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Mythifying Africa

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> As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words. [...] Some months later, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the plaza, met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites [...].[1]

In *Benito Cereno* Herman Melville delineated the failure of representing blackness. Captain Amasa Delano's glaring misreading of the situation on the *San Dominick*, of the true nature of Don Benito Cereno's and his 'slave' Babo's bonding, and of his own position and significance, testifies to the power of stereotypes not only to shape, but ultimately to efface the perception of the Other. The historical narrative of an incident in 1788 thus serves as a reflection upon the perils of subjective projection in general, bringing into view "the convulsive history of the entire region and epoch—from the Columbian arrival in the Americas, through the democratic revolutions in the United States, Haiti, and Latin America, to the contemporary crisis over the expansion of the 'Slave Power' in the United States" as Eric Sundquist noted.[2] Affecting everybody involved, African, European or American, the history of imperialism and slavery brought forth a huge repertoire of cultural images, a network beyond individual control and subjective penetration. In Melville's story, Babo draws expertly on this repertoire. He makes use of Delano's indissoluble entanglement within an imagery of 'the African,' his incapability of conceiving of such a paradoxical thing as a scheming African, a plotting black.[3]

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And yet, the manipulation of the referential system effects nothing but a momentary reversal of the structures of blackness and whiteness, a reversal which points to the arbitrary nature of the given social hierarchy as represented by the system of slavery, yet fails to undo the logic of slavery, the logic of a dialectics of master and slave. When the insurrection is turned down, Babo's effort to withhold, to resist, becomes a futile gesture, a mute, defiant gaze interlocked with "the gazes of the whites"—enacting a kind of suspended interaction that seems to perpetuate and totalize the strange bond between Cereno and Babo, a bond made out of hatred, fear, deprecation and—strangely—mutual dependance: when Babo dies, Cereno dies too.[4]

The narrative's focal constellation, the bond between black and white, master and slave, oppressor and victim, is epitomized in the shaving scene which can be read either as an exemplary act of subservience or as an ultimate threat. The same ambivalent constellation resurfaces over and over in fictional representations of blackness and whiteness. Within the last twenty years, countless efforts to re-appraise the black subject in the history of colonialism and slavery and to revise the myth(s) of blackness have evoked scenarios echoing Melville's *Benito Cereno*. In the following I will concentrate on narratives that situate this revision of blackness within a context which is itself mythical: Africa. The representation of Africa in Western fiction, I argue, epitomizes the inherent predicament any fictional reworking of a mythical entity faces: the concomitant images, evocations and allusions are always as pervasive as they are vague, so that the fiction contrives to control a symbolic framework which has already taken control of the fiction.

I. Out of America: A Postmodern Perspective

Any construction of whiteness is inexorably entwined with a construction of blackness, just as Babo and Benito Cereno are mercilessly yoked together in a symbolic system which ultimately renders the distinction between oppressor and oppressed futile. In Melville's narrrative, the imagery of stereotypes and cultural ascriptions is shown to be powerful because it is unacknowledged *and* central, so that its manipulation

disrupts not only the social system, but threatens to collapse the very foundations of reality, the natural order of things. Toni Morrison has characterized this "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" at the core of American culture as "the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony," the hidden referent behind the historical construction of an American national identity and American exceptionality.[5]

If the Africanist figure is situated at the core of U.S.American culture, its centrality within the discourse of postcolonialism is certainly no less pertinent. The problematical 'hyphenated' existence of African-Americans echoes the paradoxical situation of African peoples whose very concepts of identity and autonomy derive from the European discourses they mean to contest. Terence Ranger has shown how the British obsession with tradition and national identity inscribed itself into the 'blank space' of Africa and merged indissolubly with indigenous efforts at self-definition and independence: "the invented traditions of African societies—whether invented by the Europeans or by Africans themselves in response—distorted the past but became in themselves realities through which a good deal of colonial encounter was expressed."[6] In the course of this argument, the very idea of Africa could be conceived of as a myth in the Barthesian sense, as Kwame Anthony Appiah pointed out: "the very invention of Africa (as something more than a geographical entity) must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of European racialism; the notion of Pan-Africanism was founded on the notion of the African, which was, in turn, founded not on any genuine cultural commonality but on the very European concept of the Negro."[7] In light of this recognition, the very search for an 'indigenous' or 'natural' tradition becomes futile: tradition, regardless of its origins, is constituted by the transition of individual habit into communal custom, by a ritualization of mundane practice, by history becoming myth. By this logic all tradition is invented or—conversely—all traditions are indigenous; as the social function and cultural context of traditional settings can vary, they are subject to change and ideological manipulation. The project of cultural criticism, then, amounts to more than merely tracing back the origins of cultural practice, it needs to bring forth the constructive functions of cultural ascriptions, the subtle transformations colonial racialism undergoes once it is adopted (and re-enacted) as tradition.

