rather, it is a Hollywood-type mainstream film, because as has been mentioned, it borrows some techniques and representation style from Hollywood.

1.3.2. Ideology: In this thesis, the usage of the term “ideology” will not be the same as the everyday usage of the word. The common usage of the word in American political discourse refers to specific political beliefs such as “extremist” (the ideology of fascism, the ideology of communism) or “mainstream” (the ideology of the Democratic Party, the ideology of the Republican Party). Accordingly, in this type of usage, ideology is just the apparent part of the iceberg. The term “ideology” in this thesis will be used in a broader sense instead of giving it a specific name.

In this study, ideology will be discussed from an Althusserian point of view. The French philosopher Louis Althusser developed a theory of ideology which is not only concerned with beliefs but also, and overwhelmingly, related with structure. For Althusser, ideology is a representation system reflecting the conception of “reality.” Hence, ideology does not refer only to people’s belief but also to the myths which represent an unproblematic and natural “reality” lived by society. According to this theory, ideology gains a material existence by disseminating through the structures and institutions of the society, and cinema is one of these institutions. Thus, Althusser’s approach to ideology is fundamentally functionalist. He says: “Ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete

individuals as subjects” (qtd. in Cormack 9). This is the second important point of Althusser’s definition of ideology. Individuals are constituted as subjects by ideology and, thus, their sense of self and their role in society are ideological constructions. Althusser points to two contradictory meanings of the term “subject.” “Subject” means both a free, autonomous self, “I” (the person who does the action), and being subject to something else, servitude (e.g., being subject to law). Hence, ideology serves to make individuals consider themselves as free and autonomous selves, but this is an illusion, because they are simply subjects to ideology.

Mainstream films operate ideologically to construct subject positions for viewers in many ways, using editing, cinematic image, and narrative. These issues will be deeply analyzed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. In this thesis, film is regarded as a text, a structured cultural product, which appeals to the spectator for a specific reaction. The ideal spectator is expected to assume the subject positions created by the film text and affirm its ideological constructions.

1.3.3. Subject: The term “subject” is different from the term “individual.” Individual is the actual person. It is “the human organism, a biological, numerically distinct entity” (Carroll 59). It generally refers to a stable, autonomous and conscious man. The theory of subjectivity gives a more central place to the unconscious and to social and cultural over determination. Thus, the subject is “a socially constructed identity” (Carroll 59). In other words, subjectivity theory assumes that human reality is a construction and a product of the signifying activities, which are again, constructed by cultural and ideological values.

The concrete individual becomes a subject by being addressed by an institution or apparatus in a certain way. The subject is constituted or positioned by the discourse. So, the positioning of the subject means also the construction (constitution) of the subject. The discourse, which in our context is the filmic text itself (*Apocalypse Now*), constructs a subject position and the spectator is expected to assume this position and watch the film from that position.

The subject position in a film is mostly the figure that the spectator most closely identifies with during the film. For example, in *Apocalypse Now*, the figure of Captain Willard is used to create a subject position. In this way, the spectator sees and experiences the film from Captain Willard's perspective. Willard is a white American male who is confused about the war. He is looking for the meaning of the war. However, at the same time his voice-over narration posits him as a knowing subject. Identifying with Willard means looking for the meaning of the war as a spectator and becoming a knowing subject. However, since Willard is an American, the meanings derived and conclusions made about the war will reflect an American perspective. To encourage the audience's identification with Willard, *Apocalypse Now* uses several cinematic techniques such as voice-over narration and point of view shots.

1.3.4. Ambivalence: "Ambivalence" is a state of having contradictory emotional or psychological attitudes (for example, feeling both love and hatred for someone or something) especially toward a particular person or object, and often one attitude inhibits the expression of the other. The term is also commonly used to refer to

mixed feelings, continual fluctuation between one thing and its opposite, and to uncertainty or indecisive feelings concerning something.

In this thesis, it is argued that *Apocalypse Now* has an ambivalent attitude toward the Vietnam War. While the film openly criticizes the war with some scenes and thus becomes anti-war, the discourse laid by the film between the lines allows a highly pro-war reading. By definition, ambivalence causes the inhibition of one feeling by the other. Although the anti-war attitude of the film is more apparent than its pro-war attitude, its pro-war aspect plays a more important role in the influence on the audience.

1.3.5. Pro-War: The term “pro-war” means supporting a nation’s official decision in favor of war, but it is also used in the sense of militarism (i.e. the support of military forces during the conflict). Within the framework of the Vietnam War, another term used for a pro-war person is “hawk.”

The term “pro-war film” refers to a film that glorifies the war, turns it into a spectacle, and has a militarist tendency. The films that are explicitly pro-war are rare, but many war films are pro-war in veiled form.

1.3.6. Anti-War: The term “anti-war” means opposing a nation’s official decision in favor of war, but it is also used in the sense of pacifism (i.e. opposition to all use of military forces during conflicts). Within the framework of the Vietnam War, another term for a person who is anti-war is “dove.”

“Anti-war films” are those that criticize the war by depicting the horror and meaninglessness of the war and its devastating effects on people. Many war films are regarded as anti-war based on their manifest content.

1.4. Study Overview

Chapter 2 examines the theoretical literature on the relationship between film and ideology. It provides an overview of screen theory and its theoretical background by exploring Saussurian linguistics and structuralism, Metz’s cine-semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lacan’s theory of subject formation, psychoanalytic film theory, and the Althusserian notion of ideology. Chapter 3 provides a brief history of the Vietnam War and the official reasons for and ideology behind the war. This is followed by an examination of the responses of Hollywood to the war through its films. Chapter 4 presents an ideological analysis of the film *Apocalypse Now*. The film is analyzed in terms of its mythic structure, the subject positions it creates for the spectator, and the ideology of realism within it. The analysis benefits especially from Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Althusserian notion of ideology. Chapter 5, the Conclusion, will be reserved for the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

2. FILM AND IDEOLOGY

Textual and ideological analyses in this study are informed by “screen theory” developed in the pages of the British film journal *Screen* during the 1970s. *Screen* produced detailed analyses of film texts to reveal their operations of ideology. The ideology debate was first introduced to film studies by the film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* after 1968. The journal examined Hollywood films as either resisting or reflecting the dominant ideology (Hayward 25). These debates were broadened in *Screen*. Its contributors, such as Christian Metz, Colin MacCabe, Laura Mulvey, and Stephen Heath, created a series of debates and theories in their essays in *Screen*. Screen theory benefits from Saussurian linguistics and structuralism, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This chapter provides an overview of screen theory and its theoretical background. First, Saussurian linguistics (semiotics / semiology) and structuralism, Lacanian theory of subject formation, and Althusser’s notion of ideology will be examined. All these provide a theory of the subject, which also informs screen theory. These theories imply that subjectivity is not something pre-given to the individual, but rather something acquired or constituted through representational systems. This is followed by a discussion of screen theory itself. The works of such theorists as Christian Metz, Jean Louis Baudry, Jean Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Colin MacCabe, who had important contributions to the literature on film and ideology, will also be discussed.

2.1. Saussurian Linguistics and Structuralism

The intellectual movement called “structuralism” deeply affected film theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics provided a leading theory and initiated the mind-set of structuralism. Although his work *A Course in General Linguistics* was published in 1916, it was not popular until the 1960s. His approach to language was widely used by intellectuals to reconsider their disciplines. Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis, Roland Barthes in literary criticism, Louis Althusser in Marxist philosophy, and Christian Metz in film studies were the foremost structuralist theorists. Essentially, the film theory of the 1970s, later called screen theory, had been formulated with the help of these theorists and their theories.

Ferdinand de Saussure was the founder of the science of semiology. In his book *Course in General Linguistics*, he writes:

A science that studies of the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek semeion ‘sign’). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. (qtd. in Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 4)

For Saussure, language is only one of many semiological systems, but it is the most complex and universal one. It provides patterns for other systems. Saussure says: “language is a system of signs that express ideas” (qtd. in Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 4). Every sign has two components: the signifier (perceptible aspect, acoustic or visual words) and the signified (the triggered meaning associated with sounds or words). Saussure also claims: “the bond between the signifier and the

signified is arbitrary” (37). In other words, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is determined by convention, and it can be understood in a certain linguistic system; it is like a social contract. There is a rule or agreement that is created collectively and anonymously by individuals. It follows that language has nothing to do with real objects and it is not caused by real objects. Therefore, language does not reflect a preexisting reality; rather it constructs reality.

In language, relations come before elements. In other words, the important thing is the relation between elements rather than the elements *per se*. The sign, which is the basic unit of language, is a relational entity. The meaning of a particular sign (such as a word) is not given by the individual but comes from differences among the signs within the system of language. Saussure argues: “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (qtd. in Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 9). Saussure offers two fundamental types of relation for signs: paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. A paradigm is a set of signs from which one can pick up the signs. The elements in a paradigm set have both similarities and differences. For example, the signifier “cat” can only be distinguished by its relations of similarity and difference to other signifiers such as “hat” or “bat”. A syntagm is the combination of the chosen signs. For example, a sentence is a syntagm of words (Fiske 61-62).

Saussure also distinguishes between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* / language refers to the language system which is shared by a community of speakers. *Parole* refers to the individual speech acts made possible by the language (Stam,

Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 129). Language is the structure and it is abstract. Speech is the manifestation of language and has a material side; it is the actual practice governed by the rules. According to Saussure, *langue* is more important than speech, because it is the structure. There can be no speech without language.

According to Saussure, language is not a part of our perception of reality, but rather it shapes our perception of reality. It can be thought only through language, and hence individuals' perception of reality is determined and limited by the structure of language. Language is a system of structures, rules and codes that constitutes the individual (Jancovich 126). All these suggest that language structures the individual's way of thinking. Moreover, one's sense of identity is also a product of language. Based on all these concepts, structuralists argue that language not only constructs the perception of the world, but also gives a sense of being an autonomous self, which exists in relation to an external world. Structuralism puts "structure" at the center of meaning rather than considering the individual as the center.

Structuralism applied Saussurian linguistics to the study of texts. Structuralists studied texts as analogous to language. Structuralism suggests that narratives / texts do not express ideas in the mind of the author, but that the meaning is produced through the overall structure of the text. Therefore, structuralists attempt to figure out the rules and conventions that govern the production of meaning in a text.

One of Saussure's most important interpreters in the field of semiotics is Roland Barthes. Saussure's theories help us to understand how signs work. However,

Saussure was less interested in understanding how the sign related with the reader and his social-cultural position (Fiske 90). Barthes takes further the concept of “sign” and sets up a system to analyze how meaning is produced by the process of negotiation between the writer / reader and the text.

Barthes’s theory is based upon two orders of signification: denotation and connotation. Denotation is the first order of signification and it is the obvious meaning of the sign. “It describes the relationship between the signifier and signified within the sign” (Fiske 90). For example, the photograph of a street means the “street” itself. It can be photographed with different lenses, colors, or angles, but it always denotes the street. Connotation is the second order of signification. While denotation is the literal meaning, connotation is the symbolic meaning. It is the relationship between the sign and the user. “It describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the user and the values of his culture” (Fiske 91). In the example of “street,” if the photograph is taken with soft focus, it may evoke in the viewer his / her childhood. Childhood then is the connotative meaning of the photograph (sign). One can remember also other things by looking at the photograph. Therefore, connotative meaning is subjective and related to the interpreter’s class, gender, ethnicity, in short to his / her socio-cultural background. Connotation uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and combines it with another signified to evoke meaning. Susan Hayward suggests that in filmic terms, denotation refers to what is on the screen, which is the mechanical (re)production of the image. Connotation adds values that are culturally determined to that first order of the meaning (83).

Related to connotation, Barthes states that there is also a third order, which he calls “myth.” Here, the term “myth” does not refer to the popular usage of the word (i.e. beliefs that can be proven “wrong” or classical stories about gods and heroes). Rather, Barthes defines myth as a culture’s way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding (Fiske 93). For Barthes, myths are the dominant ideologies of our time and they serve the ideological process of naturalization (Chandler). He says “myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and imposes it on us” (qtd. in Chandler). Lakoff and Johnson argue: “myths help us to make sense within a culture” (qtd. in Chandler). Chandler puts it as follows: “their function is to naturalize the cultural –in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely ‘natural’, ‘normal’, self-evident, timeless, obvious, ‘common-sense’ and thus objective and true reflections of “the way things are” (Chandler).

Claude Levi-Strauss is another important structuralist. As an anthropologist, he studied the life of primitive societies and the logic behind their cultures. As a structuralist, he regarded culture as a signification system like language which had its own set of rules and codes. According to Levi-Strauss, the human mind is universal and eternal, and all the structures produced by this mind can be followed in every society and culture at any time. His early works analyze three specific systems: kinship relations, nature of the savage mind, and myth. As Terence Hawkes suggests, each system constitutes a partial expression of the total culture, and ultimately they generate a single gigantic *language* (34). These systems are constructed in the form of binary oppositions. Levi-Strauss states: “like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are

integrated into systems and like language may be analyzed into constituent elements and which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation” (qtd. in Hawkes 34).

Myths have also significant similarities to language systems. They function according to a set of codes and conventions. The Saussurian notion of individual utterance (*parole*) refers to each single version of a myth that conforms to the general symbolic system (*langue*). Language of a community keeps together its members. Myths also function like that. When the baby learns the language of his / her community, his / her integration into the society is provided just as in the case of myth. When a myth is firstly heard by the newcomers of the society, they learn the tradition through it (Cook and Bernink 328). The elements which constitute myths, like the elements in language, have no meaning by themselves, but acquire meaning in relation to other elements. A particular myth can be understood in relation to the system of other myths, social practices and cultural codes. All of them make sense on the basis of structuring oppositions (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis 19).

According to Levi-Strauss, thematic materials of myths involve sets of oppositions (raw / cooked, masculine / feminine, illiterate / literate). Levi-Strauss argues: “a dilemma or contradiction stands at the heart of every living myth. The impulse to construct the myth arises from the desire to resolve the dilemma” (qtd. in Hayward 255). This could also be applied to cinema. Hayward compares classical narrative cinema’s structure, which is in the form of order / disorder / order, to the functioning

of myths. She argues that dominant cinema is based upon the resolution of a dilemma which is constructed in the form of oppositions (Hayward 255).

2.2. Christian Metz and Cine-semiotics

Christian Metz was the first person who applied Saussurian linguistics to cinema. He developed “cine-semiotics,” which examines film as a web of cinematic codes and systems. Metz was interested in the problem of meaning in cinema: How are films understood? What are the channels of meaning in cinema? How is meaning constructed? Is cinema a language?

Before Metz, there were already other theorists who touched upon the notion of film language and the analogy between language and film. This issue was developed and explored in depth by Metz and his contemporaries (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 28). Metz was one of the most important figures among the cine-semiologists.

In his famous article “The Cinema: Langue or Langage?” Metz explores whether cinema is a language system or only an artistic language. He distinguishes between cinema and film. According to Metz’s view of cinema, cinema is the cinematic institution as a multidimensional social fact. This institution is based on three interconnected parts: pre-filmic events (the economic structure, technology, the studio system), post-filmic events (distribution, exhibition, political and social impact of film), and filmic events (the décor of the theatre, the social ritual of film going). However, Metz isolates “film” as the specific object of film semiology. Film, for Metz, is nothing more than a signifying text. A film does not mean cinema; it is

just an individual text. In this respect, cinesemiology does not look at the cinema as a whole but at films (Stam 110).

“Is cinema a *langue* or language?” Metz says that it is a language, but it is a language without *langue* (Lapsley & Westlake 38), because *langue* is “a system of signs intended for inter-communication” (qtd. in Heath 107). He offers three basic reasons why: First, cinema is not available for inter-communication; it allows one-way communication, whereas *langue* is a system of signs proposed for two-way communication. There is no channel for the audience to communicate. Second, the filmic image, unlike Saussurian signs, is not arbitrary. According to Metz, cinematic signification is always motivated (non-arbitrary). For example, the image of a dog (signifier) always resembles a dog (signified). Metz argues: “the cinema has as its primary material a body of fragments of the real world, mediated through their mechanical duplication” (qtd. in Heath 109). The third reason for refusing cinema as *langue* is that it lacks double articulation. French linguist André Martinet developed the notion of double articulation, and described it as a trademark of natural language. Double articulation provides the economy of language. An infinity of utterances can be generated by means of a very small number of basic units. At the level of first articulation, limited numbers of monemes (i.e. significant units, like words) are combined into different orders to provide a limitless number of utterances. However, monemes are made up of phonemes (like letters), which are the smallest distinctive units of a language. Monemes are further divided into “meaningless” units and this constitutes the second articulation. Phonemes are not meaningful by themselves, but produce differences. Cinema lacks second articulation because there is nothing that

matches the phoneme. The smallest unit of a film is a shot, but a shot has a meaning (Lapsley and Westlake 39).

