The other two are Frederick Ahl ("Classical Gods and the Demonic in Film") and Kristina M. Passman ("The Classical Amazon in Contemporary Cinema"). Given the proliferation of films on both topics, the former profiting from an ever-advancing special-effects technology that makes any and all forms of the supernatural visible, the latter reflecting the increasing number of women taking the place of male heroes in action and adventure films, these essays are still important foundations for future examinations of their subjects. The new volume is thus not an entire replacement of the earlier one, and readers interested in the topics of these two essays are urged to look for a copy of *Classics and Cinema* in secondhand bookstores.[31] New in this volume are contributions by Hanna Roisman, Fred Mench, and Janice Siegel and my own on *Star Wars*. I have included the essay by Mench on Virgil's *Aeneid* because it was the first detailed interpretation of an ancient text from the perspective of cinema on the part of an American classical scholar, and as such it deserves a new appreciation. To his and Sullivan's work I have made some additions, corrections, or revisions.

The absence of film stills from our chapters deserves a word of explanation. This was a deliberate choice on the part of some authors regarding their "texts." Moreover, from a practical point of view, the cost of even black-and-white illustrations to accompany the essays was prohibitive, to say nothing of color plates. While this is an unfortunate aspect of academic publishing, the ready availability of films on videotape and videodisc has somewhat compensated for this loss. We are aware that watching a film on tape, or even on a digital disc, which gives better-quality images and preserves the original format intact, is not the ideal way of approaching an artistic work that, for its full impact and beauty to be appreciated, must be watched in a good print on the large screen for which it was intended. We therefore hope that some of our readers will make the effort to watch the one or the other film in a revival or art-house theater or in a museum. A volume about the cinema, however, should not be entirely without images. Hence the visual essay by writer-director Michael Cacoyannis on his film *Iphigenia*, one of the most accomplished translations of Greek tragedy to the screen.

It remains for me to express my thanks to the contributors, new or returning, for making this revised volume possible. If it induces readers to watch a particular film again or for the first time, if it persuades them to read or to think anew about a film or a classical text, or if it aids academic colleagues in teaching or research, the book will have accomplished its purpose. In a wide variety of ways, classical myth and culture are alive and well in the cinema. Certainly this bodes well for our modern culture.

31. The essays by Ahl and Passman are in *Classics and Cinema*, 40–59 and 81–105.

I

The *Katabasis* Theme in Modern Cinema

Erling B. Holtsmark

To the extent that it adheres to a genre of film criticism, this chapter comes closest to the tenets of Russian Formalism.[1] It is true that the material I examine assumes a vaguely Proppian shape in that my analysis is based on a study of repeated motifs and themes, but my concern is not merely to catalogue such repetitions in order to construct an idealized *katabasis* film. The films I discuss are all formulaic in the sense that they fit, and draw on, patterns of narrative expectation that are of great antiquity. Yet their very formalism need not detract from their originality, which in fact lies in their creators' capacity to manipulate audience expectation. As John Cawelti has noted:

> A successful formulaic work is unique when, in addition to the pleasure inherent in the conventional structure, it brings a new element into the formula, or embodies the personal vision of the creator. If such new elements also became wildly popular, they may in turn become widely imitated stereotypes and the basis of a new version of the formula or even a new formula altogether.[2]

1. On this see, in general, Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). On the relevance of Formalism to film criticism see, for example, Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 4th ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 29, 60, and 163–173. Although my essay is an analysis of a crossgeneric "template" derived from classical myth, it is not, strictly speaking, genre criticism although it has connections to this approach. Readers may wish to consult, for example, the essays in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

2. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 12. Although this work is not oriented toward film, it contains much insightful information relevant to the kind of study here undertaken, and the first chapter ("The Study of Literary Formulas") in particular is strongly recommended.

And in connection with the Vietnam genre, which I will take up in detail later, the following truism has been advanced:

> The Vietnam film has not yet settled into the ripe generic dotage of the private eye or western genre, but it has reached the point where previous Vietnam films as much as Vietnam memory determine its rough outlines. As with any genre, a recurrent set of visual motifs, narrative patterns, and thematic concerns has emerged.[3]

The broadly classificatory approach at the start of my discussion is meant to serve as a convenient template of the conventional formulas of which the reader (and viewer) should be aware in thinking about and looking at the kinds of cinematic narratives treated here.