One of the crucial tasks of a cultural criticism starting from these assumptions would then be to demarcate the peripheries of the discourses of racial stereotyping and ethnic self-fashioning, the transitions, exchanges and exclusions between discourses that transfix racial identity and ethnic stylization. The intermediate realms between a dominant and a subjugated culture, or, in Homi Bhabha's words, the "interstitial disjunctive spaces" pertaining neither to one nor the other, present a space where the seminal work of 'translation' as "the performative nature of cultural communication"[8] takes place. The colonial order and the postcolonial situation arising from it release conflicting desires for control *and* understanding, exchange *and* power, constituting "contact zones" that leave nobody involved unaffected.[9]

Not accidentally, these characterizations of the postcolonial world as a conglomerate of disharmonious voices that nevertheless had to establish valid communicative patterns calls to mind the 'postmodern condition' which equally has been described by way of ruptures, clashes, precarious power structures that constantly realign themselves.[10] However, these two discursive fields, the postcolonial and the postmodern, overlap only in part. Postmodern culture, it seems, is rather concerned with enacting the mythical aspects of these interstices, stylizing the intermediate space as impenetrable, inscrutable, blank and thus epitomizing the collapse of cultural communication, the ahistoricity and opacity of the Other, rather than its subversive or productive potential. So even if postmodern writing, just like postcolonial writing, is obsessed with the idea of historical representation, even if both employ similar rhetorical, tropical and narrative strategies, and even if both collapse existent models of historical representation and recording—their cultural functions and conceptual context diverge considerably.[11] I mean to exemplify this divergence of interest and impact by way of a reading of a chapter of Thomas Pynchon's novel *V.*, "Mondaugen's Story," which enacts a scenario of postcolonialism, yet eschews its project of re-writing history and re-constructing tradition in favour of a postmodern effort at 'collapsing' historiography.[12] This reading of Pynchon's dislodging of postcolonialism will then be contrasted with an analysis of a text suffused with a postcolonialist rhetoric: Nicolas Roeg's film *Heart of Darkness* (1994).

When Thomas Pynchon resumes Melville's project of representing blackness almost one hundred years later, he focuses on the symbolic space of colonial and postcolonial Africa, the "South-West-Protectorate," a region the very name of which points to the perverse logic of colonialism. Just like Melville, Pynchon presents the 'African' as a symbolic system of cultural images and ascriptions, but whereas in *Benito Cereno* Babo manages at least momentarily to get the better of this system and to manipulate the repertoire for his own interests, in *V.* it seems irrevocably at large, beyond individual control or penetration. Just like the tattooed body of the woman in Vheissu, "the gaudy, godawful riot of pattern and color"[13] which mystified and frightened the British imperialist Hugh Godolphin, the unreadibility of Africa threatens to overwhelm the European (predominantly German and proto-fascist) community in its midst, and the frustration before the unreadable is compensated by orgies of pornographic violence and sadistic cruelty.

"Mondaugen's Story" is set in 1922 and relates the weird experiences of the young German scientist Kurt Mondaugen who in the course of a strangely vague African upheaval gets trapped in the farm of a German settler in the South-West, Foppl. The violent confrontation of Europeans and Africans mirrors an earlier situation, the (historical) campaign of General Lothar von Trotha's army in 1904 aimed at the suppression of an African insurrection against the colonial power, culminating in the "Vernichtungs Befehl" and the extermination of "about 60,000 people" (*V.*245). Foppl, Mondaugen's host, was a recruit under Trotha and his nostalgic recollections of the past events begin to infiltrate and dominate the mind of the 'voyeur' Mondaugen, who is increasingly drawn into a "collective dream—[...] a dream of annihilation" and entangled in the pattern of violence and murder he recollects involuntarily, inculpating himself in the very process of 'watching.'[14] Foppl experienced Trotha's crusade as an epitome of personal empowerment and absolute freedom: "[...] he was feeling [...] the pleasure of making a choice whose consequences, even the most terrible, he could ignore." (*V.* 271) Not accidentally this pleasure of irresponsibility is closely associated with a levelling of historical depth, with a dismissal of the past: "I had the same feeling once in the Realgymnasium when they told us we wouldn't be responsible in the examination for all the historical dates we'd spent weeks

memorizing." (*V.* 253). Foppl's feeling of release and freedom is symptomatic of the logic of imperialism—a logic of irreversible structures of power constituting a situation that is liminal, timeless and absolutely exceptional.

This exceptionality and specificity comes to the fore in the 'intermediate zones,' the institial space where colonizers and colonized are forced to meet, or rather to collide—zones that are organized by absolutely unconditional rules of power and submission, where the positions of the powerful and the powerless, the killer and the victim, are absolutely transfixed: one is *exclusively* and *forever* in control, the other *always* and *totally* victimized. When Foppl and his comrade Fleische kill a nameless Hottentot, who had refused to stick to this rule, the perverse pleasure in the absolute stability and eternal exceptionality of the system culminates:

> After Fleische, with the tip of his sjambok, had had the obligatory sport with the black's genitals, they clubbed him to death with the butts of their rifles and tossed what was left behind a rock for the vultures and flies.
>
> But as they did this thing—and Fleische said later that he'd felt something like it too—there came over him for the first time an odd sort of peace, perhaps like what the black was feeling as he gave up the ghost. [...] Things seemed all at once to fall into a pattern: a great cosmic fluttering in the blank, bright sky and each grain of sand, each cactus spine, each feather of the circling vulture above them and invisible molecule of heated air seemed to shift imperceptibly so that this black and he, and he and every other black he would henceforth have to kill slid into alignment, assumed a set symmetry, a dancelike poise. [...] It had only to do with the destroyer and the destroyed, and the act which united them, and it had never been that way before. (*V*.262-63)

Here the colonizer and colonized, white and black, enter into a relationship that demands their absolute singularity and their total representativity: they become *the* destroyer, *the* destroyed. In this perverse bond not only the victim, but also the killers are effaced in anything but their momentary experience—killing, being killed. Yet while Foppl gains a voice, the nameless African does not. Pynchon refuses to write an alternative history that would account for his experience and his position. Here, the power which yokes together oppressor and oppressed is nothing but a projection of the white man on the black man, a projection which in itself turns in a further projection, as Foppl's

recollections infiltrate Mondaugen's consciousness. If this recollection of a recollection that invades Mondaugen is called nostalgia—"nostalgia he didn't want, nostalgia forced on him by something he was coming to look on as a coalition" (*V.* 260)—it is a nostalgia which obliterates past and present likewise, replacing the past by its myth and effacing the present by creating a paranoic 'surplus' of historical depth and reference which contrives to render any idea of individual autonomy and subjective perspective doubtful:[15] "[Mondaugen's] voyeurism had been determined purely by events seen, and not by any deliberate choice, or preëxisting set of personal psychic needs" (*V.*277). In the end we are left with nothing but a blank, the vast empty space of the desert and its inhabitors, a blank which resists projection and foregoes representation:

> The Bondel had lost his right arm. "All over," he said. "Many Bondels dead, baases dead, van Wijk dead. My woman, younkers dead." He let Mondaugen ride behind him. At that point Mondaugen didn't know where they were going. As the sun climbed he dozed on and off, his cheek against the Bondel's scarred back. They seemed the only three animate objects on the yellow road which led, he knew, sooner or later, to the Atlantic. The sunlight was immense, the plateau country wide, and Mondaugen felt little and lost in the dun-colored waste. Soon as they trotted along the Bondel began to sing, in a small voice which was lost before it reached the nearest Ganna bush. The song was in Hottentot dialect, and Mondaugen couldn't understand it. (*V.* 279)

In Pynchon's novel the myth of Africa is depicted as so powerful and all-pervading that it absorbs everybody identified with it. The Bondels' individuality is completely contained within this myth of the African, a myth which is clearly shown to derive from European minds, requiring the indissoluble bond between 'destroyer' and 'destroyed,' imperialist intruder and African victim and—at the same time—the clear and univocal distinction between active and passive part, projecting subject and projected object. Just as Barthes's 'saluting negro' is "not a symbol and much less an alibi, [but] the *presence* of French imperiality,"[16] so the Bondels in Pynchon's novel are projections of an imperialism which has completely transferred and replaced every other trace of signification—there is nothing underneath or behind. Once released from the tight bond, the 'African' is completely devoid of meaning, an empty

cipher. Here, just as in Melville's approach to blackness, the intricate link between blackness and whiteness is impossible to ignore, but unlike Melville Pynchon insists upon the fatal totality of this link: While Melville permits a glimpse underneath the glib surface of racialist ascriptions by enacting the gap between Delano's representation and the reader's growing unease with the represented, Pynchon forces the reader into the imperialist position, ultimately equating the project of interpretation and signification, indeed the project of reading itself, with the project of imperialism.[17]

II. Hearts of Darkness: A Postcolonial Perspective

To represent Africa, Pynchon holds, is to don the glasses of imperialism, otherwise the project of representation shatters at the unyielding surface of the "absolute blackness" (*V*.234). By this logic the history of Africa is nothing but colonial history, since the imagery of Africa as the empty surface upon which history is projected renders a conception of indigenous *African* history absurd. Of course, when Pynchon evokes this projective function of Africa, he deliberately and explicitly perpetuates and parodically epitomizes a huge set of narrative conventions and fictional constellations, a repertoire that can be said to constitute the history of imperialism as it is inextricably linked with that repertoire. Africa, as the primitive space which mirrors and un-masks Europe, the dark, un-decipherable region inhabited by "prehistoric man" belonging to "the beginnings of time"[18] thus literally figures as the 'heart' of a pervading body of fiction on the dark underside, both fascinating and dangerous, of the Western hemisphere.[19] Edward Said has explicated the powerful impact and extension of this repertoire throughout the era of imperialism, claiming that in its time "Imperialism has monopolized the whole system of representation."[20] By today, the long-established conventions of representing Africa are far from being invalidated, to the contrary its pivotal position constantly reasserts itself—if now often reevaluated as Europe's positive counter-image, its primeval Other or untainted origin. Thus the contemporary fictional recapitulation and conversion of colonialist positions testifies to a dense discursive frame-

work, no less contingent and powerful than the older one of imperialism. Thus Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* presents an exemplary and widely discussed instance of the rhetorics of colonialism and imperialism which are so much concomitant to Conrad's work that the attempt of "looking for [...] non-imperialist alternatives" must needs be futile—"the system had simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable."[21] Nicolas Roeg's film *Heart of Darkness* (1993), on the other hand, can be read as an equally compelling narrative of (one branch of) postcolonialism, a narrative which does definitely revise its 'original version,' yet nevertheless enacts a scenario of 'Africanicity' which is at least as entangled in a contemporary context of representing blackness as Conrad's text was in the rhetoric of his time.[22]