According to Metz, the analogy between the shot and the word, and between the sequence and the sentence is not valid. Shots are unlimited and infinite while words are in finite number. Shots are the creations of the filmmaker, but words are anonymous. The shot is an actualized unit. The word “dog” associates any kind of dog, but the shot of a “dog” means “here is a dog.” It shows what kind of a dog, where, in which situation etc. Moreover, the meaning of a shot does not come from a system of paradigmatic relations like a word. Metz concludes that a shot is more like a statement than a word. Cinema in general does not constitute a language widely available as a code. The linguistic system has a code, but film language does not have a code. In this respect, every film is an invention, because there is no established code (Stam 110-111).

2.3. Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Jacques Lacan, an important psychiatrist and psychoanalyst of the 20th century, reinterpreted Sigmund Freud’s views, and applied structural linguistics to psychoanalysis. Lacan claims: “the unconscious is structured like a language.” In this new understanding of the unconscious, Lacan combined Freud and Saussure’s ideas. However, Lacan changed the definition of the Saussurian linguistic sign. According to Saussure, the sign is made up of two components: the signifier (the material aspect) and the signified (the meaning). Lacan gives primacy to the signifier and modifies the Saussurian linguistic sign by saying that there is a line between the

signifier and the signified. To cross this line and reach a signified is impossible. A signifier is associated with another signifier; there is no stable relationship between the signifier and the signified, contrary to what Saussure claimed. Thus, meaning is continually sliding and can be fixed only momentarily. It is produced by the subject, but, equally, the subject is produced by meanings. This network of signifiers organizes our social world, which is called by Lacan the “Symbolic.” According to Lacan, the subject (both sender and receiver of the sign) is situated between two signifiers as follows: signifier→subject→signifier. Another aspect of Lacan’s view of language is that language is constitutive: “the world of words...creates the world of things,” “things only signify within the symbolic order,” “nothing makes sense until you put a sign on it” (qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 37). Lacan borrows Saussure’s idea that images and words do not convey a pre-given reality, but he develops a different perspective on the construction of reality, drawing ideas from Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche, language forces us to think in particular ways and hides a mythology. If the word “mythology” is replaced with “ideology,” what film theorists took up from Lacan’s reading of Saussure becomes more clear: “film is a language and appears to make the real transparent but in fact secrets the ideology” (Lapsley and Westlake 37).

For Lacan, the subject is not only a product of language, but also divided or split. Lacan asserts that the experience of “lack” is critical to the formation of the subject. He says: “the child is born into the experience of lack” (qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 67). In the various development stages, the child attempts to bring this lack to an end, and arrive at a sense of completion and wholeness. However, Lacan claims that these attempts are never successful, even in the stage of acquiring a sense of self

(Jancovich 134). According to Lacan, there are three stages in the development of subjectivity: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Real should not be confused with reality, which is the mixture of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The Real is outside of the signification; it cannot be expressed by language. It is the domain where the baby is in wholeness. The Imaginary starts with mirror phase. Lacan explains that the mirror phase marks the first acquisition of the “self.” In this stage, the baby begins to establish an identity in the universe of meaning. This is possible through a series of identifications. The mirror phase occurs as follows: Between sixth and eighteen months, the baby sees itself in the mirror, for the first time, as a separate thing from its world. It does not necessarily need to be its own image in the mirror. It can also be any other thing perceived as a whole. The baby identifies with this image and internalizes it. In this way, a sense of completeness and unity develops and the baby begins to have motor co-ordination. However, this process involves a fundamental problem: In the moment of identification, there is alienation and misrecognition. Even though the mirror image is exactly identical with the baby itself, actually, it is a different thing. Therefore, identification is provided with a totally separate and distinct thing. The “self” is outside of the self. To say, “that’s me,” means, “I am another”. Thus, the subject is always divided and split (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 129).

From Lacan’s mirror phase account important conclusions can be drawn: Identification with an external image affects the other identifications in the rest of the life of the individual. The mirror phase is an entrance to the visible world. Further, since “I” is a fiction, an imaginary construct, “I” is dependent on the images that are outside the self. This is important in terms of the construction of

subjectivity. This also points out the role of visual media in the construction of our subjectivities, as they provide us with images for identification and alienation.

The entrance into the Imaginary is followed by the entrance into the Symbolic. The Symbolic is the social, cultural and linguistic world. This is another attempt to overcome lack in the life of the subject by the acquisition of language (i.e. the ability to symbolize) (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 129). Linguistic terms stand for what is absent. They serve to deny the absence or lack. Language enables the baby to express his / her demands, but this is also problematic. Language precedes the baby, and the baby must accept its rules and express his/her demands and desires through pre-existing terms. In other words, language and words are not made especially for a particular subject. Desire is determined by language, not by the self. However, language is not enough to express the subject's desire; desire can never be fulfilled. Words have more meaning than individuals mean in using them. They carry meanings that are beyond the intention of the individual. There is always a surplus which is described by Lacan as the "unconscious." According to Lacan, the message always slips and the intended message can never be sent (Lapsley and Westlake 70). Entering the symbolic intensifies alienation. The Symbolic is also the domain where the Oedipal crisis takes place. In this domain, the father is introduced as a potential castrator and the baby accepts the authority of the father. The baby gives up the mother as the object of desire, but in return receives a position as a subject in society and acknowledges sexual difference.

2.4. Psychoanalysis and Film

Lacan's psychoanalytic approach, especially his idea of imaginary identification, affected film theory. Christian Metz, after applying Saussurian linguistics to cinema, discussed cinema and the experience of film-watching through Lacanian notions. In his famous book *Imaginary Signifier*, Metz says that the cinematic institution consists of two machines: cinema as industry, which is related to the economic aspect of the institution, such as circulation of money and investment, and cinema in the spectator's psyche. The latter is related to the pleasure of film viewing. Metz is concerned with the second "machine" (Lapsley and Westlake 81).

Metz distinguishes the cinematic signifier from other art forms such as literature and painting. He argues that cinema is more perceptual, in that it addresses more senses (visual and auditory) (408). Similar art forms like the theatre and the opera, also, involve sight and hearing, but their difference from cinema is that they do not consist of images. In the theatre or the other spectacles of the same type, during the performance, everything that the audience hear and see is actively produced in their presence. The performers and the audience occupy the same time and place. In cinema, the spectator is there, but things that are seen and heard are absent; everything is recorded. Cinema is the record of that which is absent. The things whose images are projected on the screen exist somewhere else (Metz 409). It follows that the cinematic signifier is imaginary, because the images are based on absence: "The imaginary, by definition, combines within it a certain presence and a certain absence" (Metz 410). The cinematic signifier is imaginary also because cinema creates the impression of reality more strongly than the other arts. The image on the screen is the double, the replica of the real object: "The activity of

perception in it is real (the cinema is not a fantasy) but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror” (Metz 410). The distinctive feature of cinema, its unique position among art forms, comes from this dual character of real and imaginary perception.

As a consequence, film functions just like a mirror. Everything is projected with a perfect sense of “reality.” However, one thing is never reflected: the spectator’s own body. Actually, there is no need for the reflection of the spectator, because the spectator already knows that the object exists, that he himself exists as a subject, that he becomes an object for others. The spectator is not a baby who is at the mirror stage. Thus, the cinema is already on the side of the Symbolic. Metz asks: if the screen does not present the spectator with an image of his or her own body, then the spectator identifies with what during the projection of the film (411)? The characters in the film provide an opportunity for the spectator’s identification. However, according to Metz, this is insufficient. Metz defines the spectator as an “all-perceiving” subject, and states that identification is provided first by the camera. By identifying with the camera, the spectator thinks: “I am all-perceiving...the constitutive instance...of the cinematic signifier (it is I who make the film)...I know I am perceiving something imaginary and I know that is I who am perceiving it” (Metz 411-412). The spectator knows that he / she is outside the action, which is on the screen, but also he / she has a sense of mastery and power over the narrative. Moreover, the spectator perceives himself / herself as a cause of the text rather than the effect of the text. However, of course, this recognition is a misrecognition: “In other words, the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as condition of possibility of

the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, anterior to every there is” (Metz 412). Metz names this identification with the camera as the primary cinematic identification (419). The primary cinematic identification gives way to the secondary cinematic identification with the characters and events on the screen: “As for identification with characters, with their own different levels (out-of-frame character, etc.) they are secondary, tertiary cinematic identifications, etc; taken as a whole in opposition to the simple identification of the spectator with his own look, they constitute together secondary cinematic identification, in the singular” (Metz 419).

In the mirror stage, the baby identifies himself with an idealized image. In film, the spectator identifies with idealized images (larger than life), and the images are absent (imaginary objects). In the mirror stage, there is duality. The cinematic signifier also has a dual character. It is imaginary, because it creates the impression of reality, and it is imaginary, because the images are based on absence. However, the difference between the mirror phase and cinema is that while the baby can identify itself with its image, in cinema this is not possible because the spectator’s own body is not reflected on the screen. Cinema, by reproducing imaginary relations and identifications, becomes also the privileged domain of ideology.

According to Metz, spectatorship in cinema relies on two sexual drives, which are voyeurism and scopophilia. Scopophilia is the pleasure in looking. Voyeurism, a particular mode of scopophilia, refers to the pleasure of seeing without being seen. Voyeurism has also a sadistic dimension, because it is non-authorized, and there is a

control over what is seen. These drives are distinguished from others by their greater dependence on lack (Metz 420). Unlike taste, smell and touch (senses of contact), sight and hearing require a certain distance. The other art forms such as theatre, painting, music, sculpture also include distance, but what further distinguishes cinema is the absence of the object. The absence of the things and performers makes the cinematic apparatus inherently voyeuristic. There is already a gap between the screen and the spectator, and, further, the absence of that which is presented on the screen increases the sense of distance:

In the theatre, actors and spectators are present at the same time and in the same location...but in the cinema actor was present when the spectator was not (=shooting), and the spectator is present when the actor is no longer (=projection); a failure to meet of the voyeur and the exhibitionist whose approaches no longer coincide (they have “missed” one another). (Metz 423)

The actor has no relationship with the spectator and cannot know his / her reactions. This is why the conventions of the classical narrative cinema require that the actor should never look directly at the camera. Otherwise, the spectator would suddenly alienate and realize that his / her presence is acknowledged by the actor. In other words, the voyeur spectator feels that he / she is caught. Various other features of the cinematic institution intensify voyeurism (e.g. the dark auditorium which gives the feeling of being freed from the surveillance of those on the screen and the other members of the audience) (Metz 424).

Finally, Metz argues that fetishism and disavowal are related to the absence of the objects presented on the screen. Like the cinematic signifier, these features are also based on the play of absence and presence. Fetishism means attributing special values to certain things. Disavowal is to reject or deny what is perceived. In

Freudian and more clearly Lacanian psychoanalysis, the child's first recognition of the sexual difference, either through the mother's or the father's body, is a traumatic recognition. When the child notices that the mother does not have a penis, he / she concludes that she had it once, but she was castrated / punished. The child sees the lack, but denies it; refuses to see it. This process of disavowal leads to the fetishization of the parts of the female body. In other words, the lack gets substituted by the parts of the female body or sometimes by another object (e.g. hair, skirt, shoe, etc.), and this becomes the fetish object which veils that which is lacking. For Metz, the crucial thing about cinema is that it produces rich images based on their absence. Material absence triggers a fetishistic pleasure. The spectator knows that what he / she is watching is a fiction. It is not real, but the spectator suspends this disbelief momentarily, because the pleasure is dependent on the belief that it is not a fiction. The more the image is realistic and convincing, the more we, as spectators, wish to suspend our disbelief in it.

Metz's views have been very influential on the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who was also among the writers of the *Screen* journal. In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey explores how women are represented in cinema. Mulvey notes that cinema offers a number of pleasures including scopophilia - pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object. The various features of film viewing, especially the dark atmosphere of the auditorium as mentioned by Metz, provide the spectator both the voyeuristic process of objectification of female characters and also the narcissistic process of identification with an ideal ego, usually male, on the screen. Mulvey states that in a patriarchal society, "pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female" (309). This patriarchal

split is reproduced by dominant Hollywood cinema. The classical Hollywood narrative not only focuses on the male protagonist in the narrative but also serves the male spectator. Mulvey argues “as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (310). Traditionally, in films men are displayed as active, controlling subjects, more complete, more perfect ideal egos, whereas women are treated as passive erotic objects for the male characters in the story as well as for the male spectator in the auditorium. According to Mulvey, the classical Hollywood film presents “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (309). Men look at and women are looked at. In parallel to the patriarchal order, films are produced to satisfy the male ego by reproducing the “male gaze.”

While the male image is the point of identification, the female image causes a problem for the male spectator. It re-evokes castration anxiety, and hence unpleasure, due to her lack of penis. For Mulvey, there are two techniques, two “avenues of escape,” to overcome this problem: The first is to investigate the woman and demystify her mystery, or to punish her. Mulvey argues that this has associations with sadism: “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt- asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (311). The other technique is fetishism. This involves the “complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star” (Mulvey 311). The most common examples are Marilyn Monroe’s breasts and Rita

Hayworth's shoulders. Mulvey argues that the spectator fluctuates between these forms of looking when viewing the film on the screen.

2.5. Althusser on Ideology

Althusser's discussion of ideology, especially his conception of cinema as an "ideological state apparatus," constituted an essential reference for screen theory. Like Lacan's re-reading of Freud, Althusser re-reads Marx in terms of ideology in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." According to Althusser, Marx's discussion of ideology was limited. It did not explain how the individual subject internalized social norms. According to Marxist theory, the state is a repressive apparatus; it is a machine of repression which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class (i.e. the capitalist exploitation) (Althusser 106). Althusser distinguishes between Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).⁴ The government, the administration, the police, the court, the prison, and the army are the RSAs that function massively and predominantly by repression, and they are in the public domain. The ISAs function massively and predominantly by ideology (112). RSAs and ISAs represent the two aspects of the structure of the state, which is both repressive and ideological (Ricoeur 51). In other words, Althusser suggests that the state functions not only by power but also by ideology.

Cinema, press, radio, television, schools, church, political parties and other cultural institutions are ISAs (Althusser 111). All ISAs contribute to the same result: the

⁴ Althusser uses the term "apparatus" deliberately. It refers to a more mechanical meaning and it is something which functions and therefore it is more related with structures and reproduction (Ricoeur 52).

reproduction of the relations of production (i.e. capitalist relations of exploitation). Each of them contributes to this single result in a proper way. For example, the political state apparatus achieves this by subjecting the individuals to the political state ideology; the communications and cultural apparatuses (e.g. cinema, TV, radio, television and the press most explicitly) by filling up the citizens with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, and moralism (Althusser 117). The importance of the state's ideological apparatuses can be connected with the problem of the system's need to reproduce itself. For example, the function of the school is to reproduce the system, not only by the teaching of technological skills but by the reproduction in students of the rules of the system. The system is maintained by the reproduction of its rule (Ricoeur 52).

Althusser distinguishes between particular ideologies and ideology in general. There are several particular and specific ideologies such as religious, ethical, aesthetic and political ideologies. However, Althusser deals with ideology in general. He claims that ideology has no history, and this claim is related to Freud's assumption that the unconscious is eternal (i.e. it has no history) (Althusser 122). Althusser claims that there will always be ideology, because people have to make sense of their lives (Ricoeur 56). The reason ideology has no history is because it is a permanent structure (Ricoeur 48).

Althusser says that ideology is "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence" (123). He uses the term "real" to describe the class position of the subjects, in relation to the relations of production.

Ideology does not correspond to reality. It constitutes an illusion and it needs to be interpreted to discover the reality behind its imaginary representation of the world. “Representation,” by definition, means alienation from reality. The term “representation,” in Althusser, refers to all images, myths, ideas or concepts. “What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations which they live” (Althusser 125).

According to Althusser, ideology works through “interpellation.” This means that social practices and structures hail individuals by providing them with a social identity and constituting them as subjects who unthinkingly accept their role in the system of product relations (Stam 134). This is what Althusser means when he says: “All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (130). In this way, individuals see themselves as independent and autonomous beings. To be hailed is to become a subject. This theory is highly related with Saussurian linguistics. Saussure claims that the subject is a function of the language. When someone is addressed as “you,” he / she is positioned as the subject or the object of the sentence. Althusser also thinks that subjects are addressed by ideology in a similar manner. Ideology offers “mirror images” to constitute people’s identities such as Christian images, teenage images, and female images. Individuals construct their identities by internalizing these images as natural and inherent. However, this identification is false. It is misrecognition, just as in Lacan’s “mirror phase.” For Althusser, free natural born individuals are transformed into subjects in ideology (130). Hayward puts this as follows: “The individual is an effect of ISA not an agent. As subject-effects, individuals give meaning to ideology by colluding with and

acting according to it. A mirroring process occurs which provides the subject” (26). Subjects misrecognize their own free individuality; in fact, they are already positioned in social relations. Althusser claims that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (128). Consequently, ideology and the subject exist for each other; they are mutually constitutive. To sum up, Althusser’s theory of ideology suggests that a) ideology interpellates individuals as “subjects”; b) they are subjected to the ideology; c) simultaneously both subjects and ideology recognize each other. This mutual recognition leads to a non-problematic situation since subjects recognize themselves in ideology and behave accordingly (Althusser 135).