Although it may well be possible to investigate this or that corpus of katabasis films through an auteur approach, this has not been my choice here. The reason is obvious. The underpinning pattern I am concerned to elucidate is so widely dispersed—vastly more so than is suggested by the necessarily selective group of films I consider—and has been so common a literary property since the time of earliest antiquity that it is simply inappropriate to think of it in the more restrictive terms that the auteur theory would demand.

Because, for reasons of plot, character, and allusion, among others, myth is a central feature of ancient Greek literature, it has appeared tacitly axiomatic from the time of antiquity that myth informs most narrative literature. To reinforce this truism one may point further to the ubiquitous and wholesale adaptation of Greek myth by Roman and early medieval writers. The literature of the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, not to mention that of European Classicism and Romanticism, continues to bear eloquent testimony to the durability of myth as a vehicle for shaping versions and visions of reality in texts and images.

What is perhaps not so generally observed or consciously recognized is the astonishing extent to which the mythic patterns of classical antiquity have worked themselves into the very marrow of the cinematic skeletons that support plot, action, and characterization. Film may historically be regarded as a development of theater, which has ancient and classical foundations in its own right. And since, prior to the emergence of film, legitimate theater was essentially a literary mode, it is not too surprising that much the same thematic and narrative patterning of literature, including that deriving from myth, should have made itself felt in the cinema.[4] In this connection I am not concerned with such obvious mythic heirs as film versions of Homer's *Odyssey*, the heroic exploits of Heracles and other mythic heroes, or adaptations of Greek tragedy but with films that have no overt relationship to the mythic background which informs them.

Although they are not restricted to any one type, katabasis films tend to fall into certain genres: westerns, detective thrillers, war stories, and science fiction. These are also the literary genres that most frequently have recourse to mythic patterns in their story lines. This is not to say, however, that other genres fail entirely to offer examples of mythically conceived plots. A good instance is Blake Edwards's comedy-satire *10* (1979), whose middle-aged protagonist undertakes his own odyssey in search of a meaningful relationship. More specifically for the purposes of my essay, I am interested in that narrative, ancient even by the time of the archaic Greeks of Homer's world, that portrays the hero's descent into, and ascent from, the underworld—the journey to hell.

1. The Pattern

The Greek word *katabasis* literally means "a going down, a descent," capturing the imagined physical orientation of the other world relative to this one. The following generalizations can be made about the katabasis.[5] The entryway to the other world is often conceived as lying in caves or grottos or other openings in the earth's crust into the nether regions, such as chasms or clefts. Further, since that other world lies beyond a boundary separating it from our realm, such natural topographical delimiters as rivers, bodies of water, or even mountain ranges may be the physical tokens of demarcation. It is well known, for instance, that the underworld of classical mythology is penetrated by a number of rivers, most notably Styx and Acheron, which have to be crossed in a skiff punted along by the old ferryman Charon. The lower world is generally dank and dark, and the journey usually takes place at dusk or during the night. The realm itself is inhabited by the wealthy king and queen of the dead and by the

3. Thomas Doherty, "Full Metal Genre: Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam Combat Movie," *Film Quarterly*, 42 no. 2 (1988–1989), 24–30; quotation at 24.

4. Such obvious links between film and literature as the screenwriting careers of William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and many lesser luminaries (e.g., Erich Segal, Joseph Wambaugh) underscore the overt relationship. For a theoretical exploration of this connection see Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin, *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1977), 1–9, or Joy Gould Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film* (1985; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1989), 3–20. For classical literature see Kenneth MacKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 4–21.