Conrad's novel constitutes in many respects a 'pre-text' for the representation of Africa, or—rather—colonialism. Not only Roeg's film pays homage to this, but also Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, not to mention countless intertextual references and allusions in novels, plays and other twentieth-century art.[23] The intricate interlinkage of African and Western systems of reference, which Pynchon's text has contested, presents the foremost structural means of Conrad's approach to Africa. The 'dark continent' is a figure for the underlying, repressed and unconscious nature of Europe—"We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday" (*HD* 30)—and moreover comes to embody the very European problem of a failure of control, dominance, containment—"the horror!"

In this novel, just as in Melville's *Benito Cereno*, the death of a black man witnessed by white men constitutes a strange bond, a bond between (white) projection and (black) defiance, the effort to read and the will to resist such a reading. When Marlow's African helmsman dies, killed by Kurtz's men, Marlow and one of the Company agents attempt to pry into his dying, to draw whatever kind of meaning out of it:

> We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put us some question in an understandable language, but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-

> mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding, and menacing expression. The lustre of the inquiring glance faded swiftly into glassiness. (*HD* 82)

Just as to his death Babo remains inexorably entwined in the white 'gaze,' so the dying helmsman cannot escape the whites' observation and interpretation, not even when communication is abandoned altogether and replaced by a "sombre, brooding, and menacing expression." Only his death can relinquish the link to the whites standing over him—his glance emptying out, glazing over. When Marlow later reflects upon this man, however, he does not recall his death but his living presence, his singular meaning and significance for the journey to the inner station, and thus his conjunction with Marlow's life and project:

> I missed my late helmsman awfully,—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange, this regret for a savage who was of no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him. I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment. (*HD* 87-88)

The "subtle bond" between Marlow and the African both displays and contests the structures of colonialism: constituting an agent and an instrument, master and servant, and undermining by the same token the linearity of this relationship. After all, the very wording of the description can be read against the grain: "he steered for me—I had to look after him." Here the positions of master and servant are becoming doubtful—is it really the one who steers who is the servant, the one who 'looks after' who is the master? In this ambivalent phrase, briefly, imperceptibly, the inherent ambivalence of the relationship is acknowledged, and just as the shifting expression on the dying man's face withstood the bystanders' effort at interpretation, so his paradoxical position as a 'steering servant,' proficient guide *and* unreliable underling, disavows the concept of an univocal hierarchy. Consequently, with this

scene a process of disorientation sets in which affects both Marlow and the reader, as clear-cut evaluations and universal judgments seem increasingly to formulate. The servant at the steering wheel demarcates an ambiguity which echoes the uncanny shaving scene in Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Here, too, a servant figure using a symbol of power, the knife, can be read in two ways—as a threatening blackguard or as a devoted barber. In Melville's text, however, the ambivalence is not marginalized and repressed, but adopts a pivotal position of the narrative.[24]

Later, when Marlow meets Kurtz, the memory of the "subtle bond," the "kind of partnership" with the helmsman is merging with the new one, "this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land" (*HD*110). Kurtz comes to embody both master and servant, both Marlow and the African, paradoxically collating the function of the agent and the function of the instrument, aspiring to the pleasure of control and of submission and ultimately suffering nothing but the painful implications of both states. It is this weird conglomerate of impulses—utter dependence, utter superiority—the 'sickness' of the "white God" which Kurtz's first appearance in the novel epitomizes:

> It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. (*HD* 99)

Kurtz's greed and desire to 'swallow' Africa—to master the crowd, to own the land, to dominate the wilderness and to control the darkness—is bound to fail. The powerful system he wanted to conquer has invaded his very body whose whiteness now looks like the ivory he strived to possess.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the referential system linking Europe and Africa, the Congo and London, constitutes the core of the narrative. In Nicolas Roeg's adaptation of the novel this link is severed. His film does not start out on the river in London, but with a surface the camera traces out, a scarred, dusty, ancient material which we come only gradually to identify as the skin of a dead elephant killed for its tusks.

Roeg's Europeans—with the exception of Marlow (Tim Roth)—want money, not power. For the Company, Africa is a huge storage space to be cleaned out as completely and quickly as possible, the less contact and interaction with the natives the better. Roeg's colonialism has turned postcolonialist. The words "ivory," "ivoire" dominate the conversations and the severed tusks come to stand for 'Africa'—the carcass of the elephant haunts only Marlow's dreams. When Marlow asks the ever complaining company agent Harou why he came to Africa in the first place, Harou answers nonplussed: "To make money, you fool, what do you think!"