According to Althusser, subjects are born into ideology and ideology spreads with common sense. Ideology is always invisible. If it were identifiable, it would not be powerful. The dominant order always seems natural. In other words “ideology never says ‘I am ideological’” (Althusser 131). Then, the question becomes how such a hardly recognizable thing can be traced. Ideology appears not as a whole, massive and manifest, but it gives symptoms. Therefore, it needs to do a “symptomatic reading” to bring to the surface the operations of ideology in a text (e.g. film). Symptomatic reading is not concerned with the essence or depth of a text, but it looks at the breaking points, lapses and silences, its absences and distortions. Ideology always says something, and saying something is an act of choice. When you say something, you leave other things unsaid. In symptomatic reading, what is the most important are the ones that are left unsaid in the text. All narratives contain an ideological project and therefore necessitate a symptomatic reading (Storey 33).

2.6. Apparatus Theory

As has been stated, cinema is one of the ISAs discussed by Althusser. In parallel to this, a group of theorists including Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, attempted to theorize the ideological workings of the cinematic apparatus. These theories are grouped as the “apparatus theory.” Baudry, in his article “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus,” described cinema as a “work,” that continuously conceals the traces of its workings. In this way, cinema presents its ideological constructions as natural.

Baudry argues that cinema produces an ideological position with the mechanics of representation such as the camera, the editing, and the fixed spectator placed in front of a screen. Ideology is not imposed upon cinema; on the contrary it is already in the cinematic apparatus. Cinema is based on a fundamentally ideological effect. This ideological effect involves constituting the viewer as a transcendental subject or an imaginary unity. Baudry starts his article by analyzing the perspective in Renaissance. The perspective system gives the spectator an all-knowing unitary place by making the eye of the spectator the center of the visible world. Baudry argues: “This system, recentering or at least displacing the center (which settles itself in the eye), will assure the setting up of the “subject” as the active center and origin of meaning” (532). According to Baudry, the camera lens was designed to produce the same ideological effect like the system of perspective in the Renaissance painting (534).

However, film is different than still images. It is an instrument that mechanically produces a series of images. Furthermore, it is not composed of a series of shots from a single point of view, but of continuous intercutting between different point of views. At first glance, this might seem to have a destructive effect on the spectator's sense of mastery and coherence, but when the shots are successfully edited, in other words, when the discontinuous elements are restored, an illusion of continuity is created. This would increase the spectator's sense of mastery over the film. In this respect, for Baudry, editing plays a decisive role in the production of ideology in cinema (535). The movability of the camera, the framing and reframing of the shots and cuts from one image to another are the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the "transcendental subject" (Baudry 537). At the cinema, the world of the film unfolds before the spectator's eyes, and this provides him / her the central position. The spectator's vision is freed, liberated from the body, and the world exists for him / her. However, for Baudry, this sense of being godlike is misrecognition. The spectator, who is constituted by the text, mistakes himself or herself as its author.

2.7. Screen Theory

Thus far, it has been attempted to sketch out the theoretical background that informs screen theory. In the mid-1970s, film theory concentrated on three different but related problems: "the relation of the film to the world it represents; the internal organization of filmic discourse and the reception of the film by the spectator" (Nowell-Smith 8). Screen theory benefits from Althusserian Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis while investigating these problems. Screen theorists, like the apparatus theorists, conceived cinema as an institutional and ideological apparatus.

However, they focused on the textual operations of the cinematic institution. They offered detailed analyses of individual classical Hollywood films, which represented the cinematic institution. Drawing ideas from Althusser, Saussure and Lacan, screen theorists approached film as a discourse and attempted to describe the ways in which films organize their consumption by producing certain ways of seeing and knowing through specific narrative mechanisms and codes of representation.

Screen theory appeared as an objection against auteur theory. Auteur theory was a movement that dominated film criticism and theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Alexander Astruc defines cinema in his essay “Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Pen” as a new means of expression analogous to painting or novel-writing. He adds that the filmmaker should be able to say “I” like the novelist or the poet. According to this view, the director was no more the servant of the screenplay, but a creative artist in his / her own right (Stam 83). Consequently, auteur theory placed the auteur at the center as the producer of meaning. According to this theory, the auteur expresses and transfers his / her worldview to the audience by using a visual language that is peculiar to him / her. Film is just a medium in this expression. Auteur theory does not account for text, spectator or ideology (Hayward 23). However, informed by Saussurian linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, screen theory claims that film is a text which produces a discourse, and that the meaning is produced through the relation between the text and the spectator. Accordingly, Stephen Heath, influenced by Metz’s cinesemiotics, refers to “a cinema no longer of films, but of *texts*” (104). Screen theory attempts to understand the relationship between the spectator as a textual construct and the film, and evaluate the political implications of this process. Roland Barthes’s claim of the “death of the author” also

supports this view. According to Barthes, by the emergence of the reader, the author is no more the privileged source of the text's meaning. Any text, once written, gains freedom. It exists independently from its author. The reader can put his / her interpretation on the text, which might be quite different from what the author intended. The text, as it is read by the reader, changes and is re-created. What the author means is not important in this process of re-creation. The reader finds his / her own meaning. Barthes says:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet, this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (qtd. in Mayne 36)

Screen theory is interested in the politics of signification and asserts that cinema serves the maintenance of ideology. It regards popular films as inherently ideological (Jancovich 124). While auteur theory assumes that the spectator and the audience are independent and autonomous individuals, according to screen theory, cinema functions like a language and constitutes individuals as subjects by its own structures, rules and codes. As Saussure states that signs do not refer to pre-existing objects, screen theory argues that films as texts do not refer to pre-existing reality.

Shaun Moores explains:

Central to *Screen's* approach was the proposal that film does not simply capture a pre-given external reality. Images are not transparent windows on the world. Instead film was seen to be structured according to distinctive narrative conventions and codes of representation. Images are productive rather than reflective – they produce ways of seeing the world and thereby organize consumption in certain ways. They construct the 'look' or 'gaze' of the spectator, binding her or him into the fiction and into a position of imaginary knowledge. (10)

Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni define film as a particular product. It is manufactured within a given system of economic relations and it involves labor. A certain number of workers come together to produce. Film is a commodity, having an exchange value which is realized by the sale of tickets and governed by the laws of the market. On the other hand, since it is a material product, a meta of the system, it is also an ideological product of the system (i.e. capitalism). Every film is a part of the economic system and a part of the ideological system. Therefore, every film is political (Comolli and Narboni 45).

Comolli and Narboni accept that cinema reproduces reality but this reality is nothing but an expression of the general ideology. They state:

So, when we set out to make a film, from the very first shot, we are encumbered by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideology. This includes every stage in the process of production: subjects, 'styles', forms, meanings, narrative traditions all underline the general ideological discourse. The film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself. Once we realized that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the filmmaker's first task is to show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality.' (46)

In parallel to the apparatus theory, screen theory accepts that cinema is an ideological apparatus and that it essentially functions in a seamless manner. The spectator does not see how the film text produces the meaning. The text renders its production invisible and natural thanks to cinematic techniques such as continuity / invisible editing and shot / reverse shot. The spectator can easily enter into the narrative with the processes of recognition and identification as well as the reality effects (Hayward 194). According to screen theory, the classical Hollywood text is dominated by this ideology of realism. The ideology of realism serves to represent the dominant

ideology as a natural thing. This is achieved with narrative structures and technical features of the film such as editing, lighting, color, and so on.

The term realism refers to a literary and art movement of the nineteenth century. Realism appeared against idealism and its principle was to portray life as it really was. The film camera is considered a natural tool for realism because of its mechanical nature. It is assumed that the camera reproduces “what is there” and that the film shows reality. The film claims to give a “direct” and “truthful” view of the “real world” through the presentation of the characters and their environment in a particular way. Films dominated by the ideology of realism may address social issues, but, eventually their narrative conclusions offer easy solutions, and, in this way, social problems become natural, even individualized. These films posit individuals as responsible for themselves, as if the bad events that happen to them arise from their faults, not from the system, and as if everything can be solved through individual action. In this respect, mainstream films do not provide any deep insight into social, economic, and political causes of social problems (Hayward 311).

There are two types of realism with regard to film: Seamless realism, whose ideological function is to mask the illusion of realism, and aesthetic realism. The ideological function of realism is examined. The seamless type of realism relates to the film technique which functions together with narrative structures to mask the idea of illusion; to create the “reality effect.” It hides the naturalizing function of the film; otherwise the authenticity of its “realism” would be destroyed (Hayward 311- 312).

“The classical realist text stands for transparency that is the attempt to efface traces of the ‘work of the film,’ making it pass for ‘natural,’ and thus reproducing the vague and non-theorized world of common sense (i.e. dominant ideology in Althusser’s sense)” (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 188). Jean-Paul Fragier regards the impression of reality as a constitutive part of the ideology produced by the cinema. He argues: “[The screen] opens like a window, it is transparent. This illusion is the very substance of the specific ideology secreted by the cinema” (qtd. in Stam 140).

This debate is expanded by Colin MacCabe, one of the most prominent screen theorists, through the concept of the “classic realist text.” According to MacCabe, the classic realist text have two important features: “(1) The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory; (2) In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in relation to dominant specularity” (39). The classic realist text, MacCabe argues, works to produce the illusion of realism, which has certain ideological implications. The classic realist text may represent many contradictions in the form of different discourses struggling for supremacy and usually through various characters in the narrative. However, this is illusory, because the narrative is composed according to a hierarchy. MacCabe remarks: “a classic text may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth” (34). MacCabe claims that the dominant discourse, the privileged one, is placed at the top. It acts as the voice of truth and interprets, overrules and judges all the others. It is the place where the contradictory discourses are tested and eventually repressed by the dominant ideology (Cook and Bernink 332).

MacCabe applies the structure of the nineteenth century novel to film. According to him, the nineteenth-century realist novel is the ancestor of the mainstream cinema.

MacCabe states:

This notion of the real is, however, I wish to suggest, a notion which is tied to a particular type of literary production- the nineteenth-century realist novel. The detour through literature is very necessary because, in many ways, the structure is much more obvious there and also because of the historical dominance of the classic realist novel over much film production. (MacCabe 34)

In the case of the realist novel, there is a narrator who knows all. The narrator is presented as “the voice of truth” and he / she interprets, disqualifies or guarantees the views and perceptions of the characters in the narrative (Jancovich 128). MacCabe argues: “in the classical realist novel the narrative prose functions as a metalanguage that can state all truths in the object language” (35). In the case of film, the position of knowledge is taken over by the narrative of events. Moreover, the camera itself becomes a guarantor of the truth: “The camera shows us what happens – it tells the truth against which we can measure the discourses” (MacCabe 37).

In both literature and film, narrating discourse appears to provide the truth; to render the real transparently. While the other contradictory discourses are easily recognizable, the discourse at the top, the dominant discourse (metalanguage) is not. “Transparent in the sense that the metalanguage is not regarded as material; it is dematerialized to achieve perfect representation – to let the identity of things shine through the window of words” (MacCabe 35). The problem is that the particular image functions as the guarantor of the truth so simply that it is immediately regarded as truth by the viewer. The hierarchy of discourses in the film supports a single meaning -the meaning of dominant discourse- and the spectator is fixed in

apparent possession of knowledge (Cook and Bernink 332). ‘The spectator is positioned as “a subject who is supposed to Know”’ (Stam 144). “This metalanguage, resolving as it does all contradictions, places the spectator outside of the realm of contradiction and of action – outside of production” (MacCabe 54). Therefore, the spectator remains passive because the subject is fixed in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious; there is no need for any further activity but watching. Hence, MacCabe defines the classic realist text as “reactionary” (Lapsley and Westlake 172). The classic realist text is authoritarian toward the spectator; the viewer is not in the process of the production (i.e. he / she is discouraged from creating his / her own reading). Moreover, this process also reaffirms the spectator’s sense of himself / herself as an independent and autonomous individual. MacCabe points out: “It is the cinema’s ability to place the spectator in the position of a unified subject that ensures the contradiction between his working activity which is productive and the leisure activity in which he is constantly placed as consumer” (54). This is just what capitalism wants.

It has been argued that the pleasure offered by the narrative is based upon the process of narrative conclusion in which conflict and contradictions are resolved. Narratives are classically set up in the form of order (beginning) / disorder (middle) / order restored (end) style. Accordingly, the spectator’s pleasure comes from fulfillment of the expectation that the narrative will reach a particular type of conclusion. This also gives the spectator a sense of mastery and coherence over the narrative. The problem is that, social reality does not present easy solutions and life is not such an order (Jancovich 130).

To sum up, the “classic realist text” places the individual as social subject by interpellating him / her with “the voice of truth.” The subject is also placed in a fixed position of knowledge thanks to the effects of the classic realist text (Cook and Bernink 333).

Parallel to Lacan’s conception of the subject as an effect of language, the subject in cinema, the spectator, according to screen theorists, was the product of the filmic representation. The classical narrative film encourages the viewer to assume certain subject positions inscribed in the text. This insertion of the spectator as subject into the filmic text is called “suture,” which is a concept borrowed from Lacan.

As has been argued, according to Lacan, the subject is split and divided. There are always attempts to re-cover and maintain the sense of unity. This self-division is based on the division between the self which speaks and the self of which one speaks in the symbolic domain. On the other hand, the sense of unity acquired in the mirror phase is already imaginary. Suture is the process of the subject’s efforts to fill the gaps, to restore the divisions within the self, and to provide order and coherence to the contradictory and conflicting elements of the unconscious. Jacques-Alain Miller introduced the concept of suture to cinema “to account for the momentary and incomplete stitchings of that gap or wound” (Moore 11). Miller writes:

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse...it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension – the general elation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking the-place-of. (qtd. in Silverman, “On Suture” 137)

Suture is necessary for the constitution of the subjectivity. Stephen Heath and other screen theorists consider film as a discourse and claim that film is not only concerned with the construction of scenes but also with putting the spectator at a place in relation to these scenes. Heath says: “the spectator completes the image as its subject” (qtd. in Moores 12). Suture provides the ongoing process of the stitching of the spectator into the text. Textual strategies generate subject positions for the spectator and produce subjectivity.

Theoreticians of the cinematic suture generally agree that one of the most common cinematic techniques of suture is the shot / reverse shot formulation. The shot / reverse shot system is often used in the representation of conversations. It is a linking of two shots “in which the second shot shows the field from which the first shot is assumed to have been taken” (Silverman, “On Suture” 138). The exchange of views between characters is edited in such a way that shot 2 reveals a character whose point of view had been displayed in shot 1, and the image “of a fictional character of looking in shot 2 usually proves sufficient to maintain the illusion that shot 1 visually belongs to that character” (Silverman, “On Suture” 139). The textual positioning of the spectator and the spectator’s identification with the camera create the visual illusion that the viewer is an all-perceiving subject. “The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, “Yes, that’s me,” or “That’s what I see” (Silverman, “On Suture” 141). In this way, the sense of incompleteness is overcome with an illusion. Daniel Dayan takes the idea of deception and examines suture within the context of ideology. He claims that the shot / reverse shot system creates the appearance of transparency. The viewer ties together different shots and assumes that the image is just the point of view of a

character in the narrative rather than the product of ideology. In this way, the text masks its own status as representation (Jancovich 138). Jean Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan claim that the shot/reverse shot formation is virtually synonymous with the operations of suture. However, Heath suggests that shot / reverse shot is only one element in a much larger system and he emphasizes the features of the editing system which are common to all shot transitions (Silverman, "On Suture" 138).

Heath does not reject the idea of suture, but finds the identification of suture only with the shot / reverse shot system limited. Statistical studies show that shot / reverse shot system is used only in one third of the shots in Hollywood films. Heath argues that suture can be better understood in terms of general cutting and the relation between film and the viewing subject (Silverman, "On Suture" 139). Similarly, Kaja Silverman analyzes *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) by not only looking at shot / reverse shots but also looking at the suturing role of the whole narrative that is how it positions the spectator. Silverman shows that *Psycho* uses point-of view editing in such a way that the spectator is positioned ambivalently, both as victim and sadistic voyeur (Stam 138).

Although screen theory made significant contributions to the development of film theory, including a theory of film-spectator relations, it has been subjected to serious criticisms.⁵ A major criticism is that screen theory fails to distinguish

⁵ For an overview of the major criticisms of screen theory see, Mark Jancovich. "Screen Theory." *Approaches to popular film*. Ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995. 124-125, 144-147; Shaun Moores. "Texts, readers and context of reading: developments in the study of media audiences." *Media, Culture and Society* 12 (1990): 14.

between the textual spectator and the actual social subjects who interpret or decode the text. The relationship between the text and the audience is not only determined by the text. There are also other social formations and discourses which affect the position of the spectator. In other words, the spectator is already a social subject before encountering the film text, before assuming the subject position constructed by the text. There is not an abstract, isolated relationship between text and the spectator. Moreover, screen theory assumes that the spectator is very passive during the production of meaning, in that he / she unproblematically assumes the subject positions in the text and makes the meanings that the text produces.

Another criticism is that although screen theory claims that it is interested in the politics of signification rather than the politics of representation, that is how things are represented, it has focused largely on the latter. Most of the articles by screen theorists focus on narrative and character instead of cutting and editing. There is also the claim that screen theory makes conclusions out of its theoretical claims too quickly, which in fact need further analysis. Thus, it is argued that screen theory is highly reductionist and functionalist.