5. More extensive analyses of the typology of the hero's descent appear in my *Tarzan and Tradition: Classical Myth in Popular Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981), 97–99 and 137, and *Edgar Rice Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 18–20.

innumerable spirits of the dead, by monsters (e.g., Cerberus) and evildoers (e.g., Tantalus). The usual purpose of the journey is to obtain spiritual or material wealth—wisdom, gold, flocks, or some other form of treasure—or to rescue a friend or friends, often a woman or wife. The katabatic hero is often accompanied and helped by a companion (who may be female) or by a loyal retinue of retainers, some or all of whom may be lost in the course of the journey so that the protagonist returns alone. Virtually all katabasis stories might carry as their epigraph the famous lines which the Sibyl addresses to Aeneas as he prepares to undertake *his* great descent:

> facilis descensus Averno . . .
> sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
> hoc opus, hic labor est.
>
> the way down to Hell is easy . . .
> but retracing your steps and getting back up to the upper air:
> there is the task, there is the job! (*Aeneid* 6.126, 128–129)

After his return, the hero sometimes assumes roles of increased responsibility and leadership (for instance, as a teacher or ruler) on the basis of his experience underground during his harrowing in hell.[6] From the time of Odysseus' descent in the *Odyssey*, katabasis seems inevitably to entail at some level a search for identity. The journey is in some central, irreducible way a journey of self-discovery, a quest for a lost self.

A critical point to appreciate for our purposes is the protean nature of the displacements to which the underlying paradigm is subject and this paradigm's sometimes tenuous association with the cinematic product in question. For example, without too much imagination we can appreciate how the underlying "reality" of the cavernous entrance to the underworld may manifest itself associatively in any given narrative, whether literary or cinematic, as claustrophobic defiles or narrowing mountain passes, or how the underlying motif of the demarcating body of water may appear inversely as a scorching desert, given the geographical exigencies of a particular narrative.[7] And just as these paradigmatic elements undergo

6. Further discussions may be found in Raymond J. Clark, *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1976), and A. D. Leeman, "Aeneas' Abstieg in das Totenreich: Eine Läuterungsreise durch Vergangenheit und Zukunft," in *Form und Sinn: Studien zur römischen Literatur (1954–1984)* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1985), 187–202.

7. See Jarold Ramsey, "From 'Mythic' to 'Fictive' in a Nez Percé Orpheus Myth," *Western American Literature*, 13 (1978), 119–131. On such suggestive associations or antitheses in myth in general see Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959; rpt. 1980), 6–9.

such transformations, so do the objectives. Thus the journey is no longer a literal descent into the actual underworld, as in Book 11 of the *Odyssey* or Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, but becomes a displaced trek into such emblematic hells as enemy terrain (e.g., the Vietnam of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* [1979]), prison (as in Stuart Rosenberg's *Brubaker* [1980]), the sleazy world of the Times Square area (as in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* [1969]), the urban universe of drugs and crime (as in Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* [1987] and its sequels), or the futuristic outworlds of science fiction (as in George Lucas's *The Empire Strikes Back* [1980]).

Any hero who, like Odysseus, literally descends into hell in a sense dies and is then reborn when he ascends once more to the upper world. This theme of the katabatic hero as "dying" before being "reborn" gives rise to numerous variations, all displacements to a greater or lesser degree of the underlying idea. In the detective or police thriller, for example, the protagonist goes "under cover," that is, he is no longer the real he but some concoction dreamed up by his superior or control.[8] In John Irvin's *Raw Deal* (1986) a discredited FBI agent seeks to reinstate himself with the Bureau by undertaking an undercover mission that requires him first to burn to death in an explosion.

I now turn to a more detailed consideration of some specific films in order to note how this ancient and pervasive concept of the katabatic hero is worked out. I begin with the most archetypally heroic genre.

2. The Western

The western undoubtedly has the most readily available material for transformation and remapping: unbroken deserts and delimiting mountain ranges stretching ceaselessly westward and filled with hostile Indians, Mexican bandits, or greedy outlaws bent on rape, pillage, and murder.[9] *100 Rifles* (1969), directed by Tom Gries, contains some good elements of the type as well as an interesting inversion at the end.

A black lawman, Lyedecker, comes from Arizona to Mexico to bring back a bank robber, a half-breed named Yaqui Joe. Mexico here functions as the displaced underworld. The point is underscored by its mountains

8. Some of the terminology for such heroes is highly suggestive, such as "mole," an animal that burrows down and lives under the earth, the standard location of the underworld, or "sleeper," sleep readily being understandable as a displaced form of death. In Greek mythology, Thanatos (Death) and Hypnos (Sleep) are brothers.