While the representatives of the Company remain vague and faceless, unaffected by the African space as they do not really enter it, Conrad's unnamed helmsman undergoes a curious transformation in Roeg's narrative. As Mfumu (Isaach de Bankolé) he becomes Marlow's advisor, guide, translator, and eventually his "friend." Translating in every sense of the word, Mfumu correlates two different referential systems—the abstract, detached and secretly violating commercial system of Europe and the concrete, bodily and openly violent system of African cannibalism. Mfumu is both part of and outside both systems, and thus his very existence figures forth a model of cultural contact which counters the imagery of colonialism: envisioning something beyond commercial exploitation and fearful projection. When Mfumu dies, the project of practical mediation collapses and is replaced with Kurtz's endeavour for mythifying totalization. Three crucial episodes enacting the 'contact zones' between Europe and Africa and the circulation of power at stake may serve to highlight the implications of this curious replacement.

When the expedition camps for the night at the border of the jungle, Mfumu is seen to cover the African carriers with leaves, concealing them from a danger he purports not to believe in: "First time they work for the company. See: people think they good for trading. People think them to exchange for supplies. Mfumu laugh. Mfumu don't believe it." But Mfumu is wrong, the next morning the men are gone and even a well-filled bundle of barter doesn't get all of them back—one of them has obviously been killed by the 'jungle people' who abducted the carriers over night. Marlow is more furious about this obvious unreliability than about the actual abduction: "Did they kill him? For God's sake, we gave

them enough barter to get a bloody village for an entire year. You saying they didn't think it enough and they killed the boy just to make a point? Who are these people?" "Different people. [...] Hunters. They hunt," Mfumu replies cryptically, obviously unimpressed and unaffected by Marlow's exasperation.

While the European commercial system *has* invaded the African space, it is transformed in the course of this invasion. The carriers have to be hidden away like precious goods at night, like the commodity they have become for the European traders. The 'jungle people' in turn make use of this 'commodification' and change the conditions of the game while they play it—acting unreliable, unpredicable, 'different' by refusing to stick to the superimposed logic of exchange. While these people are most certainly Kurtz's men or 'emissaries' as Harou suspects, their power is not his power: "This has nothing to do with Kurtz," Marlow recognizes, "this is much much older." And again, as so often in this film, the camera traces an inscrutable surface, the green wall of the jungle.

In view of this strange and primeval 'old' system the bond with Mfumu, the African, gains vital importance for Marlow, the European. The ambivalence of a partnership based on dependence and guidance, 'steering' and 'looking out,' is impossible to ignore in Roeg's *Heart of Darkness*. "Have you been assigned to me?" Marlow asked upon first meeting Mfumu, and "Non, non," he replies, "c'est moi que ha demandé de la faire. I ask." Explaining, negotiating, acting, Mfumu draws Marlow gradually into his own system of thought, forcing him to accept an order of things where piercing one's face means appropriating an enemy's power. And still, Mfumu dies, and it is the bloody image of his dying, rather than his strategies of coping and survival, that will come to haunt the rest of the film.

In Conrad's novel, Marlow is horrified to witness the bloody death of the African, he throws away his shoes disgusted at the blood he stepped in ("I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks." [*HD* 82]). Roeg's Marlow is deeply moved, rather than disgusted, and Mfumu's death comes to function as a strange ritual, initiating Marlow eventually into the rites of Africa, the rites of the jungle. He won't wipe off Mfumu's blood on his face and when he throws away his shoes this is a gesture of dismissal rather than disgust, an expression of his moving

to the other side, entering the other, older space of Africa. Yet while Mfumu's death seals the bond to Marlow (Mfumu's last words are in his own language and subtitled—"Farewell, my friend. I had no choice"—and still Marlow seems to understand somewhat intuitively), it also forecloses the aesthetics of pragmatic interaction Mfumu represented and initiates a new symbolic order in which Africa represents nothing but Europe's Other, its dark opposite. With the introduction of Kurtz (John Malkovitch), Mfumu's strategy of 'coping' by translation and the 'jungle people's' strategy of subversive resistance are wiped out.

Like Mfumu, Kurtz occupies a transitional or interstitial position between (European) abstract reasoning and (African) concrete referentiality, like Mfumu he translates for Marlow and the viewer, but his wordy explanations come to obliterate the memory of Mfumu and the presence of Africa. What is enacted as an approximation of Africa from the other—the European—side ends up entangled in an obsessive performance of guilt and responsibility which exhausts itself in the futile reiteration of its grandiose failure and inexorable causality.