Finally, the concept of subject in screen theory is trans-historical, universal and highly abstract. This is partly due to the fact that screen theory gives too much credit to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic film theory. Psychoanalytic theories, and thus psychoanalytic film theory, ignore the socially-specific constructions of subjectivity by considering subjectivity in general. While the subject in general is largely used in screen theory, historical and social determinacy over the subject is

underestimated. Screen theory is not concerned only with one aspect of cinema (i.e. authorship, genre) but with the form of cinema itself. Moreover, screen theory tends to be global rather than local. By doing this, it cannot avoid making large generalizations and being ahistorical.

It would be argued that despite all these weaknesses, screen theory is a valuable source for the ideological analysis of films. It cannot be ignored that films contribute to the circulation of particular meanings in society. Therefore, textual and ideological analysis is necessary. Screen theory has weaknesses like any other theory, but this should not prevent us from using it in the analysis of films, especially if one wants to understand how films privilege certain meanings over others, and thus create particular views, particular ways of seeing and thinking.

Following a chapter on the historical background of the Vietnam War, based on the theoretical overview presented in this chapter, in Chapter 4 a symptomatic reading of *Apocalypse Now* will be conducted. The film will be analyzed as a filmic discourse with respect to the ideology of realism, the subject positions created for the spectator, and the mythic structure of the narrative. This analysis will benefit especially from the Althusserian notion of ideology and Lacanian theory of subjectivity and attempt to show that *Apocalypse Now* is both a pro-war and anti-war film which reveals the U.S. ambivalence toward the Vietnam War.

3. THE VIETNAM WAR AND VIETNAM WAR FILMS:

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Vietnam War, like all other big disasters that leave bad traces in social memory, deeply affected the American nation. In this chapter, the history of the war, the official reasons behind the war, and the situation of American society during the war will be explored. In addition, since cinema is a social phenomenon, the reflections of the Vietnam War in Hollywood films will be examined.

3.1. The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a military conflict in Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, involving the North Vietnamese army and the National Liberation Front (NLF, also known as Vietcong) in conflict with the U.S. forces and the anti-communist forces of the Republic of Vietnam, or simply, the South Vietnamese army. It was the longest military conflict in U.S. history and it cost more than 58,000 American lives and wounded more than 303,000. According to different estimations, the loss as suffered by South Vietnam change between 185-225,000 deaths, and 500-700,000 wounded. The North Vietnam and the Vietcong loss was approximately 900,000. In addition to these, during the war, more than 1.000.000 civilians died in North and South Vietnam (*Ana Britannica* 630). The war resulted in the military victory of North Vietnam over South Vietnam in 1975, which also meant a political defeat for the U.S.

The Vietnam War was a war of independence and national liberation for the Vietnamese. However, it was not the first war in Vietnam's history. According to D. R. SarDesai, Vietnam was conquered by the French in 1883 and it was a colony of France in the mid 19th century (31). This status ended with the defeat of France by the Vietnamese led by the communist Ho Chi Minh in the First Indochina War in 1954 (SarDesai 58). In the Geneva Conference of 1954, the country was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel into two states: The State of Vietnam and The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (SarDesai 65). The State of Vietnam was settled in the south, controlled by the Vietnamese who had cooperated with the French and was governed by Ngo Dinh Diem. North Vietnam came under the control of the Vietnamese Communists, and The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established by those who had opposed France and who wanted a unified Vietnam under Communism. This was considered an adequate reason for the U.S. intervention.

Essentially, the U.S. concern with Vietnam started before the division. In the First Indochina War, the U.S. supported France both financially and militarily⁶ (SarDesai 65). The French presence in Southeast Asia was favored by the U.S. (SarDesai 61). When the Communist Revolution was successful in China, according to the U.S., the Far East was threatened by communism. It was important that a non-communist government rule Vietnam, and that Vietnam should be an outpost to prevent the spread of communism to other countries, especially Oceania. The "unfinished" Korean War had also contributed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It must also be stated that the presence of the U.S. in Vietnam was not sudden, but was a gradual process.

⁶ Financial support amounted to 3 billion US dollars by 1954 (SarDesai 61).

After the separation, Diem was supported by the U.S. (SarDesai 68). He established an authoritarian state in South Vietnam (SarDesai 71). Vietcong guerrillas who were organized, trained and armed by the North Vietnam Army started to attack South Vietnam. The U.S. strongly opposed the Minh government and started to support South Vietnam in this conflict. Ronald H. Spector states that on November 1, 1955, the first American advisors, the Military Assistance Advisory Group, arrived in Saigon to train the South Vietnamese Army (256). This date was the beginning of direct and official American involvement in Vietnam. Despite all of the military equipment and advisory support supplied by the U.S., the Diem regime could not halt the guerillas. By the 1960s, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was founded. President John F. Kennedy decided to deploy additional military advisors. During his administration the number of U.S. military advisors increased from several hundred to 16,500 (SarDesai 80). Richard Nixon states that John F. Kennedy also ordered the advisors to fight alongside the South Vietnamese Army (73).

The desperate situation of the Diem government led to the end of U.S. assistance. Military officers organized a rebellion against the government, and Diem had to leave the presidency. He was killed on November 2, 1963 (SarDesai 80). Only 20 days later, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Vice-president Lyndon B. Johnson became the new U.S. president, and he declared that the U.S. would continue its support to the South Vietnamese by saying “I am not going to lose Vietnam” (qtd. in Newman 442). This meant a significant increase in U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam and the “Americanization” of the war began (Berman, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* 9).

On August 2, 1964, the U.S. Destroyer Maddox was attacked by three torpedo boats of the North Vietnamese Navy (SarDesai 83). This was officially a cause of war, and after this event the war entered a new period. President Johnson used this event as an excuse to order the bombardment of North Vietnam in early 1965, which would come to be known as “Operation Rolling Thunder” by the U.S. Air Force and the Navy (Berman, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* 15). It lasted until November 1968. In March 1965, the first U.S. combat troops were sent to Vietnam and U.S. combat strength increased from 75,000 to 125,000 in July 1965 (Berman, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* 9).

After 1965, the war rapidly escalated. Vietcong guerrilla attacks were directed also on U.S. soldiers, President Johnson ordered a reprisal, and Hanoi was bombarded. On November 27, 1965, the Pentagon declared that to be able to neutralize NLF and North Vietnamese forces, the number of U.S. troops needed to be increased. At the end of 1965, 180,000 U.S. soldiers were fighting in Vietnam under Commander General William C. Westmoreland (*Ana Britannica* 630).

Despite the increasing number of U.S. troops, modern equipment and regular air bombardment, Americans could not stop their decided enemies. By the middle of 1967, 389,000 U.S. troops had reached Vietnam. The Americans’ position became worse with the “Tet offensive” in 1968, which was a huge attack by Vietcong guerillas against certain major South Vietnam cities (Berman, *The Tet Offensive* 21). It caused disappointment for the South Vietnamese and American soldiers and greatly increased the confidence of the Vietcong guerillas (Berman, *The Tet*

Offensive 18). The Tet Offensive destroyed the Johnson administration (Clark 356). He announced to the nation on T.V. and said “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president” (qtd. in Levy 148).

Anti-war movement in the U.S. became popular with the Tet Offensive (Gilbert and Head 10). According to David W. Levy, Tet offensive is “the single most important event reversing American support for the war” (144). In the late fall of 1969, the revelation of the “My Lai Massacre” increased the unpleasantness against the war in the eyes of public. The event happened in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. On March 16, 1968, platoon leader Lieutenant William Calley with his 25 men, the members of Company C, Task Force Barker, went to a small village, marched the 350 unarmed civilians (including many women, children and old people) into a ditch, and opened fire with automatic machine guns. The army concealed the event for a whole year (Levy 158). The U.S. public started to question the necessity and legitimacy of this war. Anti-war demonstrations were organized all over the country and people openly showed their opposition to the war.

During Nixon’s presidency, the war entered the last phase, which was the “Vietnamization of the war and the American withdrawal” (SarDesai 87). Military clashes decreased in South Vietnam in 1969. At that time, there were over 500,000 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. Nixon was looking for “peace with honor” (DeGroot 201). For this, 25,000 U.S. troops returned to their country in the first stage. However, the war continued. Moreover, it spread to Cambodia and Laos. On May 4, 1970, Kent State University students gathered to protest the Cambodia Invasion.

The National Guard killed four students. A week later, 100,000 people met in Washington D.C. to protest the killings and the invasion (DeGroot 309). This was the heyday of the anti-war movement in the U.S.

Although some disagreements occurred during the peace talks, U.S. withdrawal and negotiations continued. On October 12, the Nixon administration decided to withdraw 40,000 troops. In time, the number of American soldiers in Vietnam dropped to about 190,000, which was the lowest point since January 1966. As U.S. troops were leaving the country, the “Vietnamization” of the war was another failure for the U.S. (Spector 378). The South Vietnam Army could not cope with the Vietcong guerrillas. Eventually, the ceasefire agreement was signed on January 23, 1973 (Clarke 490). By the end of March, the last American troops had left Vietnam. Although President Nixon declared that “America won peace with honor,” the South Vietnamese continued the battle until the fall of Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, on April 30, 1975 and President Gerald Ford declared that the war was “finished” (Muse 77).

3.2. The Official Ideology and Reasons Behind the War

The justification of the war and the convincing of the American public had been necessary for the U.S. government. The ideological justification of the Vietnam War lied in “the domino theory.” This theory assumed that if a state becomes communist, it would affect its neighbor state, and this would affect the next one, and so on. In the case of Vietnam, if Vietnam became a communist state, all of Southeast Asia would fall into communism like domino pieces. The Truman

administration first used the term “domino theory” in 1952, but after him many U.S. presidents used it until the end of the Cold War. In 1956, John F. Kennedy, when he was a Senator, emphasized the “domino theory” more vividly and he described Vietnam as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia” (qtd. in Nixon 29). Thus one of the major aims of the American involvement in Vietnam was to contain communism. Policy makers saw the war in Vietnam as a part of the global struggle between communism and “The Free World.” Kennedy, when he was president, promised the U.S. people “to defend the democratic government of South Vietnam.” President Lyndon Johnson’s speech at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965 is an important source to understand major justifications of the war. In that speech, Johnson explained the reasons for sending U.S. soldiers to South Vietnam. He highlighted three main reasons for the U.S. intervention: to help South Vietnam, to contain communism, and to preserve American credibility (Appy 209). According to Johnson, America would help the people of Vietnam to establish a democracy against communist aggression. He described Vietnam as an “independent nation.” This nation, Johnson argued, was struggling to defend itself against the attacks of North Vietnam, but it would not be able to continue the struggle without American support. Johnson continued:

Thus, American soldiers were sent to protect “simple farmers” in “small and helpless villages” from the communist “terror” that threatened the “freedom” of this “small and brave nation”. We want nothing for ourselves, only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way. (qtd. in Appy 210)

Similarly, during the war, American policymakers depicted South Vietnam as a unified nation struggling to maintain independence and democracy. However, this characterization was not true. Political and military leadership were totally provided by the U.S. Moreover, the South Vietnamese regimes were presented as reformist

and democratic governments to the public, but they were nothing more than dictatorships. American leaders also presented American soldiers as “public defenders, saviors of freedom and self-determination” for both American and South Vietnamese people (Appy 210). In fact, they were invaders in Vietnam.

Another reason for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was to preserve American credibility. In time, the Vietnam War became a struggle for the U.S. to prove itself both at home and to the rest of the world. If the U.S. failed against this small nation in this fight, its enemies would consider it weak and vulnerable, and the allies of America would lose their faith in the commitment to freedom. Any failure to prevent communism would put the credibility of America at risk. What would other nations think about America and its values? Who would trust America and who would fear its power? The Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton wrote in 1966:

The present U.S. objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation. The reasons why we went into Vietnam...are varied; but they are now largely academic. Why we have not withdrawn from Vietnam is, by all odds, one reason: to preserve our reputation as a guarantor, and thus to preserve our effectiveness in the rest of the world. We have not hung on to save a friend, or to deny the Communists the added acres and heads. (qtd. in Appy 212)

By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, U.S. policymakers tried to save, preserve and enhance the image of American power rather than helping the South Vietnamese. Nixon had avoided immediate withdrawal because it would create the impression that the U.S. was weak and coward. Although the U.S. president worried about the “national image” and struggled to save it, these attempts were useless.

3.3. The American Nation During the War

In the late 1950s, few Americans knew the situation in Vietnam. The defeat of France and the Geneva Conference to which America joined, garnered some public notice. The Geneva Agreement, which was signed on July 21, 1954 at the end of the Geneva conference, put an end to the First Indochina War that had been going on between France and Vietnam. With this agreement in which America sided with France, Vietnam had been temporarily divided into two (SarDesai 62-63). There was not enough interest and information to take action against American involvement in Vietnam. In January 1961, when Kennedy warned Americans that some sacrifices might be required of them in the years ahead, still, almost nobody knew the place and political situation of Vietnam. In mid-1963, Vietnam still did not occupy a central place in peoples' minds. There occurred some criticism about the war by the late spring or early summer of 1963, but, these were weak and ignored. The public could not realize that something important was happening until the beginning of 1964, the American presence in Vietnam enormously escalated. This gradual awakening of public interest to Vietnam can be linked to the ignorance of American society about the rest of the world. For example, a poll in the mid-1960s revealed that one out in four Americans was not aware that communists ruled China (Levy 128). According to Levy, policy makers were aware of this fact and they assumed that public opinion was generally supportive and certainly manageable in favor of war (129). Gerard J. DeGroot also notes that in 1965, the war was popular and the anti-war movement was hugely unpopular (254).

The Vietnam War deeply divided the American nation, especially, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This dividedness continued even after the war. Public opinion

polls reflected the disunity about the Vietnam War and the disagreement that increased in parallel with the escalating American involvement (Clark 337). While politicians were debating over Vietnam as “hawks” and “doves,” the public was also divided into hawks and doves. In July 1966, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset concluded that “most Americans are, in fact, doves *and* hawks” (qtd. in Levy 128).

“Hawks” and “doves” are political terms in America. Hawks refer generally to Republicans, which represent the more conservative circles of the public. They are on the side of aggressive policies against any threat to their country, especially communism. Contrary to this, doves consist of democrats and they support more pacifist policies. In the case of Vietnam, hawks are on the pro-war side and doves are on the anti-war side.

After 1965, the anti-war movement gathered strength and spread to large portions of the American public. At the end of 1967, around 45 percent of the American people thought that the war was a mistake and around 10 percent wanted immediate withdrawal. At the end of 1968, almost 60 percent thought the war was a mistake and around 20 percent wanted immediate withdrawal (Levy 151). The debate about the Vietnam War focused on whether Vietnam was a just war. According to the war’s opponents, the Vietnam War was immoral. This is the main argument of the war’s opponents and constitutes the core of their resistance. The war was immoral because it was illegal. Moreover, it was a violation of the Geneva Accord. This illegality created a moral uneasiness in U.S. society. The struggle in Vietnam was a

civil war and the involvement of the U.S. was unnecessary, because they did not belong there. Finally, anti-war citizens were also against the nature of the fight itself. It was a war between one of the super powers of the world and an underdeveloped Third World country. There was unequal use of power. According to protesters, the war was “a furious war of destruction upon a primitive, peasant, essentially agricultural society” (Levy 55). Contrary to these, pro-war citizens advocated deeper involvement in Vietnam. Their views were in conformity with the official ideology. Vietnam had to be saved as other “free” nations in the world because of its strategic geographical position and the spread of communism had to be stopped; this was a matter of national security. The supporters of American policy in Vietnam also accepted the brutality, but, this is in the nature of war in general where both sides use brutality.

The division and indecisiveness in the U.S. also negatively affected the U.S armed forces. As anti-war movement was increasing, many young men refused to join the armed forces and the draft resistance movement appeared (Appy 31). Even in the armed forces, troops refused to combat. For example, in August and November 1969, two infantry units refused orders for their missions (Appy 231). In time, the army became more and more incompetent, undisciplined, and demoralized because of two reasons: society in general was not in favor of the war and, according to Christian G. Appy, America executed a highly contradictory foreign policy (7).

3.4. Hollywood's Treatment of The War

Vietnam has been the subject of many Hollywood films, which can be grouped together as a genre. Daniel Lopez describes Vietnam War films as “the films for or against one of the most controversial wars Americans have been involved in,” and he remarks that these films “have often had a mixed reception” (374). Lopez groups these films into three categories in terms of their main focuses: the effect of the war on those who stayed at home, the veteran adjusting to civilian life, and the films depicting actual combat (374).

Hollywood's approach toward the Vietnam War parallels the American nation's attitude: It is inconsistent and divided. There are pro-war films as well as films which are considered anti-war. In Hollywood films, the official ideology can be traced. For example in *The Green Berets*, (Ray Kellog, John Wayne, 1968), American soldiers are depicted as the saviors of Vietnamese and the enemy is brutal communists. However, not all Vietnam films are the representation of official ideology. There are also films that construct their own ideology such as *Apocalypse Now*.