9. On the mythic aspects in westerns see Martin M. Winkler, "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22 (1985), 516–540.

and sere deserts and by the graphic hanging and the displays of suspended corpses at the beginning of the film. The sheriff, a kind of combination of Hermes and hero, has entered this realm in order to return Yaqui Joe to Phoenix, an antithetical variant on the search for a friend. One is tempted to see the choice of town as intentional, evoking, as the name does, the idea of rebirth. This quest in turn undergoes mutation within the katabasis proper, and the film's focus comes to rest on the rifles Joe had purchased for the Yaqui Indians with the stolen money. Thus, typologically speaking, both treasure and "friend" are the motives for this particular journey into hell.

Joe and Lyedecker get on the wrong side of the savage Mexican general Verdugo (Spanish for "executioner") and are almost killed by him on several occasions, most dramatically in front of a firing squad before the brutalized Yaqui Indians come to their rescue. These near-deaths, like unconsciousness, sickness, or sleep, are thematic displacements of death itself; as such they are emblematic of the larger realm of death in which the protagonists move.

A katabatic inset also occurs, recapitulating the larger katabasis theme of the narrative and foreshadowing its successful resolution. After some Yaqui children are taken hostage by Verdugo's men, Joe and Lyedecker organize the Indians for a raiding party into the outpost to which the general is moving. They kill the men and stage an ambush on the column escorting the children. The action is set in nocturnal darkness, and after the enemy are slain, the outpost is turned into a fiery inferno from which the Indians escape with their children. This use of the parallel, even embedded, mininarrative that reflects or somehow comments on the core tale is a familiar literary device; from classical literature, for example, we may think most prominently and immediately of the *Odyssey* and of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, not to mention the ancient romances and novels. In the *Odyssey*, for example, the journey of Telemachus is set off against the journey of Odysseus, and the banqueting scenes at Ithaca, Pylus, and Scheria are set off against the banquet, as it were, in the Cyclops' cave. In Virgil's *Aeneid* the hero's journey to the underworld is a culmination of his other journeys in the preceding books to seek information about his future.

Toward the film's end Lyedecker is transformed into the unwilling leader of the Indians in their final conflict with Verdugo and his militia. The katabatic hero has in effect become a leader in the nether realm and leads his companions into a successful defense against Verdugo. In the end the hero relinquishes this role as unbecoming to himself and turns it over to the half-breed, Yaqui Joe. Contrary to typological expectation, the hero does not bring back the "friend" he was sent for but decides to return alone to Phoenix and bequeathes to Joe the leadership of the Yaqui Indians.

100 Rifles is an interesting variation on the katabasis theme. Among its more unusual aspects are its defiance of thematic expectations and the repeated suggestion that Joe and Lyedecker are split aspects of one persona, each of which, as a result of this particular harrowing of hell, achieves a deeper awareness of himself. Both are nonwhite, the one black and the other half-Indian; both are leaders (Joe steps right into Lyedecker's role at the end); and, most dramatically, for a portion of the film they are handcuffed to each other, at one point engaging in a ferocious fight while attached to each other, as if, metaphorically speaking, components of the persona were at odds with its entirety. Lyedecker several times comments gnomically on knowing who he is and doing the kind of job he is best suited for, while Joe, at the end, is made to realize what *he* is best suited for—leading his people.

Set in the same general time and place as *100 Rifles*, southern Texas and northern Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) likewise lends itself to analysis as an extended katabasis. In fact, the "underworld" becomes an unusually fluid concept in this film. Initially it is represented by the south Texas town that Pike Bishop's marauders enter in order to steal railroad funds. After mutual slaughter among the townsfolk and Pike's band, they meet up with old man Sykes, a gang member who functions typologically as a kind of Charon-Hermes figure. He knows the terrain and has had a lot of experience in it, and he is good with horses and wagon. He is also the only member of the gang who does not die at the end. When the Bunch cross a demarcating river into Mexico, a kind of topographical reversal takes place. The United States subsequently becomes the place to which they must journey in order to secure their particular version of treasure, a trainload of rifles for the Mexican revolutionary general Mapache. In a dramatic return from this displaced hell they cross desert and a bridge spanning the riverine boundary between the two realms, making it back safely to Mexico with the weapons, for which Mapache pays them ten thousand dollars. One of their group, the Mexican Angel, is taken prisoner by Mapache after the delivery of the rifles. In a fashion predictable from the type, Pike and Dutch, who fills a subordinate leadership role in the Bunch, decide to ignore the lethal dangers of confronting Mapache and his two hundred soldiers in their stronghold, and the four surviving members of the Bunch enter it to rescue their companion. Thus the locus of hell shifts once more, although the mapping conforms to the type. They ride down from the mountains, cross the desert, and enter through the portals, offering to buy Angel back from the drunken and darkly dressed Mapache.