Significantly enough this change of perspective culminates in a reprisal of the earlier incident of the African carriers' abduction. When Kurtz's men take hostage of another carrier, Kurtz suggests 'business' to the Company agent Verme. In exchange for the carrier he offers half of his ivory. Verme agrees. Kurtz unmasks the inhumane logic of commercial exchange by hyperbolizing it, turning the seemingly abstract logic of commerce into the very concrete, corporeal logic of war: "Ambitious hunter after contracts is Monsieur Verme. Black for white proposition. Irresistible, don't you see? [...] Happiness is to be found only in victory. In commerce as well as war." And yet, Kurtz's maneuvre exposes not only the logic of colonialism, but is shown to be just as deeply determined by the law of the jungle. Hence, while on the one hand Kurtz's 'black for white proposition,' a proposition setting the life of a Black man against a load of ivory, exposes the secret congruity of commerce and war and demarcates the unacknowledged—imperialist—violence underneath both systems, on the other hand the very concreteness and corporeality of this exposure (i. e. the exhibition of the dead carrier's head) reveals an inherent complicity of this—imperia-

list—order with an older, mythical power structure: the violence of imperialism, it seems, is at heart identical with the violence of Africa.[25] Imperceptibly, imperialist 'order' and African 'chaos' come to merge. Marlow's effort to disavow this fatalistic complicity of jungle and colonial logic fails: even if he eventually leaves the ivory behind, he cannot revive the carriers, nor Kurtz or Mfumu at that. The loaded raft is left floating in the middle of the jungle, an image of death and violation.

Whereas the 'jungle people' earlier on were shown to disrupt the conditions of commercialism, Kurtz sticks to them—he totalizes rather than collapses a given logic. In Kurtz's territory there is only one system at work which casts an inexorable spell over the white men and even the—absent—white woman, Kurtz's Intended,[26] drawing them deeper and deeper into its power. This symbolic framework everybody falls prey to is imperialist *and* African, or rather it is Non-European, structured by conditions that are strange, merciless, cruel, fascinating—exotic. Roeg's film ends up depicting an absolutely self-referential framework of black and white signifiers, both reflecting nothing but each other, fundamentally different and yet interdependent: "Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust," Kurtz quotes Goethe. When Kurtz dies, the scene is intercut with close-ups of Mfumu's dying and Marlow's gaze, which in its reflection identifies and collates both events and both men and thus reduces Mfumu's death to an image and premonition of Kurtz's dying. The guilt-ridden system of imperialism saturates the African space utterly, it comes to occupy the heart of Africa.

Whereas Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* presents a powerful reflection of colonialism, Roeg's *Heart of Darkness* reflects the system(s) of postcolonialism by way of an imagery which eventually forecloses the very project of approximating Africa; Africa being *per definitionem* the 'Other,' the unapproachable and non-communicable space. With Mfumu's death the film loses a precarious poise, an intermediate and undecided position between two irreconcilable, yet entangled symbolic orders. When Marlow in this version lies to Kurtz's fiancée about his last words, it is not to "keep the conversation going, suppress the horror, give history the lie,"[27] but to bring forth the futility of communication in view of Africa's eternal resistance, its violent rejection to take part in a dialogue with Europe. Mythifying the African space, Roeg eternalizes it at the

same time—consigning it to a referentiality which forecloses change and autonomy once and for all. Where Pynchon eschewed representation, Roeg transfixes difference.

Let me finish with a short digression, to recapitulate the positions I have sketched here. In an article called "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" Kwame Anthony Appiah has recounted the organization procedures for an exhibition entitled "Perspectives: Angles on African Art" by the Center for African Art in New York in 1987. Several 'co-curators' had been appointed to take part in the process of selecting representative pieces of African art. The major problem for everybody involved, it seems, consisted in defining what should be considered a truly and originally 'African piece.' Significantly enough, only one curator opted for a piece combining traditional *and* contemporary features, a sculpture called *Man with a Bicycle* by an anonymous Yoruba artist, and thus broke with a silent agreement that 'true' African art reflected only the mythical past and thus fitted neatly into "the mold of the Africa of 'Primitivism.'" This guest curator was neither an art historian nor an ethnologist, but the writer James Baldwin.

For Appiah, Baldwin's decision expresses a vision of Africa which abandons the paralyzing imagery of the self-contained and mythical Other and embraces the concepts of pragmatic interaction and cultural dialogue. Consequently, Appiah argues for a circulation, rather than confrontation of cultures:

> If there is a lesson to be learned in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous *echt*-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writing that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of late modernism that we must learn to live without.[28]

Returning to my reflections on Melville, Pynchon, Conrad and Roeg, Appiah's plea for dialogue and interaction might serve to highlight once again the pertinence of the 'intermediate zones' all of these artists have dwelled upon. As I hope to have shown, the revisionary approach by

light of postcolonialism will most certainly remain just as inconclusive as the colonialist effort to overcome the contemporary predicament of imperialism. However, just as almost inadvertently an alternative position is opening up in between the rigid oppositions of *Heart of Darkness* when Nicolas Roeg introduces Mfumu, so the very effort at translation and intermediacy contests the unsatisfactory relapse into a dichotomy of white and black. While the myth of Africa cannot be ignored and will certainly not dissolve of its own accord, as it forms an integral part not only of European ascriptions but also of African aspirations, its power is neither unassailable nor eternal. Just like any other myth, the myth of Africa is subject to revisions, breaks and functionalizations: not only a point of origin, but always also a point of departure.

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NOTES

[1]Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1855), *Billy Budd and Other Tales* (New York: New American Library, 1961) 223.

[2]Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993) 28.