The most significant aspect of Hollywood's response to the Vietnam War is that, during the war, there was no direct representation of the war, except *The Green Berets* (Steier 114). Another significant characteristic of Vietnam War films is that they have created debates and controversies. Anti-war films have especially been subjected to many critiques and debates about how much anti-war they are. According to Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, few Vietnam War films have been

able to represent the real nature of the battleground and almost all of them have left untouched the political logic behind the U.S. commitment there. These films do not analyze the historical or political bases of the war, or look from the Vietnamese perspective. There is no effort to understand the culture of the other; the Vietnamese are depicted as weak men having no military skills who are close to death, and their countries are a war arena and the land of U.S. soldiers' fantasies (xiv - xv). Most Vietnam War films fail to raise the question of why America became involved in Vietnam and depict the consequences of the war on the Vietnamese people. Moreover, there are also films which tell the event in ambivalent and contradictory ways.

There are over 400 films -including television films- about the Vietnam War in Hollywood.⁷ It is not possible to cover all of them here, but, some important ones will be used to explain the general approach of Hollywood to the Vietnam War.

Eben J. Muse remarks that 1948 is the year when Vietnam first appeared in a Hollywood film (23). The film was *Rogues' Regiment* (Robert Florey, 1948). In the film, an American joins the French Foreign Legion in Vietnam to track down an escaped Nazi war criminal. The enemies are Vietnam nationalists supplied by the U.S.S.R. through Nazi smugglers. According to Muse, *China Gate* (Samuel Fuller, 1957) is the most complex film among the films in this period (25). The male protagonist played by Nat King Cole fights in Indochina collaborating with the French. The film calls for a greater U.S. commitment to the anti-communist

⁷ Jeremy M. Devine makes a critical and thematic analysis of over 400 films about the Vietnam War in his book *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*.

struggle in Southeast Asia. Another important film was *The Quiet American* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1958). Auster and Quart remark that “the film’s essential message is that the United States was involved in Vietnam to help its people gain and maintain their independence and to protect the rest of Southeast Asia from falling to the Communist” (18). Another film, *The Ugly American* (George H. Englund, 1963) has a discourse that parallels Kennedy’s Cold-War foreign policy. It supports Third World independence, and it is full of cold war clichés – true American men versus communist enemies. These films are exemplary of filmmaker’s efforts to fit Vietnam into U.S. Cold War commitments. They were not combat films and they indirectly depicted Vietnam -in *The Quiet American*, it is barely evident that the film is set in a Vietnam city- but they were related to Vietnam and they helped to rally U.S. public opinion in favor of the U.S. cold war commitment against communism. In other words, they prepared the public for the U.S. intervention to Vietnam. Auster and Quart remark:

Films like *China Gate*, *The Quiet American* and *The Ugly American* did set a political tone. First and foremost, they were hardly reticent or subtle about portraying a ruthless, universal Communist conspiracy bent on world domination, in contrast to which they juxtaposed U.S. innocence and commitment to freedom. Most important of all, they conditioned the American public to accept the fact that the cold war was a global struggle and that we had a definite commitment to protect South Vietnam from Communist aggression. (22)

The films of this period, which were also the early years of the conflict, carry a united ideological message. The reason for this might be that they were made in the period of anti-communism. The anti-communist consensus among the American public and McCarthyism might have affected filmmakers who produced anti-communist Vietnam War films in the early years of the conflict. These films set the

political agenda that peaked in 1968 with the combat film, *The Green Berets* (Whillock 305).

The Green Berets was supported by the Pentagon and the White House, and John Wayne was the protagonist of the film. It was one of the most patriotic films ever made, and can be directly compared to cowboy-Indian film: Colonel Kirby played by John Wayne, who is known to the audience as a Western hero, was the “good guy” fighting against the Vietcong, represented like “savage Indians,” and helping native people (i.e. giving sweets to children). It can be assumed that the film was nothing but a summary and reinforcement of the reasons for American involvement in Vietnam. Its very opening scene affirms this. In that scene, some soldiers give a briefing about the war to some reporters. One of the reporters asks whether the war in Vietnam is a civil war or not. A general shows the captured Vietcong weapons, a Chinese rifle, Russian made weapons and Czech ammunitions. He says that these are the proof of communist domination in Vietnam. Reporter George Beckworth (David Janssen) plays an important part in the film. He is an identification figure for the viewer, who at the beginning of the film is critical about the war, but, as the film progresses, is convinced by Colonel Kirby to confirm his attitude toward the war. *The Green Berets* was the only combat film made during the war years that explicitly dealt with Vietnam. As anti and pro-war feelings cooled down, Hollywood began to produce films that depicted combat in the late 1970s. During the interval years, there were no combat films. As Muse argues “The missing combat films reflect a missing consensus about the War itself” (101).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the Vietnam allegories appeared. In these films, the situation in Vietnam is transformed into other situations in American history; they are set in other wars and other lands. The Vietnam allegory films appeared, because filmmakers were discouraged to make a direct representation of the war because of the divided situation in society. According to Muse, viewers saw these films as direct comments on the war (46-47). The most common allegory is the Indian massacre by American cavalries in the Western genre. For example, *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970) recreates the Sand Creek Massacre where an American Cavalry killed Indian children and women. This is parallel to the My Lai massacre. As another example, although *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) is a comedy on one level, it is actually about Cheyenne, the battle of the Little Big Horn, which was a battle between Lakota-Northern Cheyenne Indians and the 7th Cavalry of the U.S forces and in which General Custer was killed. In the film, General Custer (Richard Mulligan) is a racist egomaniac. This film is a critique of U.S genocidal policies towards the American Indians and its colonialist culture.

A military black comedy film, *M*A*S*H*, is also another allegory of the war, but it differs with its iconography from the others. The film is set in Korea and it follows several young surgeons and nurses working at a hospital during the Korean War, but the film is perceived as a critique of the U.S. military in Vietnam (Roberts 407). Instead of specifically opposing the war itself, *M*A*S*H* is more concerned with bureaucracy and human weakness. It is anti-establishment and anti-authority as well. Auster and Quart remark that the film lacks a coherent political critique (36).

With the ending of the war, as the U.S. soldiers, including prisoners of war, were returning to their country, the veteran films began to appear. In most veteran films, the veterans are depicted as physically and psychologically damaged, and alienated individuals who have difficulty in re-integrating into society and exhibit violent behaviors. They are the victims of the war. This figure is not so wrong because most of the returning soldiers were suffering. This figure created a certain sympathy for the American soldier in the viewer at those terms. *The Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) is a good example of a mentally damaged Vietnam veteran. Robert De Niro plays a mentally unstable Vietnam War veteran who works as a taxi driver. Veteran films can be regarded as anti-war films in terms of their depiction of the effects of the war on Americans. Indeed, one of the most devastating effects of the war was on the returning soldiers. This cannot be denied. However, the veteran films, especially the ones which are in the claim of being anti-war, look only at American citizens' sufferings.

Coming Home (Hal Ashby, 1978) is another important veteran film. According to Randy Roberts, it is one of the first films which proved Hollywood that a film about the Vietnam War could be political and profitable at the same time (411). It was written by anti-war activist Nancy Dowe. The veteran hero in this film is different from the veterans in other veteran films. Luke (Jon Voight) is not depicted as a threat to society. He is not a depressed man either. The paralyzed veteran image and the comments of an officer about how his men cut the heads of enemies show the filmmaker's anti-war intention. However, this message is not enough for a political message and also comes too late, ten years after the conflict (Suid). Luke's statement that the enemy is not Vietcong but the war itself puts the film out of its

political and historical context. This can be applied to *Apocalypse Now* as well. According to Auster and Quart, *Coming Home* does not get into the heart of the Vietnam War (51). In the end, it is a love story with a happy ending rather than a representation of how the Vietnam War affected its participants.⁸

The Deer Hunter (Michael Cimino, 1978) was one of the most controversial films of the 1970s. This film was important for Hollywood like *Coming Home*, because until the release of *The Deer Hunter* the subject of the Vietnam War was not a financially profitable subject (Suid). The film is also the first filmic narrative that narrates the war in an epic manner. The film extremely changes the event and places, and, thus, distorts the context of the war. In other words, it does not portray the Vietnam War accurately. One of the main critiques about the film was about the famous Russian roulette scene. It was not true that prisoners of war were forced to play this game by the Vietcong. Besides, the film shows the Vietnamese in a very racist, stereotypical way. While the film shows the horror and effects of the war on U.S. soldiers, it does so without a historical and political perspective. Like most of the other Hollywood films, *The Deer Hunter* personalizes history and reduces everything to an individual struggle. The film can also be seen as both pro-war and anti-war film. In the end of the film, characters who managed to survive both physically and psychologically sing "God Bless America." This can be interpreted as the symbol of patriotism which is embedded in the film, but also can be read as an ironic comment on the war. Also, the visible pro-war and anti-war attitude of the film makes it appeal to a wide audience who may have different opinions about war. It appeals to both pro-war and anti-war spectators and thus attempts to increase its box-office gross. According to

⁸ United Artists sold *Coming Home* as "one of the most beautiful love stories you'll ever see" (Devine 198).

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *The Deer Hunter* is a conservative film (194). However, their research shows that 69% of the spectators felt that the film portrayed the war as a mistake and 94% believed that the film portrayed the Vietnam War accurately (205-206).

By the beginning of the 1980s, the Reagan administration wanted people to “put the war behind them” (McCain). This was a sign of a new period. American self-confidence rose again with Ronald Reagan. The Reagan years affirmed patriotic values and conservatism with right wing revisionism. Hollywood responded to this wave with films such as *Uncommon Valor* (Ted Kotcheff, 1983), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984), *Missing in Action II: The Beginning* (Lance Hool, 1985), *Braddock: Missing in Action III* (Aaron Norris, 1988). The restoration of greatness and confidence was provided by these pro-war films. These films were about the saving of MIAs and POWs from Vietnam; thus, in a way, the Vietnam War was re-created and won through these films.

The films made in the second half of the 1980s, *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Hamburger Hill* (John Irvin, 1987), *Good Morning Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *Casualties of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989), are named the “noble grunt movies” by Pat Aufderheide as a subgenre of Vietnam films (Young 23). Among these, *Good Morning Vietnam* is based on the life of Adrian Cronauer, the radio Armed Forces disk jockey (Robin Williams), who is popular with the troops and the Vietnamese but in conflict with his superiors. As Carla A. Fellers suggests, the film points to the contrast between

the rhetoric of the official and the unofficial ideologies (232). Cronauer's music list consists of unapproved songs. He wants to play rock-and-roll, but he is forced to follow an official play list. Moreover, he is forced to announce censored news which do not reflect the real situation. This struggle and conflict between official and unofficial radio broadcast can be interpreted as the conflict between official (pro-war) and unofficial (anti-war) ideologies.

The films *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*⁹ were two of the early examples of films which show the daily life of the soldiers in Vietnam. It could be argued that after the epic narratives such as *The Deer Hunter* and Rambo-esque adventure films, these were the first realistic representations of the Vietnam War. *Platoon* is the story of a young soldier, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), in Vietnam. Vietnam is shown through his eyes and through his narration. He must choose between two sergeants; one is the violent and angry Barnes (Tom Berenger) and the other one is the conscientious Elias (William Dafoe). The film is a good versus evil story. The two sergeants symbolize the inner division of the U.S, and Chris symbolizes the nation itself that fluctuates between the two sides. The discourse that "Americans fought each other not the Vietnamese" is explicitly stated at the end of the film in Chris's monologue. He remarks: "I think we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us." This monologue recalls one of the remarks Nixon has made in his address to the American nation on the Vietnam War on November 3, 1969: "Let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that" (qtd. in Schell).

⁹ Although *Full Metal Jacket* is not a Hollywood film, it is one of the most important Vietnam War films.

According to Randy Roberts, the films *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, *The Deer Hunter*, and even *Coming Home* are about self-discovery, not war (416). Indeed, *Platoon* overwhelmingly focuses on the inner fight and moral struggle between two sides as pro-war and anti-war. The Vietnamese are ignored or barely seen. They are always in dark shadows, or in the bushes preparing an ambush. Aufderheide notes: “The enemy is not so much the Vietnamese as cold, abstract forces of bureaucracy and the incompetence of superiors” (qtd. in Young 23). The famous scene in *Platoon*, which illustrates a raid on a village by the platoon evokes the My Lai massacre. With the realistic battle scenes, *Platoon* has become one of the most influential Vietnam War films.¹⁰ The problem is that the film reduces the conflict to a few soldiers’ actions. This is highly problematic in terms of revealing the political side of the event. It seems to suggest that those responsible for the war are the soldiers, as if there were nothing wrong with the system or the policy. The discourse “we were at war with ourselves” is a form of repression. It devaluates the effect of the politics of the war, and serves as an ideological mask.

The plot of *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick is about a group of soldiers sent to Vietnam who are transformed into killers during marine training. In the second half of the film, the spectator can see Vietnam. By showing the dehumanizing effect of the war and brutal military training, the film criticizes the military as an institution. The conflict in this film is shown through the narrator Private Joker (Matthew Modine) who remains ambivalent about the violence surrounding him throughout most of the film. Private Joker represents the inner American conflicts also by

¹⁰ On January 26, 1987, *Time* magazine’s cover was “Platoon: Viet Nam As It Really Was.”

wearing a helmet on which the words “Born to kill” are written, but with a peace sign on his combat suit.

The films discussed thus far show that Hollywood’s approach to the Vietnam War has changed significantly from anti-communist films of the late 1950s and early 1960s to the controversial anti-war films of subsequent years. Most Vietnam War films have attempted to describe the Vietnam War in all its dimensions (political, sociological, and historical meanings). Whether they do this successfully or not is debatable, but the vast numbers of Vietnam War films confirm the fundamental significance of Vietnam for the U.S.

Politically and socially diverse opinions persist even two decades after the war. Since the American nation -except the soldiers- has not seen a war in their lands except the Civil War, the meaning of the Vietnam War was constituted through novels, news, and especially films. In the next chapter, the film *Apocalypse Now* will be analyzed as a specific case of ambivalence, as a film that produces both a pro-war and anti-war discourse, which is also observed in Hollywood’s treatment of the Vietnam War in general.

4. AN AMBIVALENT FILM: *APOCALYPSE NOW*

In this thesis, *Apocalypse Now* is examined as both a pro-war and anti-war film which reveals and reflects the U.S.'s disunity and indecisiveness about the Vietnam War both politically and cinematically. It can be said that *Apocalypse Now* has an anti-war statement, because there are scenes that depict the absurdity of the American presence in Vietnam, the unfairness of America's Vietnam policy and the brutality of Americans in the war. However, the visual style of some scenes and certain discursive elements which the film includes allow a pro-war reading. Moreover, in the background, the film seamlessly constructs an ideological message which is more important than what is seen on the screen. The ideological message of *Apocalypse Now* is decisiveness in war, and in this way solidarity for the American nation. This is the film's symbolic solution to the political and social anxieties and conflicts regarding the Vietnam War. The film projects decisiveness as a solution for the social chaos surrounding the war. In this way, it attempts to eradicate the feelings of anxiety and despair. The ambivalence in the film arises from this conflicting situation. While the film criticizes some aspects of the war and opposes the war, it also constructs an ideological and hence utopic message which could be regarded as pro-war. There are a set of other ideological operations in the film. First, *Apocalypse Now* presents itself as the real Vietnam War through the ideology of realism. It attempts to create in the spectator the illusion that what he / she sees on the screen is the Vietnam War, but in fact, it is nothing more than a constructed discourse which

manipulates its subject matter. The film positions the spectator as a subject in the filmic text and stitches him / her into the film. This is achieved by Willard's voice-over narration which represents the "voice of truth" and various cinematic techniques. Second, *Apocalypse Now* has a mythic structure and as a modern myth it naturalizes a historical event, the Vietnam War. This naturalization leads to the dehistoricization, depoliticization and universalization of the events which, in fact, were caused by particular historical conditions and policies and occurred in a particular period. Third, *Apocalypse Now* criticizes the war, but at the same time turns it into a spectacle. It makes the war an energetic and exciting event rather than a terrible and devastating one. This could be regarded as a sign of ambivalence. Finally, in the film, the Vietnamese are both excluded and mitigated. While the film keeps the Vietnamese silent, it explores neither their national aim nor their pain. All these suggest that *Apocalypse Now* displays a set of contradictory discourses and thus reflects ambivalence. In the sections that follow, these ideological operations in the film will be examined in detail.

Coppola believes that his film is a direct representation of the Vietnam War. He thinks that his film is the ultimate film that says everything there is to say about the Vietnam War. In *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, 1991), the documentary on the making of the film made by his wife, Coppola says: "If you want to look at Vietnam, you look at my movie." He refers both to the film itself and its production process. Indeed, according to Coppola the production of *Apocalypse Now* was very much like the way Americans fought in the Vietnam War. Coppola says: "My film is not a movie; it is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It is what it was really like; it was crazy. We were in the jungle, there were

too many of us, we had to access to too much money, too much equipment; and little by little, we went insane” (qtd. in Bergan 53).