When the latter slits Angel's throat, a fierce gun battle erupts in which most of the townspeople, Mapache's soldiers, and all four of the Bunch are killed.

Enclosing these katabases is a larger one, in which an unwilling agent of the railroad and former member of the Bunch, Deke Thornton, has been pursuing Pike's gang and, after the train robbery, is trying to intercept the rifles and capture the thieves. From Thornton's point of view, Mexico is the underworld he is forced to enter with a useless crew of miscreants, a group reminiscent of Odysseus' often less than helpful companions who, like Thornton's, are killed because of their greed long before they make it back to *their* "upper" world. Typologically speaking, it is the hero who survives the journey through hell, and therefore Thornton emerges at the end as the protagonist. He alone survives the "descent" and will assume a leadership role in helping Sykes rebuild Angel's village after the film's narrative has concluded.

Why this unusual shift in the locus of hell, and the different points of view about hell? As abbreviated katabasis narratives in their own right, they provide parallel accounts, a multiplication of the pattern. Conceptually, however, the viewer is left with the sense that hell is where you make it, and for the likes of Pike's gang hell is wherever they are, as Mexico certainly proves to be for them. Lest there be any doubt about this point, the camera, after its nightmarish panning and crosscutting among the combatants' dances of death, lingers suggestively over the strewn corpses and waiting buzzards. It is also worth noting that the film is organized in classical ring composition, with the winning of treasure at its center and the two extended sequences of slaughter framing the whole.[10] Minor thematic moments enhance this sense of almost paradigmatic structure: after being bumped by an old woman at the start Pike helps her; after being shot by a young one at the end he shoots her. The innocent and mindless cruelty of children at the start is echoed by the consequential and deliberate cruelty of a child at the end; the *Iliad*-like despoiling of the corpses of the slain at the start, albeit by clear antiheroes, involves only clothing and personal effects, but at the end the stakes have been raised to gold-filled teeth. The bloody slaughter of innocents is portrayed in graphic slow motion at both ends.

The katabatic subtheme of the rescued woman occurs in Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966). A wealthy older man, Grant, hires four individuals to cross the desert into Mexico to recover Mrs. Grant, kidnapped by the Mexican revolutionary Raza. The four adventurers each have an

10. On ring composition in film see my "Films and Ring Composition," *KLEOS: Estemporaneo di Studi e Testi sulla Fortuna dell'Antico*, 2 (1997), 271–274.

area of expertise: Rico is an arms expert with leadership ability; Dolworth is an explosives man with considerable inventiveness; Ehrengard is a natural horse handler; and Sharp is a tracker par excellence.

In terms of the ancient prototypes, these four men distributively represent the typological constants familiar from the katabasis narrative. The hero is of course a fighter, clever as well as strong, and frequently has special abilities or associations with animals. The black man, Sharp, as often in modern cinematic incarnations, is a Hermes figure, the *psychopompos* ("escorter of the dead") who not only guides the hero into hell but also helps him return to the upper world.[11] In the ancient tales sometimes the hero is alone, as when Heracles rescues Alcestis, and at other times he has companions who may be especially helpful (e.g., Peirithous trying to get Persephone back from the lower world for Theseus) or not (e.g., Odysseus' journey to the Cyclops' cave). From a typological point of view it matters little whether we are dealing with many capabilities condensed into a single hero or with several heroes who have split among themselves the varied abilities of a single personality. In any event, at the end of *The Professionals* our thematic expectations, as well as Grant's hopes, are foiled in that the ostensibly rescued woman turns out to have been Raza's willing "victim," who wanted out of Grant's clutches; she is finally returned to Mexico. The suggestion emerges that Grant is in effect the real Hades from whom she had to be rescued.