[3]Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown how the very idea of 'reason,' 'planning' and 'foresight' was considered incompatible with the idea of blackness and specifically Africanicity in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, so that "[m]etaphors of the childlike nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppetlike personality of the black" were all-pervasive. H. L. Gates, "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. H. L. G. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 1-20, 11. The same conjunction of blackness and stupidity comes up when Captain Delano is shown to take "to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (*Benito Cereno* 185).

[4]Dying, Cereno complies with Babo's earlier order to "follow your leader" (*Benito Cereno* 212), the leader, however, being no longer personified in the white skeleton of Don Alexandro, but in Babo's severed head.

[5]Toni Morrison, "black matters," *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992) 3-28, 5, 8.

[6]Terence Ranger, "Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) 211-62, 212.

[7]Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism," *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 134-63, 143-44.

[8]Homi K. Bhabha, "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation," *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 212-35, 217, 228. Bhabha's concept of the postcolonial is clearly in discordance with Jameson's idea of the postcolonial subject. Whereas Jameson conceives of the postcolonial dilemma as based upon a binary constellation—West against diaspora—Bhabha conceives of postcolonial representation as a suspension of the binary and the evocation of a new spatial and temporal order, the culture of the interstice. See: Fredric Jameson, "Secondary Elaborations," *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 297-357.

[9]Mary Louise Pratt used the term "contact zone" in close analogy to the linguistic term 'contact language' to describe the specific interaction of colonizer and colonized, a situation where "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict." M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 6.

[10]Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. G. Bennington, B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984).

[11]Linda Hutcheon has analyzed the interrelations and breaks between postmodern and postcolonial modes of fictional representation. The problem of her model, however, consists in her liability to subsume the postcolonial under the postmodern. Even if she convincingly disclaims any attempt at appropriating or recuperating the postcolonial into the postmodern, she does tend to reduce the postmodern to its postcolonial (or political) validity and readibility. Thus, her very idea of postmodernism has always been determined by a certain negligence in view of nonreferential language games or deconstructive projects, and a tendency to interpret playful intertextual allusions as efforts at a fictional re-writing of history rather than a 'mere' deconstruction. This is apparent in her emphasis on the historiographical effort of postmodernism: "Despite the Marxist view of the postmodern as ahistorical—because it questions, rather than confirms, the process of history—from its roots in architecture on, postmodernism has been embroiled in debates and dialogues with the past [...]. This is where it overlaps significantly with the postcolonial [...] which, by definition, involves a 'recognition of historical, political, and social circumstances [...].'" Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Postcolonialism and Postmodernism," *Ariel* 20 (1989): 149-75, 152. Here, the postmodern strategy of 'enacting' history in order to collapse it which is apparent in postmodern architecture or (on a totally different level) in Thomas Pynchon's writing, is unduly equated with a postcolonial project of re-writing history. It is no accident that Hutcheon obviously prefers Salman Rushdie's writing over Pynchon's as the former exemplarily performs the postcolonial renegotiation and excavation of historical 'fact' which indeed employs postmodern narrative strategies, but testifies to a different conception of history and identity and is endowed with different cultural functions.

[12]About Pynchon's model of historicity in this novel and his strategy of collapsing contingent marks of orientation see Manfred Pütz, "Thomas Pynchons *V.*: Geschichtserfahrung und narrativer Diskurs," *Ordnung und Entropie: Zum Romanwerk Thomas Pynchons*, ed. Heinz Ickstadt (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981) 75-103.

The differentiation between postmodern and postcolonial representation I am suggesting here, does not aim at a depreciation of any of these two textual modes.

In another context, Winfried Fluck has reflected on a 'new realism' within U.S.American literature, a literary (re)turn to the realist project of representation, and pointed out that this break with postmodern narrative strategies integrated postmodern stances, so that instead of merely drawing upon former cultural models of literary representation, authors like Don DeLillo or Walter Abish effected "another blow to liberalism's cultural authority." This analysis could be easily expanded to certain branches of postcolonial literature. Moreover, Fluck's approach applies exemplarily in this context as it emphasizes the function of these different narrative modes and thus manages to avoid the paralyzing consequences of a constant evaluation and hierarchization of different literatures: "The purpose of this linkage is to get away from a polemical mode of argumentation and from various unproductive dichotomies in order to demonstrate that the new realism is not just a naive conservative backlash to postmodern daring and innovation, but a new type of writing with its own potential for contributing to our contemporary cultural situation." The analogies to postcolonial literature are apparent. Winfried Fluck, "Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge: The New Realism in American Fiction," *Restant* 20.1 (1992): 64-85, 83, 67.

[13]Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963; London: Picador, 1975) 171. Hereafter cited in the text as *V.*

[14]Martin Klepper, "Die Moderne entläßt ihre Kinder: Pynchon's *V.* und die Probleme des postmodernen Wissens," *Amerikastudien* 38 (1993): 613, my translation. In his unpublished M. A. thesis, Klepper has explicated this process of inculpation which draws Mondaugen into the history of imperialism and anticipates the mass-exterminations in Nazi-Germany: "Implicit Models of Function in Thomas Pynchon's Novel V" (Universität Konstanz, Mai 1990).