Coppola attempts to distinguish his film from other Vietnam War films. In *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, he says that *Apocalypse Now* is about idiocy. He also says that it is “anti-lie” (qtd. in Suid) as if it reveals all the “truth” about the war. Coppola behaved like an *auteur*. He was the co-writer of the film script, he directed the film, he paid a lot of money for the production, and he composed the music for the film. He would like to transfer “his Vietnam” to the spectator with his film. However, we will look at the film through the perspective of screen theory. We will not see it simply as a medium which transfers the ideas in the mind of an *auteur*, but as a text which produces a discourse. We will not see it as the reflection of reality, but as an ideological construction of a particular reality.

As discussed in Chapter 2, according to Saussure, language constitutes, mediates and shapes our perception of reality. Thus, it has an ideological function. Metz says that cinema is like a language. It is a sign and representation system that produces meaning. It follows that film as a representation system cannot reproduce history accurately; rather it shapes history according to a certain ideology. Coppola attempts to symbolize a historical problem which cannot be symbolized. Furthermore, the text goes far away from Coppola's intention, which to reflect Vietnam as it really was. It will be shown that this film cannot be a direct representation of the Vietnam War. In other words, it is not a window for people to look at what was going on during the Vietnam War; it is not a slice of life. Moreover, the film produces a certain ideology

by emphasizing the importance of decisiveness, solidarity and wholeness for the American nation.

4.1. The Ideology of Realism and Spectator as a Subject Position

Unlike a typical Hollywood film, *Apocalypse Now* opens with no title or credits. This opening without credits suggests that the film claims to be a realistic representation, a transparent window to the reality, rather than being a film. It implies that, as Coppola said, it is not a film about Vietnam; it is Vietnam. Another important cinematic tool used is the first-person voice-over narration, which is also used in the majority of Vietnam War films. It enhances the identification of the spectator with Willard (Martin Sheen). The spectator sees the whole film through Willard's eyes and mind, through his discourse. Moreover, as is discussed below, the film frames Willard's voice as the voice of truth.

It must be noted that Willard offers two subject positions as both the narrator (voice-over) and the main character in the story. His voice-over constructs a "knowing subject." He talks about Vietnam as if he really fought and experienced the war from inside. In this way, the spectator is placed at the position of knowledge through Willard's voice, which represents truth. On the other hand, the spectator also experiences how Willard becomes a knowing subject. That is, Willard, as the narrator, speaks as if he knows, but as a character acts as if he does not know anything, as if he is in the process of searching and learning. The spectator listens to the experienced and knowing Willard and at the same time sees how he becomes experienced. During this process, the spectator also becomes experienced about the

war, but this is a false experience, because the film is not the Vietnam War. It is a particular discourse about the war.

The usage of Willard's off-screen voice has ideological implications. Willard speaks to, or in Althusser's terms, hails the spectator. Willard's voice comes from somewhere -we can never know where his voice comes from or when it comes. However, we know that he speaks to "us," the spectator. His voice does not come only from recorded film tapes. Its place is unknown as much as the place of ideology. Willard's voice has power, because, as a first-person witness, he knows, but this knowing is not epistemological. Willard is a character, not a real Vietnam veteran and the film is not a Vietnam guide, but a fiction. The ideological operation starts with the all-powerful position of Willard: He "knows." His voice acts as the voice of truth. Moreover, he does not only know and speak; he knows and speaks for someone, someone who cannot talk or respond, that is the spectator. This affirms Metz's argument that cinema is not available for inter-communication; it allows one-way communication.

The voice-over addresses the spectator and talks on behalf of the spectator. In this way, the spectator is hailed as a knowing subject. Willard's voice has hegemony over the spectator, in that it positions the spectator as a subject who is supposed to know. This is similar to the case that MacCabe asserts with regard to the classic realist text. Willard is the one who has the power and the right to say everything, not the spectator as a subject position constructed by the film text. In this way, the ideal

spectator has no option other than making the meanings that Willard / the film makes for him / her.

Coppola himself takes a small part in the film, as the head of a TV crew who directs and yells at Willard to give a performance rather than recording the event directly: “Don’t look at the camera! Go on through. Just go by as if you are fighting.” This self-reflexive scene has an important function. The spectator becomes alienated and thinks that he / she is present in the production of what he / she perceives. Miriam Hansen argues: “The war is not some quasi-natural event that happened ‘once upon a time’ and ‘out there’ but is being produced as we are perceiving it” (127). This self-reflexive scene also reminds the spectator of the T.V. images of the Vietnam War. Since the Vietnam War was the first T.V. war in history, it was a hyper real phenomenon in Baudrillard’s terms. Baudrillard says: “The war becomes film even before being filmed. The war became film, the film becomes war” (59). This has a blurring effect on the social memory: Does it ever exist? Did it really happen? While Willard is being briefed about the mission, one of the officers says to him: “You understand captain... that this operation does not exist, nor will it ever exist.” From this point of view, the use of the word “Disneyland” in the film is very significant. During the journey, Lance reads a letter from his friend. His friend says: “Lance, I’m fine. I was on a trip to Disneyland. There can never be a place like Disneyland, or could there? Let me know.” Lance replies: “Jim, it is here... really is here. Disneyland. Fuck, man, this is better than Disneyland.” This analogy gives the event a different status. Yes, on some level, the war really becomes Disneyland with ammunition in the jungle, at least while your ticket is valid. However, it is more than just “entertainment.” According to Baudrillard, Disneyland is a perfect model for

simulation (23). He also suggests that “truth” and the “real” are blurred and lost in the existence of simulation. Thus, the Vietnam experience is doubtful, “unbelievable” and discoverable only via films for American society.

The Americans at home did not see Vietnam at all, what they saw on their T.V. was just a simulacra. Films also create an illusion for people. Peter McInerney’s rightly remarks that: “Apocalypse Now is a prolonged hallucination” (31). Consequently, the scene with the T.V. crew underlines a contradiction between the war seen on T.V. and the war as it is lived in reality. The film points to the difference between the two and claims that it offers a more realistic view of Vietnam, that it shows the truth which is lacking in T.V. representations of the war. However, eventually, we do not see the reality. What we see is only a film, a fiction, a discourse which claims to offer the truth about the war.

4.2. The Split and Lacking American Subject

Apocalypse Now is a film of self-recognition and self-discovery. It is a journey into the self. Here, we will consider the concept of “self” in the context of the social condition of America during the war. The self does not simply refer to a specific character in the film, but it is symbolized with the characters. In this respect, the film is not about the struggle of a character’s, namely Willard’s, subject formation, but the imaginary journey of a nation toward becoming a unified self. Willard as the main character in the story represents the confused and searching American nation. As Lacan says, the self is always a lacking subject and he / she tries to overcome this feeling of lack throughout his / her life. Lacan also asserts that the self is a divided /

split subject. These arguments could also be applied to the American nation during the Vietnam War.

The main lack in the American nation could be described as the lack of decisiveness. This lack can be seen in the pro-war / anti-war division in the civilian life in the U.S.A., as discussed in Chapter 3, and even in the lowest ranked soldier in Vietnam. Because of this lack, there was no will to fight. Furthermore, the American nation was also deeply divided into hawks and doves. Thus, *Apocalypse Now* could be read as a quest for cohesion and completeness, at a national level.

Willard does not only search for Kurtz, he also seeks a sense of wholeness. Kurtz, the man that Willard looks for, is a decisive American who fights decidedly and brutally against the enemy. In this sense, Kurtz is Willard's *objet petit a*. For Lacan, the subject always tries to recapture the sense of wholeness. Therefore, he / she continuously searches for a thing which will bring the lack to an end. "The object (a)...derives its value from its identification with some missing component of the subject's self" (qtd. in Williams 136). According to Lacan, *objet petit a* is not a real object. It is an object of fantasy. *Objet petit a* cannot be in the domain of the Symbolic. It does not exist in the world. It is a substitute for the missing part. It cannot be explained in the Symbolic, and, thus, it remains in the Real. It could be argued that the Kurtz character in *Apocalypse Now* represents a fantasy, a national ideal. Kurtz has something that Willard -the American nation- does not have: decisiveness. He is something that is always desired to be. He is the sublime object

of ideology. In this respect, Kurtz also represents a utopia. Willard's journey becomes a journey from the Symbolic to the Real.

Kurtz's compound can be compared to the Real, because it defies representation. By definition, the Real where the self is unified cannot be represented. Allegorically, in the film Kurtz acts as if he were a sacred thing which cannot be or should not be photographed. A photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) tells Willard that when he tried to take some shots, Kurtz was irritated: "He said if I took his picture again – I'm gonna kill you. Just like that." It could be argued that, the film, like the photographer, attempts to represent Kurtz, the non-representable. In other words, it attempts to bring him into the Symbolic. Like Kurtz himself, Kurtz's compound is highly grotesque -chopped heads, dead bodies lying on the ground, servant natives- and hardly definable. The film shows immediately that this is a different place from the outside world. As Willard's boat slowly passes among the natives –Montagnards- whose faces and bodies are painted white, the natives stand with their boats and Willard is passing through them as if they are a door or a gate. This is the border, beyond which things are radically different from the world, the known, like the Real itself in Lacanian terms.

The style of the film becomes more and more surreal as Willard travels closer to Kurtz. The lighting and the mood darken, the style of the film becomes increasingly less realistic and sometimes surrealist as the boat navigates up the river. When Willard arrives at the Do Lung Bridge, the closest point to Kurtz, the scene is highly surreal. The bridge is a bizarre place. For Miriam Hansen, it is in the "middle of

nowhere:” There are numerous lights, flashlights, explosions, sounds of missiles, dispersed human voices in the dark of night. Dialogues are in fragments, slow, and inconsistent (128). Soldiers are in total chaos. Willard cannot find any commanding officer here, because now they are far from the Symbolic, the authority, the Law. Hansen makes a brilliant metaphor when she likens Willard’s journey to a journey to the womb: “In a similar vein, Willard’s boat moves up the river, discharging violence along the way and finally gliding through vaginal rock formations (pink filter) towards the womb of darkness” (132). According to Lacan, all the experiences of the infant who is not able to speak and generate images (for example its existence in the womb) are in the realm of the Real. Symbolizing the Real, Kurtz’s compound also contrasts with the Symbolic, which could be symbolized with the city of Saigon where the film begins. Saigon is the social and cultural world. Gradually, Willard moves to the Real, Kurtz’s compound, where Kurtz is in wholeness thanks to his decisiveness. This is also the place where Willard (i.e. the nation) can feel self-completeness.

4.3. Some Contradictions and Ambivalence

In the film, Kurtz is first shown as a deviant. The reason for this is that he fights a private, brutal war other than the war of the official army. This can be again evaluated in Lacanian terms. Kurtz is figured as a man who is opposed to the Law represented by the American officers and generals. They represent the Father figure. In the domain of the Symbolic, the limits and rules are determined by the Father. The Father represents authority. Kurtz opposes this authority, the law of the Father, and goes beyond the limits. Indeed, in the film, Kurtz is depicted as a murmuring and whining little boy, especially in the scene where he records his voice and says: “They

train young men to drop fire on people. But their commanders won't allow them to write fuck on their airplanes because it is obscene!" Kurtz is angry against the authority (i.e. the Father). Thus, he does not obey the Father's rules, the rules of the Symbolic, any more.

By opposing the Father, Kurtz becomes a deviant, a man desiring something impossible by behaving out of the law; he becomes a man who must be terminated. This might seem to contradict the overall ideology of the film, because we have said that Kurtz also represents a utopia. However, any ideology may contain contradictions. As Colin MacCabe expresses in his discussion of the "ideology of realism," a classic realist film may contain different discourses, but in the text eventually they are repressed and the dominant ideology is justified. Here, the deviant aspect of Kurtz's character is immediately passed over and repressed. Eventually, Kurtz and his actions are justified and affirmed. Running away from the symbolic order, Kurtz, according to Willard "split from the whole fucking program." This statement posits Kurtz not simply as illegal but also provocative. The idea of utopia functions like this. It is provocative, it goes beyond the limits, changes the definition of the normal, and it challenges the normal. It may contradict the authority who defines the normal; the order.

According to Fredric Jameson, the works of mass culture are ideological and utopic at the same time: "The works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly and explicitly utopian" (144). He advocates that mass culture creates illusions of social harmonies, projects solutions for cultural

chaos, in order to eliminate feelings of anxiety and despair. When we look at the time when *Apocalypse Now* was made, this definition is suitable. After the war, America witnessed the scandal of Watergate in 1972 during the presidency of Nixon. On November 4, 1979, the Iran hostage crisis happened, a diplomatic crisis that lasted until January 20, 1982. A group of militant university students who were supported by the new Islamic regime, held 63 diplomats and three additional U.S. citizens hostage inside the American diplomatic mission in Tehran, Iran. In Nicaragua, the brutal Somoza regime supported by America was overthrown in 1979. Moreover, the trauma of the Vietnam War defeat could not be overcome. These negative developments led to the questioning of the efficiency of American foreign policy. America was in a period of depression and loss of self confidence and prestige both inside and around the world. *Apocalypse Now* was made in such a chaotic and desperate atmosphere. In the moments of crisis, a way to survive and keep solidarity is to motivate the nation with an aim, a desired ideal, and the promise of a prosperous life, which may exist in the future. It could be argued that the film also attempts to cope with this chaotic situation and the social anxieties it causes by presenting decisiveness as a solution. This is the utopic function of *Apocalypse Now*.

The film represses Kurtz's deviant character and transforms him into the symbol of a utopia by justifying and affirming him and his actions during the narrative. Willard is fascinated by Kurtz. Willard's admiration and ambivalence is revealed at the very beginning of the film, when he examines Kurtz's file: "At first, I thought, they handed me the wrong dossier. I could not believe they wanted this man dead. Third-generation West Point, top of his class...a thousand decorations, he had an impressive career, maybe too impressive... The more I read and began to understand,

the more I admired him.”, “The thing I felt the most, much stronger than fear, was the desire to confront him.” Kurtz is depicted as a man who is correct in his judgments throughout the narrative (Tomasulo 150). He is guilty of murdering four Vietnamese double agents, but, after these killings there is no more espionage case. Willard says: “Enemy activity in his old sector dropped off to nothing. I guess he must have hit the right four people.” Furthermore, Willard says “charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500.” Willard sympathizes with Kurtz and rationalizes his behavior.

Along the journey, thanks to Willard, the spectator learns Kurtz’s achievements and he becomes almost a respectable and admirable man confused with fear. This reaches a peak at the end of the film when Kurtz explains his views about the war. Kurtz is never shown in full light, but in shadows; he is hardly recognizable throughout the film. This shadowy portrayal increases Kurtz’s mystic character and enhances his God-like position in the eye of the spectator. Marlon Brando’s star persona also strengthens Kurtz’s aura in the film. The film also presents him as an admirable figure. As has been stated, Willard is fascinated by Kurtz and, in this way, the spectator is mesmerized by Kurtz. This kind of portrayal also transforms Kurtz into a fetish object both for Willard and the spectator. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, the fetish object compensates for the lack. In *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz reminds Willard of his lack, which is decisiveness, and thus becomes a source of anxiety. This anxiety is overcome by fetishizing Kurtz. Kurtz reaches a transcendental status both in the eye of Willard and the spectator. It must be noted that in most of the scenes where Kurtz is present, especially in his monologue scenes, the narrative does not progress, it is almost frozen. Kurtz’s image on the screen becomes a fetish that

helps to disavow a lack. This could be compared to the fetishization of the female image, in classical Hollywood narrative as discussed by Metz and Mulvey.

There is not any ironic portrayal of Kurtz; even the spectator may identify himself or herself with him because of his auratic character. Neither Kurtz nor Willard are insane. The only character in the film who is explicitly constructed as a mad man is Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who will be analyzed later. Kurtz is conscious of what he has done. As the photojournalist says, “The man [Kurtz] is clear in his mind, but his soul is mad.” Kurtz is like a guru, a man who has reached perfection. He is like a spiritual leader. While the film affirms Kurtz, it takes a pro-war attitude. The utopia suggested by the film is based on “decisiveness,” but this decisiveness involves a pro-war feeling, because according to Kurtz, the war in Vietnam can only be won by embracing horror and having determination. He says “If I had ten divisions of those men [Vietnamese] then our troubles here would be over very quickly.” Kurtz’s decisiveness, which is in favor of war, is also revealed in one of his tape recordings. He says: “We must kill them. We must incinerate them. Pig after pig, cow after cow, village after village, army after army.” Kurtz is not a pacifist. Thus, the utopia he represents is not so innocent.

Kurtz’s Godlike position is directly taken from Conrad’s novella. However, it can also be read as an allegory of how a decided, unified America (i.e. the utopic America) can establish an authority over Third World countries.¹¹ Such an America can be a controlling power, like a God, for those countries. Kurtz’s Cambodian and

¹¹ Usually America is in conflict with Third World countries, especially with the ones that do not act in favor of America.