Although certain film genres such as westerns and detective narratives seem to lend themselves more intuitively to patterning on the katabasis theme than others, even such films do not, of course, all fall into the general type. Yet even where the overarching design is lacking, it may manifest itself in smaller segments that inform or enhance the plot as a whole.

A good example is *The Long Riders* (1976), directed by Walter Hill, the story of the James-Younger gang in post–Civil War Missouri. The film is structured as a series of parallel episodes of bank robbery followed by celebration and involvement with women. The first and last bank robberies in the film create a ring-compositional frame. The last robbery is relevant to my discussion. For once the gang decides to leave the familiar territory

11. As such, blacks typically have roles as escorts or trackers to point the way. They pilot the boat, as in *Apocalypse Now* (a film discussed later), or bring the hero back to his world, as the black drummer does in Richard Fleischer's *The Jazz Singer* (1980) by driving into the desert. Consistent with this is the inverted use of albinos as monster types. The freaky albino in *Lethal Weapon* is a transcendent Death monster, with whom the hero wrestles at the end. The equally crazy albino in Burt Reynolds's *Stick* (1985), a Death demon suitably dressed completely in black, is a twist on the same inversion. The etiolated death figures are evil incarnate, while the black ones embody the instructive psychopompic function of the Hermes figure.

of Missouri and do their robbing in distant Minnesota. They leave home for a place far from home that they reach by train, shown traveling at night. They are going to this distant place in search of treasure, as one of the gang has learned that the bank in Northfield, Minnesota, is full of money. Appropriately the bank is located next to the town mortuary, a point emphasized not only in dialogue but also visually; a shot of Cole Younger waiting outside the bank places him prominently and lingeringly against the mortuary in the background. As it turns out, the town knows that the gang are on their way, and they are unable to get any money. In addition, they are ambushed as they try to escape. All but Jesse James are wounded or killed, and Jesse, along with his brother Frank, abandons the rest of the men. He is himself later betrayed and shot.

The importance of this minor instance of the theme lies in the fact that it is played off against the expectations we have of the standard tale. It is a kind of anti-katabasis, fully understandable as such only against the backdrop of familiarity with the general tale. For here the hero neither gains treasure nor, certainly, any wisdom. (Jesse returns to Missouri and wants to start a better gang to rob banks.) Rather than bringing back friends from the dead, he leaves them dying or destined for long prison terms. Thematically, then, it seems appropriate that Jesse is shot at the end, since he never really escaped from the harrowing journey to hell in Northfield, where the rest of the gang came to their end.

George Stevens's classic western *Shane* (1953) has a memorable katabasis narrative at its end. In a resolution of the fierce range war that has divided the film's world, Shane rides into town late at night, crossing the river that separates the settled, civilized homestead, on whose behalf he is fighting, from the corrupt town. Little Joey, his friend, follows him and is shown crossing a graveyard on the way. We assume that Shane did also, although this does not appear on screen. For the final showdown with the land-hungry Ryker and his hired gun Wilson, Shane enters a tavern through swinging doors. These saloon doors have appeared numerous times before and have become a kind of iconic shorthand for entrance into a zone of danger, that is, a katabatic realm. One may note that a common euphemism in classical myth for the underworld was *pylae* ("gates, entryway").[12] The classical hero is not infrequently associated with cattle or is involved in a confrontation with an owner of cattle, as in the case of Odysseus and the cattle of the Sun, Heracles and the cattle of Geryon, or Amphitryon and the stolen cattle of the Taphians.[13] Ryker is a ruthless

12. Fontenrose, *Python*, 329–330.

13. For this cattle owner as a Death demon see Fontenrose, *Python*, 335–336 and 346; see also G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1974; rpt. 1990), 189–190.