[15]This concept of nostalgia differs considerably from Fredric Jameson's. When Jameson depicts nostalgia as the central element of postmodern historicity, he evokes its function as bringing about a stylized, ahistorical *image* of history, the myth of the past, that comes to replace present and past likewise in their specificity and poses as smooth self-reference and holistic quotation within a present which undergoes an "insensible colonization [...] by the nostalgia mode. [...] This approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage." Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *Postmodernism* 20-21. While this phenomenon of a replacement of the past by a smooth image of 'pastness' does hold true in view of Jameson's examples, Lawrence Kasdan's film *Body Heat* and E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*, it fails to account fully for Pynchon's strategy of constantly forcing the reader to face the constructedness and irreality of the fictional past and thus disrupting and fracturing the 'glossy mirage.'

[16]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) 236. My translation.

[17]On the larger scale of the novel, Pynchon's 'deep aversion against history' as Heinz Ickstadt has called it, just like his skepticism about the project of interpretation and the quest for contingency, are of course countered by an equally deep reluctance to abandon this quest altogether, as it is epitomized in the person of the "untheoretical nihilist Benny Profane [who] refuses to take part in the quest and perishes due to the formless experience of the moment." Heinz Ickstadt, "Thomas Pynchon, *Die Versteigerung von №* *49*," *Ordnung und Entropie* 104-27, 105, 106. My translation.

[18]Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 69-75. Hereafter cited in the text as *HD*.

[19]Hartmut Heuermann has characterized this underlying connection between Europe and Africa in *Heart of Darkness* as a mythogenous exploration of universally valid human experiences. In this context, colonialism figures as an allegorical constellation, a "second fall of man enacting death effectively." Hartmut Heuermann, *Medien und Mythen: Die Bedeutung regressiver Tendenzen in der westlichen Medienkultur* (München: Fink, 1994) 149. While this generic and universal symbolism of Conrad's novel is certainly given, it is the very tension between actual historical and political fact (colonialism) and the effort at universalization and abstraction which will interest me in the following.

[20]Edward Said, "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories," *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; London: Vintage, 1994) 1-72, 27.

[21]Edward Said, "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories" 26.

[22]Speaking about postcolonialism in the following, I will limit this term to its 'Western' context, as my focus is on U.S.-American and European discourses of racial ascription and self-fashioning rather than their African reception, subversion or transformation. Edward Said has presented an extensive and inspiring analysis of African revisions of Conrad's novel such as James Ngugi's *The River Between* and Tayb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. "Resistance and Opposition," *Culture and Imperialism* 230-340, 252.

[23]In a comparative reading of Conrad's novel and Coppola's film, Simon During has shown that the novel's intertextual appropriation and responsive transformation in the twentieth century is integral to *Apocalypse Now*, effecting ultimately a queer "monumentalization of modernism." Commenting upon Coppola's strategy of replacing the Vietnamese enemy by the (mediated, technologized) images of 'resistance' he comes to the conclusion that in Coppola's film the "Other is eliminated by fiat. If there were an enemy available for representation, perhaps then there would be narrative rather than just citation." Simon During, "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 448-62, 454, 455. While citation and referentiality are as pertinent for Roeg's filmic version as they were for Coppola's, Roeg tries to avoid the concomitant problems of a dehistoricization or elimination of the Other by way of writing the Africans back into the text. See also: E. N. Dorall, "Conrad and Coppola: Different Centers of Darkness," *Joseph Conrad: Heart of Darkness*, ed. R. Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988) 303-11.

[24]Arguing against Chinua Achebe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a racist concoction, Abdul JanMohamed has pointed out that Africans do not really figure in Conrad's novel, "they are an incidental part, and not the main project of representation." Thus both critics eventually agree on Conrad's strategy of marginalizing the colonized which links up neatly to the totalization of Kurtz's 'horror,' and is broken up only momentarily and almost imperceptibly, as I have shown. Cf. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *The Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 782-94; Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 59-87; Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 167.

[25]This collation of 'war,' 'commerce' and 'jungle' logic within the symbolic system of the film is deeply problematical in that it counteracts any idea of concrete historical reference. After all, the perverse analogy of war and commerce which is epitomized in the colonial situation is inherent in the logic of war in which bodies become 'barter,' are exchanged and finally efface each other, as Elaine Scarry has shown. By equating the 'jungle logic' with the symbolic orders of 'war' and 'commerce,' the interrelation of the latter systems is obscured and replaced by a vague imagery of exotic 'difference,' an imagery which is both all-comprising and non-committal. See: Elaine Scarry, "The Structure of War: The Juxtaposition of Injured Bodies and Unauthored Issues," *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: OUP, 1985) 60-157.

[26]In the course of his journey to the inner station Marlow comes across a number of pictures of Kurtz's 'Intended,' painted by Kurtz. The last picture shows her in an African setting, naked and scarred, and merges eventually with the image of Kurtz's African lover.

[27]Homi K. Bhabha, "How Newness Enters the World" 212.

[28]Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Post-colonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336-55, 354.