Vietnamese servants may symbolize the countries that are under the control of America. The dead bodies and chopped heads represent the ones which cannot escape the wrath of America. It must be noticed that Kurtz's servants are with him not because they are forced to be servants, but because they admire him with a sense of awe. In real life, the situation is not so different from this. The countries where America intervenes, in time, become dependent on America. America financially aids those countries; in return it has military bases there and, after a while, a master-slave relationship unfolds, like the relationship between Kurtz and his native servants.

The ending of *Apocalypse Now* is not concrete; it is even ambiguous. According to Jon Lewis, this is because of Coppola's indeterminate political view. For the critics, if *Apocalypse Now* was the ultimate Vietnam War film, it had to make the ultimate political statement as well (51). According to our evaluation, the ending is not so enigmatic. In Kurtz's compound, Willard kills Kurtz. Kurtz's murder by Willard might seem contradictory within the framework of the analysis presented above, because it has been stated that Kurtz represents a utopia (i.e. a decided nation) and hence he is an object of desire for Willard. Therefore, if Willard kills Kurtz this would be meaningless and contradictory. However, the sequence of Kurtz's murder by Willard is inter-cut with the ritualistic sacrifice of an ox by the natives.¹² This sacrifice scene transforms Kurtz's murder into something more than a simple killing. Coppola explains his intention in this scene as follows: "I had no ending... I decided that the ending could be the classic myth of the murderer who goes up the river, kill

¹²In the film *Strike* (Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925), there is a similar scene which is shown with the same technique. At the end of the film, the killing of the workers is inter-cut with the footage of an ox being slaughtered.

the king and then himself becomes the king – it is the Fisher King, from *The Golden Bough*” (qtd. in Cowie 125 Coppola). *The Golden Bough* is a study of religion and mythology written by James George Frazer who was a Scottish anthropologist. It is also one of the books owned by Kurtz in the film. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer argues that celestial kingdoms were based on the belief that the fertility of nature and social order depended on the king’s power. When the king shows the symptom that his powers are declining, as a ritual, he must be killed / sacrificed to re-increase the fertility of nature and be replaced with a more powerful king. This could also be applied to the situation of Kurtz in the film. Although one can not claim that Kurtz’s power has been declining, one thing is very clear: Kurtz wants to be killed. Willard says: “I felt like he was up there, waiting for me to take the pain away. He just wanted to go out like a soldier... Even the jungle wanted him dead, and that’s who he really took his orders from anyway.” Kurtz waits for Willard to sacrifice himself and give way to Willard. In other words, Kurtz plays the king who must be sacrificed so that his kingship may survive. On the other hand, as has been stated, from Willard’s perspective, Kurtz represents a utopia. However, the utopia is not Kurtz *per se*, but what he represents, namely decidedness and wholeness. Willard cannot take Kurtz’s god-like position and reach wholeness as long as Kurtz exists. Thus, Kurtz must be sacrificed. Therefore, Willard kills Kurtz not because of disliking or hating him but to achieve his and the nation’s utopia. In this way, the nation may overcome lack and reach wholeness. This may also be read as an attempt to re-establish the nation’s dominion over other nations.

However, after the ritual killing / sacrifice of Kurtz, Willard does not take Kurtz’s position. After Willard kills Kurtz, he appears at the entrance of the temple. This is a

critical moment. Willard has a chance to succeed Kurtz as the new God. The natives look at him and bow down. The nation is closest to assuming the “God” position. Now, the self, the nation, is in wholeness. The utopia is about to be realized. The resemblance between Kurtz and Willard reaches its peak, especially with the camouflage on Willard’s face. However, Willard does not take Kurtz’s place. This could be interpreted as follows: According to Lacan, the relationship between the self and *objet petit a* is paradoxical. The self avoids reaching the *objet petit a*, the object of desire; thus, it avoids and delays the satisfaction, because, in fact, the target is the *objet petit a*, but the aim is not the final destination. In other words, the aim is the journey itself which moves towards the target. The self does not give up seeking but also does not really want to find the *objet petit a*. It makes its way until it reaches a dead end. Whatever we do, the object of desire misses our hands. Utopia has a similar function for nations. One cannot know whether it is achievable or not, but always wants and looks for it. In this quest, the pleasure lies in the journey itself. All the efforts and attempts to reach it are considered sacred. On the other hand, should Willard take the place of Kurtz, there would be no utopia to strive for anymore. In this sense, the door is left ajar. Willard does not succeed Kurtz and he continues the journey. However, this is not the end. Although the nation cannot totally reach wholeness, the film points to the necessity and the legitimacy of the search for utopia for the nation.

It can also be said that, at the last moment, the film transforms everything into a matter of individual choice and action. As has been said in the Introduction, the film is based on a story of an individual (Willard). The spectator sees one man’s journey / adventure. Even Kurtz’s murder by Willard is reflected as an individual choice;

though it is an official order. At the end, Willard decides to leave Kurtz's compound and does not order an air assault on the compound asked by the generals. He turns off the radio and goes down the river with Lance in the patrol boat.

At the beginning of *Apocalypse Now*, Willard's unshaved, sweating face appears between the dissolving images of the burning forest. His abnormal situation suggests the inconsistent, contradictory attitude of the U.S. nation towards the war, because he is upset and depressed. Is he remembering the war or only dreaming about the war? Is this a wish? Perhaps it is just a prediction. It is like a mixture of reality and dream. Was there a war, or is it only this man's nightmare? These confused feelings are also valid for the American nation. While Willard (i.e. the nation) is in this mode, in the right side of the frame, an idol-like stone sculpture head / face appears. This is a sculpture from Kurtz's compound and thus it symbolizes utopia. These two images -Willard and the stone face- oppose each other, because while Willard is upside down, because of his lack of decisiveness, while the stone face is straight. The choice of this idol-like stone face is not random. In this way, the invulnerability and the eternality of the utopia are stressed since stone is a very strong and durable material in nature. At the end of the film, Willard's face appears next to this stone face again. This time, they are both straight. Now the utopia and the nation are adjacent. The screen goes black and there are no credits at the end like at the beginning of the film. This increases the film's realism by avoiding reminding the spectators that what they have seen was just a film.

However, this is only one ending. In fact, *Apocalypse Now* was released with two different endings. In the 35 mm version, which was widely distributed in theatres, as the PBR drifts away from Kurtz's compound, the compound is destroyed by an air strike while the closing credits roll. Coppola says: "*Apocalypse* was always intended to have no titles, and it's wonderful without titles. But when we did it in 35 mm, we had to have titles, and I was going to put them on a black background when someone suggested that as we had all that footage of the explosion, why not use that?" (qtd. in Cowie, *Coppola* 132). He continues: "...and I had tons of this gorgeous infrared stuff so I put it under the titles" (qtd. in Schumacher 263). According to Coppola, this footage does not change the film's original ending, because, for him, "it is so clearly the credits" (qtd. in Schumacher 263). These different endings and the way Coppola talks about them underline one more time Coppola's and the film's political ambivalence suggest that Coppola's intention was not very clear in his mind from the production till the end. Although Coppola did not prefer to conclude the film with the explosions in the original 70mm version, they constitute a more cathartic and concrete ending than the original one for the audience (Tomasulo 155). According to our analysis, the termination of the compound would point to the impossibility of the utopia. What Kurtz suggests is that the world is hell -as the film's title also suggests- though it supports a particular ideology. How can all the citizens of a nation show the same decisiveness and become whole? This might become a fascistic attitude. In this respect, the utopia in *Apocalypse Now* can be compared to a dystopia as well. However, the film is ambivalent, in that it both negates and affirms Kurtz as both dystopia and utopia. Moreover, as is discussed above, the affirmation is much stronger than the negation. Indeed, the desired model is almost impossible. There is democracy, freedom of expression and so on. Impossible or not, Willard desires such

a place, the journey is performed with this idea. If we examine the etymology of the word “utopia” we see that it derives from the Greek words “outopia,” which means “no place,” and “eutopia,” which means a “good place.” In this respect, the term points to a possibility and impossibility simultaneously. It suggests that the good place is no place. Thus, for Willard, Kurtz is his / the nation’s “eutopia.” However, after Willard leaves and Kurtz’s compound is destroyed, which suggests that there is not such a place, there cannot be. Thus the “eutopia” becomes an “outopia.”

4.4. *Apocalypse Now* as a Modern Myth: The Naturalization of the Historical

Apocalypse Now can be seen as a modern myth.¹³ According to Lévi-Strauss, as discussed in Chapter 2, myths, which consist of binary oppositions of certain social realities and tendencies familiar and important for society, guarantee the permanence of societies. The structures of myth are formative and also reflective of the attitudes of a social group. Myths serve to construct and maintain particular worldviews and ideologies. Myths function as social mediators, producing an impression of resolution, though it is illusory. In other words, myths function like a control device and may be satisfying for a troubled society. Lévi-Strauss says: “Myth...provides an interpretive grid, a matrix of relations which filters and organizes life experience and produces the blessed illusion that contradictions can be overcome and difficulties are resolved” (qtd. in Tomasulo 146). Lévi-Strauss’s formulation is also applicable to films as cultural products. *Apocalypse Now*, as a modern myth, is filled with ambivalent messages and binary oppositions such as civilized vs. savage, city vs. jungle, strong vs. weak and so on.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the film based on Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of “myth,” see Tomasulo.

The most important binary opposition in the film is civilized vs. savage. In general, this opposition of civilized vs. savage is represented with the opposition of Americans (civilized) vs. Vietnamese (savage). While Americans attack with high-tech helicopters (modern machinery of war), Willard and his crew are attacked with arrows and spears along their journey (antiquate machinery of war). This depiction of the Vietnamese using arrows and spears is taken directly from the novella and it is a way to attach the attribute of “savage” to the Vietnamese, because they did not use such weapons in the Vietnam War. The film blindly associates the Vietnamese with savagery without acknowledging their national purpose. It ideologically constructs them as savages with primordial instincts, who fight savagely not because they are willed to save their nation but because of their nature. Thus, the film represents something historical as being natural. This also serves to mitigate the Vietnamese. Saul Steier defines *Apocalypse Now* as a “profoundly racist film” (120); because in the film, all Asians are represented as void of rational thought. The “will” that the Vietnamese have to win the war is because of their primitive and animalistic nature. There is “no possibility that Vietnamese are revolutionaries, nationalists, or Marxists” (Steier 121). The Asians are “primitive” and “animalistic;” they are “authentic savages.” Rationality is the invention of the civilized and it leads to the defeat of the Americans (Steier 121). The story told by Kurtz about the natives cutting off the arms of their children also serves the racist myth of the civilized, white European confronting dark skinned hostilities (Fiedler 396). It can be said that the film frames the Vietnamese as unreasonable primitive people. However, on the other hand, the film also constructs them as an object of envy. They possess what Americans lack: solidarity and decisiveness which is barely seen in modern, civilized societies. This is how Kurtz sees them.

The mythic structure in *Apocalypse Now* serves to dehistoricize and depoliticize a historical and political subject. The film attempts to represent the issue as a timeless and placeless ethical problem rather than a political and historical conflict. Thus, the Vietnam War turns into an event which did not result from certain political and social forces at a certain point in time, but from the dark side of the human nature in general. This is a characteristic of mass cultural texts. Mass cultural texts tend to dehistoricize social realities and naturalize events in order to create generally accepted assumptions, such as that war comes from human's dark side. In this respect, as Paul Virilio states, "representation of events" goes further than the "presentation of facts" (qtd. in Martin 102). This is also what Althusser says about ideology: "a representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to the real condition of existence." In *Apocalypse Now*, the spectator sees a dream. It is a dream about the American nation and the distorted reasons for the Vietnam War. *Apocalypse Now* is an attempt to naturalize and universalize the historical and the local. This ideological operation can also be observed in Coppola's following statement: "I started moving back in time, because I wanted to imply that the issues and themes were timeless. As you went further up river, you went deeper into the origins of human nature" (qtd. in Tomasulo 154). The film loses the specificity of its historical reference by exploring universal and timeless truths about humans. It becomes ahistorical and thus apolitical. The conflict becomes a matter of universal issues rather than a matter of American international policy.

The film abstracts the war from its historical context by connecting it to the terror in human being. Thus, the film mystifies and blurs the actual problem. Willard does not ask "why": Why did this war happen? Why are we here? However, he questions

“how”: How are we fighting? How should we fight? How does the war affect the people, mostly the Americans? The question “why?” cannot be answered easily, because the answer will reveal that the war was morally wrong, but the film is interested in “how?” *Apocalypse Now* concludes with the ideological assumption that nothing was wrong with the war ethically –in terms of the presence of Americans in Vietnam, but that the reason for defeat was the lack of will to fight decisively.

According to Holger Bachmann, Conrad, in his novella uses colonialism only as a background and as an instance of the inhumanity of the modern world. Marlow’s journey is a symbolic journey into the human psyche. It is about morality and ethics and the discovery of the darkness in every human being (318). According to the novella, even at the heart of the most civilized man (Kurtz who is depicted as a puritan European man) there lies a savage. Conrad’s novella also criticizes imperialism, because it deviates from its aim. Imperialism, by entering the dark places of the world, would bring enlightenment to those areas, but it only brought death, destruction and exploitation. In this sense, *Apocalypse Now* is parallel to the novella, in that it can be read as a serious critique of American imperialism. America intervened in Vietnam to bring “democracy and freedom,” but it only brought death, destruction and pain. However, to make this critique, the inconsistency between the reality and the promises should be represented, but in *Apocalypse Now* the U.S. military is already in Vietnam as if this is a quite normal thing.

Apocalypse Now uses the Vietnam War as a metaphor to explore more general matters such as moral ambiguity and hypocrisy. In this respect, it is quite harmonious

with the novella, though it is a loose adaptation. As Andrew Martin suggests, throughout its history Hollywood has been quite successful in identifying ideological conflicts and social contradictions and resolving them symbolically. This does not mean that Hollywood represents social problems directly and realistically. On the contrary, the usual strategy includes condensation and displacement through metaphorical and symbolic solutions (Martin 97-98). As Jameson remarks, social and historical anxieties are detached from their original source and attached to another, more natural one. Although *Apocalypse Now* does not have a concrete and classical, conventional Hollywood ending, the film as a whole offers a solution by connecting the war to ethical problems by using the boat journey as a metaphor for the discovery of psychological questions.

According to Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, metaphor is a highly ideological representation technique. Metaphor assigns an idealized meaning to an image. The image goes beyond its meaning. For example, freedom is symbolized with the image of an eagle. There is no direct connection between an eagle and freedom. The meaning of freedom is met by a concrete but highly idealized object, the eagle. The process of attributing an idealized meaning to a real object through metaphor is quite similar with the way reality is perceived through certain idealized meanings via ideology as suggested by Althusser. The internalization of such idealized images causes people to think and live as if the situation is like that in real life (Ryan and Kellner 15-16). In the context of *Apocalypse Now*, the film cuts the link between the historical event and reality, and the spectator is encouraged to think that the Vietnam conflict is not caused by certain policies but by one of the devastating effects of the unification of the modernized world with the dark side of humans. If metaphor is

ciphering an unknown thing with a well known thing, *Apocalypse Now* does this efficiently.

4.5. From Criticism of the War to War as Spectacle

Another important character in the film is Kilgore. Kilgore is a symbol of great American egotism. He is used as a critique. The film does not affirm Kilgore's actions and depicts him in a negative way. However, the effect of this critique is limited and diminished by both the film's energetic cinematography, especially in the sequence of the village raid and Kilgore's caricatured character. In that scene, which reminds us the My Lai massacre, the film criticizes the overpowering technology of modern battle by showing the destructive and violent effects of these war machines on people, but, on the other hand, the representation style of the helicopters integrated with a triumphant musical score is an attempt to amaze the spectator.

While Kilgore's air cavalry is preparing for the village attack, they are like a modern American cavalry unit which will soon attack the Indians. Kilgore is General Custer with his big, black cowboy hat. Indeed, at the moment the helicopters' lift off, a soldier plays an attack horn. The emblem on the helicopters is the cavalry unit emblem. All of these connote American imperialism which was used against the Indians in yesteryear and used today against Vietnam. This analogy is a critique of American imperialism.

The battle scene at “Charlie’s Point” is the most-well known and the longest sequence in the film. Cinematically, Michael Dempsey defines it as “a thundering, majestic spectacle” (8). The aesthetic style of this sequence causes a pro-war reading. Style always embodies a meaning. As helicopters are approaching the village, they are shown in deep focus, and low-angle shots. In general, a low angle shot of an object in cinema connotes superiority of that object. Accordingly, these low-angle shots of the helicopters connote the U.S army’s superiority. The appearance of full armada on the horizon at dawn in a regular flight order creates an idealized, elaborated, extravagant atmosphere that makes the war not a devastating and terrible event but a visually stunning and exciting experience. “We are drawn into the artificial ecstasy of the attack” (Hansen 129). The helicopters are represented in a heroic way; they are not cold, annihilating machines. They are “death from above.” The editing is composed with rapid cuts as parallel with the dynamism of action to provoke this excitement. While the Americans are depicted in this way, the village is shown only for seconds. There is a cut from helicopter images to the quiet, non-violent, serene village. A woman dressed in white takes children away suggesting innocence and purity, and a few men take the anti-aircraft artillery. The spectator is not able to see in a detailed way; he / she does not know who the Vietnamese are or what they have been doing before the attack. They are simply excluded. The camera cuts again to the helicopters after this short appearance of the Vietnamese. Although the film seems to criticize the war, namely America’s attitudes in the war, it transforms the war into a spectacle. In the documentary *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, the cinematographer Vittorio Storaro says: “Francis (Coppola) always reminds me: Vittorio, remember, this is not just a documentary about the Vietnam War. This is also a main show.”

In addition to the poetic depiction of the helicopters, Kilgore plays *Ride of the Valkyries* by saying: “Yeah, I use Wagner – scares the hell out of the slopes! My boys love it!” The scene is synchronized with glorious music, Richard Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*. This is not a random choice; it must be noted that Wagner –or useful parts of Wagner’s music- were used by fascists for propaganda. While the song is playing, the camera shows in close up a soldier caressing the machine gun of the helicopter. The song starts blasting away from the speakers attached to the helicopters and then the helicopters start to fire. Moreover, through the point of view shots from the helicopter, the spectator sees the whole battle from the American side. There is no shot from the ground. We do not see the perspective of the Vietnamese villagers. In the point of view shots from the helicopter, the Vietnamese become unidentified masses, dozens of faceless people. They are represented in aerial long shots; the spectator never sees their faces. The representation of the Vietnamese, which is some sort of a “non-representation” prevents the spectator from identifying with the Vietnamese as in the case of many other Vietnam War films. What Kilgore does is like buffalo hunting and he becomes a cowboy with his yellow scarf around his neck and black hat.

This sequence is the aestheticization and glorification of war, a visual form of the Futurist Marinetti’s manifesto with the beauty in the battle scenes. As one viewer says: “In an age of liberal moralism and bureaucratic fear, *Apocalypse Now* made a daringly reactionary statement: War is a beautiful and vital human experience” (qtd. in Tomasulo 150). Philip Wander claims that *Apocalypse Now* has a fascist aesthetic and says: “The heart of the issue, most clearly present in *Apocalypse Now*, is the historic attraction of fascist and proto-fascist art” (77). According to Walter

Benjamin, who argues that art in the age of mechanical reproduction can enable the formation of the masses, Fascist movements attempt to “aestheticize politics” by creating huge spectacles for the masses. For Benjamin, “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (241). It could be argued that the village raid scene, or the film as a whole, aestheticizes politics rather than politicizing art. War is ugly and causes ugly pictures: corpses, injured, napalmed bodies. However, the village raid sequence transforms the war into a glorified, thing with its cinematic richness of color and elegant and stylish camera movements.

One of the most important scenes which is highly critical of the actions of Americans in Vietnam is the massacre of the civilians in a sampan. According to Tomasulo, Willard’s killing of the young Vietnamese girl provokes sympathy for the victim by recalling the historical My Lai massacre in 1968. The scene uses clichés such as a young innocent girl and a puppy, thus the cinematic representation of this scene is “heart wrenching.” The emotional roller coaster also enhances this feeling. First, there is continuously loud machine gun fire, then there is silence, and finally there is one single shot (Tomasulo 152). Moreover, Willard’s voiceover comment is important in terms of emphasizing and criticizing the hypocrisy of the military: “We’d cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a band aid. It was a lie, and the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies.”

In the sequence of the U.S.O show, the army is also criticized for its lack of control and discipline. The soldiers are depicted as revelry men not warriors. At the end of the show, drunken American soldiers scream at women, they charge the stage trying

to get closer to their objects of desire and women board the helicopter and run away. The show ends in chaos. Their running away in chaos is reminiscent of the evacuation of the last Americans from Saigon with a helicopter at the roof of the U.S embassy just before the invasion of the North Vietnamese Army. It was a dishonorable thing for Americans. However, the effect of this scene is compensated by reminding the spectator of another historical reference. Hence, this sequence includes a conflicting situation. The Playboy bunnies dressed as Indians and cowboys create a spectacle of colonization (Hansen 131). It is not a critique of U.S. imperialism; rather, it is the transformation into a pleasurable thing through the construction of a harsh male gaze. Colonization becomes an iconic stage show, depicted as a pleasurable thing.

4.6. Silences and Absences

Apocalypse Now tells the story of an American soldier in Vietnam where thousands of Vietnamese were killed. The film claims to show everything, but, in fact, many things are absent. The film has a speech / discourse but this speech is constructed upon a certain silence. This could be explored through a “symptomatic reading.” As discussed in Chapter 2, symptomatic reading is concerned with the lapses, silences and absences in the text. As has been said, ideology always says something, and saying something is an act of choice. The absences are crucial to the work’s ideological function. When you say something, you leave other things unsaid. In symptomatic reading, what is most important are the things that are left unsaid in the text. The absences in a film are related with the director’s or writer’s decision or the discourse of the film about what to address or not in the film (i.e. what the camera does not show). In war films, which inevitably deal with political issues, the

avoidance of something is as significant as what the film directly addresses. In other words, what is absent may tell us as much as what is present tells us.

As has already been mentioned, a major absence in *Apocalypse Now* is the Vietnamese. The “absence” does not refer simply to the missing elements in the text; it rather refers to the avoidance of some elements which are expected to be in the text. It is quite normal to expect to see -in whatever way- the Vietnamese in a Vietnam War film. This war happened in their lands and against them. However, in *Apocalypse Now* there is not a single line of concrete dialogue from a Vietnamese. The best example of this can be observed in the scene where Kilgore encounters a Vietcong lying on the ground with a fatal wound begging for water. Kilgore does not simply pass the man. He gives the soldier water, but when he learns that the famous American surfer Lance is in his unit, he goes immediately to welcome Lance. Because of the caricaturized Kilgore, this scene can be interpreted as a critique of the great self-indulgence of America. However, even in this critique, the camera does not exactly take a close-up. Contrary to this, in the scene of village raid discussed above, a wounded black American soldier lying on the ground is shown in the close-up, despite the fact that all the energetic scenes are given in the aerial perspective-from the point of view of the helicopters. Thus, Kilgore forgets the Vietnamese, but, at the same time, the film forgets the Vietnamese. It is a critique of self-indulgence with self-indulgence. The film keeps the same representation attitude in its general structure. It would be naïve to say that “the film as a whole is a critique of self-indulgence.” *Apocalypse Now* is a film about the American self.¹⁴ This is a self who is interested in himself, in his own completeness and utopia. As Willard finds himself

¹⁴ “The director described his film as ‘honest, mythical, pro-human and therefore pro-American’” (Suid).

closer to Kurtz, the Vietnamese gradually become less and less important, even unseen, because, the nation moves closer to its utopia; its desired self. The best example for this is the scene at Do Lung Bridge, the last stop before Kurtz's compound. In this scene, the Vietnamese are unseen; we can only hear their voices.

The absence of the Vietnamese does not create a problem for cinematic suture. Suture is the process of the subject's efforts to fill the gaps, to restore the divisions within the self, and to provide order and coherence. In cinema, it is provided by editing, which completes the gaps and stitches the spectator into the film text. In *Apocalypse Now*, the absence of the Vietnamese is not noticed by the spectator due to the illusion provided by editing. First of all, subjectivity is constructed through Willard. Thus, suture works to overcome the gap around Willard. Secondly, the Vietnamese are depicted out of focus, most of the time faceless, sometimes even tiny. This treatment is ideological. It prevents the spectator from seeing the absence by directing the spectator to look at a different thing.

4.7. What Is Really On the Screen?

Apocalypse Now is a complicated film with many possible meanings. These meanings have highly ideological implications. The film reflects the theme "war is madness and hell", and it attempts to represent the Vietnam conflict. The inhumanities, the horror, the madness of the war are successfully described, even sometimes in a technically impressive and shocking way. However, while saying these, the film leaves the most important things unsaid. It does not tell and show much -almost anything- about why and how America became involved in the war. It

shows Americans committing all the violence –sometimes in a glorified manner. However, like many other Vietnam War films, it concentrates on the effects of the war on Americans rather than on Vietnamese. *Apocalypse Now* disavows the political significance of Vietnam with set of ideological operations discussed above and manipulates the spectator in an epic style. *Apocalypse Now* points to the mystery of the war, but it does not pave the way for a comprehension into Vietnam's importance and meaning for the American public. It is about how the Vietnam War invaded the American nation, not about America's invasion of Vietnam.

5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the film *Apocalypse Now* has been analyzed in terms of its ideological function and messages. More generally, this thesis has been an attempt to explore the relationship between film and ideology. To make this connection, screen theory has been used to analyze the film. Screen theory claims that cinema is an institutional and ideological apparatus. Screen theorists focus on the textual operations in films. This thesis has attempted to perform the same thing. In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework of screen theory has been sketched out. Saussurian linguistics and structuralism allow us to understand how meaning is constructed and how texts shape our conception of reality. According to Metz, film, as a signifying text, also constructs reality, though it is not real. Although *Apocalypse Now* presents itself as “the real Vietnam,” this study has attempted to prove that the film is rather a particular construction of the Vietnam War from a particular perspective. Coppola says, *Apocalypse Now* is an anti-lie film (Suid), but, in fact, it is just another lie, an ideological discursive construction.

The signifying text can only appeal to an idealized spectator, that is the “spectator as subject.” According to Lacan, subject formation is a matter of visual illusion, which he describes in his “mirror phase” account. Metz takes this analogy into cinema and uses it to explain the identification process in cinema. In cinema, the spectator is positioned as a subject by the text. Althusser borrows the concept of “subject” whose

formation is vitally related with visual illusion. According to Althusser, ideology is “a representation of imaginary relationships of the individuals to their real condition of existence” (123). In this way, ideology hails individuals and turns them into subjects. It could be said that being a subject is also ideological; both in social life and cinema the subject is exposed to ideology. Cinema, by reproducing imaginary relations and identifications, functions in the domain of the ideology. Moreover, cinema creates an illusion of reality with its power to create very realistic images. This causes the spectator to assume that looking at a film is looking at the outside world, the reality. However, the images are filtered through the ideology and then put on the screen.

The film *Apocalypse Now* is analyzed as a case to discuss these notions. In conclusion, this film is ideologically constructed as a symbolic solution for social equilibrium. Although it seems to be anti-war, and, hence, it appeals to anti-war circles, it affirms the desire for a nation and a society with no division and full of decisiveness, which can be read as a fascistic and pro-war message. As has been argued, the utopia in the film can also be seen as a dystopia. The film becomes ambivalent by both negating and affirming Kurtz as both utopia and dystopia. In parallel to the two meanings of the term “utopia” (“good place” and “no place”), the film points to a possibility and impossibility at the same time. The two different endings of the film underline the film’s ambivalence about the symbolic solution it offers which alternates between eutopia (good place) and outopia (no place). While Kurtz represents eutopia, the destruction of his compound transforms the eutopia into a outopia.

The film attempts to produce a political critique of the Vietnam War, but this critique, because of the representation and narrative techniques it employs, turns into a set of conflicting and competing discourses. This leads to a paralysis and makes the film ambivalent.

The meaning of the Vietnam War is continuously sliding for Americans. It cannot be caught and fixed. Even today, almost 30 years later, films about the war are still made. There are also World War II films, but they constitute a relatively heterogeneous genre unlike the controversial Vietnam War films. Vietnam War films have always caused serious debates: Are they anti-war or pro-war? Which film best depicts the War realistically? The making of Vietnam War films even today could be regarded as a sign of the desire to fix the meaning and put the war in the past. It is like the sliding meaning in Lacan's theory of language. The meaning is never fixed, because language does not belong to the subject. The Vietnam War was not totally supported by Americans. A large portion of Americans did not accept the war and the debate over it continues. Instead of repressing and totally forgetting, *Apocalypse Now*, like some other Vietnam War films, attempts to make the war remembered "truly." In this way, the war can find a proper place in American memory. Otherwise, it would remain a disturbing anxiety. However, the war never really ends like the end of *Apocalypse Now*. Even, *Apocalypse Now*, as the two different endings suggest, cannot fix the meaning. Film, as a language, does not help to fix the meaning of the war, because it is shaped by a certain ideology. Moreover, it changes and distorts the existing meanings.

This thesis may conclude with a question: Is it possible to make a purely anti-war film? It would take another chapter or another thesis to answer this question. However, some personal preliminary remarks could be made. Making a purely anti-war film seems difficult, especially when films are regarded as channels of ideology. War, as a promoted thing for productivity and, hence, the economy in general, occurs in favor of certain political and economic profit. Throughout history, war has never been simply a struggle for sovereignty but a violent path toward economic salvation. Today, war is an investment and an industry. Hollywood, as one of the branches of the industry, cannot oppose the existing political structure and the general tendency of the economy, because films are, remembering Comolli and Narboni, commercial products. Film is manufactured within a given system of economic relations and it is an ideological product of the system (i.e. capitalism) (Comolli and Narboni 45). However, it is not just a matter of producing a profitable product. If we remember Hollywood's treatment of the war during the war years, there was not any film directly related with the war, either pro-war or anti-war, except *The Green Berets*. It is significant that the anti-war movement reached its peak at the end of the 1960s and 1970s; this means that there was potential for anti-war films. However, the critical films were produced after the war, in the second half of the 1970s. This suggests that Hollywood waited for the safe time to put Vietnam on the screen instead of taking sides, during the war due to economic concerns as well as ideological ones.

The difficulty of producing an anti-war film is also related to the difficulty of representing and projecting the "war" itself, which defies representation. When the war is attempted to be depicted it turns into a spectacle. War films make war look exciting. The aim of the director may be to show the horror, destructiveness and

inhumanity of the war. However, as a result of the visual nature of the medium, the spectator falls in with the energy and excitement of the scenes instead of feeling fear, disgust and hate. Watching war films is like an experience of adventure at the end of which the audience undergoes a catharsis.¹⁵ Showing a war scene is a dilemma especially for anti-war films. If a war scene is shown in the film, as has been discussed, it usually becomes an exciting and adventure-like experience for the spectator. If there is no war scene, the film may fall into a different genre, as in the case of the film *Coming Home*. It was produced to protest the war, but eventually it simply tells a love story.

As a final opinion, although there may be some exceptions, mainstream films, in general, attempt to tell the story of someone, not the event itself. The events are narrated from one person's point of view. In the context of the Vietnam War film genre, protagonists are American soldiers and the war is depicted from their perspective mostly. Representing history is already a problematic issue in terms of accuracy, objectivity, and the reflection of all dimensions. Moreover, in films, the events are transformed into a narrative and presented to the spectator through a perspective. Yet, there are some films which attempt to overcome these problems to some extent. For example, *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974), an independent British documentary, provides the spectators with different perspectives (Ryan and Kellner 197). The film uses archival news footage together with interviews. The key theme is how American racism and militarism helped create the Vietnam conflict. The film shows the supporters and the opponents of the foreign policy of the United States one after the other, and the demolition caused by war puts the war supporters

¹⁵ United Artists sold *Apocalypse Now* as a "high epic adventure" (Devine 198).

in a cruel position. For example, consider the words by General C. Clark Westmoreland on the Oriental attitude towards life: “The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is cheap in the Orient.” Just after these words, the scene of the Vietnamese crying for their dead appears.

According to Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, this film is important for defining the social and historical context which created the main causes of the war (197). Contrary to the fictional war films produced after the war, *Hearts and Minds* uses a multi-dimensional perspective which abolishes the blindness and the infertility of a single subjective perspective. In the film, the Vietnamese gain subjectivity to a certain extent, unlike in the other films. As has been examined, in other films, subjectivity is established by an American figure and the Vietnamese are just the objects. The film also tries to give a voice to the Vietnamese people themselves to express their pain, anger, how the war has affected them and their reasons for fighting the United States. Moreover, one of the languages in the film is Vietnamese.

As another example, *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968) is an important film in terms of both its release date and its treatment of the Vietnam conflict. Unlike many other Hollywood “anti-war” films, the film was released while the war was going on and the anti-war movement was increasing. However, unlike *Hearts and Minds*, the Vietnamese themselves are not the major subject in this film. Nevertheless, the historical and political aspects of the war, the Vietnamese’s fight for independence and the way all this led to primarily a civil war and then to an international problem are considerably dealt with.

There are also some films which produce a serious anti-war statement even if they do not show the other's perspective directly such as *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Errol Morris, 2003) and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). These two films criticize the war by looking deeply into the self rather than trying to represent the other.

Apocalypse Now might be a good intentioned film which attempts to make an anti-war statement outside the Hollywood system. It is one of the most important and valued films of the New Hollywood era. Technically, it is a magnum opus and one cannot deny Coppola's artistic effort. However, like any artwork, it is also a text which produces and circulates meaning in the social sphere. This thesis has explored these meanings by analyzing the discourse of the film. The main concern was the film's ambivalent character in relation to the pro-war / anti-war dichotomy. As a final remark, it must be noted that ambivalence is not a wrong or unethical thing in itself. On the contrary, its dialectical nature can be quite productive. The problem with *Apocalypse Now* is that it pretends to be and it is forwarded by the filmmaker as a non-ambivalent film; as if it is clearly "anti-war." This is ideological. The main purpose of this thesis has been to unveil the ambivalence of the film through an ideological analysis.

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