cattle baron and, typologically speaking, Shane, in overcoming him and his henchmen, embodies the role of the hero as master of cattle. As if to underscore the contrast between the hero and the murderous agent of this lethal cattle owner, Shane is dressed in white, Wilson in black.[14] Shane shoots both Ryker and Wilson, and as he begins to walk out of the saloon, Joey, who has been watching, alerts him to a man with a rifle aiming at him from the upper story. It is not unusual for the hero to receive help at some point in his journey from a woman, child, animal, or other kind of escort, and the aid Joey gives Shane may be seen as a form of this element of the narrative. Although Shane is ostensibly helping Joey's father and the homesteaders in the valley, his confrontation with Wilson reinforces in himself the self-knowledge to which he has come and which he now carries out of the gunfight. Appropriately, the emaciated Wilson looks like a figure of death with an especially menacing grin. As Shane tells Joey before he rides off: "A man has to be what he is, Joey. You can't break the mold. I tried it, and it didn't work for me." A man of violence is a man of violence, just as a man of peace is a man of peace. Shane knows, finally, what he is.

Katabasis aside, this sentiment is itself strongly classical. Its underlying meaning is captured in the Delphic injunction "Know thyself," repeated in countless guises throughout Greek literature. Dress plays an important part in orchestrating this shifting of roles by Shane. When we first meet him, he wears his "armor," his gunfighter outfit complete with six-shooter and gunbelt; as he tries to fit into the homesteaders' civilized society, he buys farmer's clothing and a new belt, which he wears until he starts on his trip into town to deal with Ryker and Wilson. At that point he once more dons his "armor." This emblematic use of clothing is common in film; a well-known deployment of it in a katabatic setting is the opening of John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), where a country hick from Texas gets himself outfitted for his descent into the dark netherworld of male prostitution in the urban hell of New York City.

Another western, Robert Aldrich's *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), which deals with the pursuit of renegade Apaches into the Arizona territory, is structured as a typical katabasis but accommodates certain shifts toward the end. A young lieutenant, Garnett, full of peaceful Christian pieties quite inappropriate to the infernal desert where the Indians live, leads an army party in pursuit of Chief Ulzana and his band of horse raiders. Garnett's commanding officer sets the tone at the film's start by recalling General

14. On this imagery see Andrew Tudor, "Genre," in *Film Genre Reader II*, 3–10, especially 5.

Sheridan's observation that if he owned hell and Arizona, he would live in hell and rent out Arizona.

Into this harsh and uncompromising land goes the naive lieutenant, escorted by a white scout named MacIntosh and by Ke-Ni-Tay, an Apache in the service of the army. The searing desert and the mountainous defiles through which they pass conjure up the western version of the katabatic landscape filled with the Apaches' pillage, burning, and rape.[15] For the lieutenant this campaign proves to be as much the emblematic journey for practical knowledge of the world as it is the ostensible pursuit of horses and thieves. Throughout, he questions MacIntosh and Ke-Ni-Tay about the land, the Apaches, their customs, and the reasons for their cruelty. MacIntosh is the Hermes figure who at the start conducts the lieutenant and his men into the wilderness, but the native scout Ke-Ni-Tay gradually comes to assume that role. Indeed, since MacIntosh is dying at the end, Ke-Ni-Tay escorts the corpse of Ulzana, whom he has killed, to burial. The white and the Indian scout teach the lieutenant about the land as much as they teach him about his need to learn that Christian charity, while laudable in the fort, is a dangerous delusion in the desert. By letting Ke-Ni-Tay have his way, Garnett symbolically lays aside his Christian arrogance and, the film implies, begins to learn how to accept the land on its own terms as he sets out for the "real" world of the fort.

3. The Thriller

Now for a different venue. *Narrow Margin* (1990), written and directed by Peter Hyams, sketches a brief for the duty of citizens to bear witness against those who corrupt society, but this message tends to get blown away in the general rush of the film's action. The plot is quite simple. A deputy district attorney must bring back a witness to a murder in order to convict a major crime figure.

The katabatic landscape, the displaced underworld, is in this case the rough and dangerously beautiful terrain of the Canadian Rockies. Caulfield, the deputy D.A., travels by helicopter to the remote cabin where his companion, a detective, has traced the woman who had inadvertently witnessed a crime czar's presence at a murder and whose testimony can put this man behind bars for good. The immense grandeur of snow-covered peaks, among which the helicopter threads its precarious way, provides a splendid example of contemporary displacement of the traditional boundaries demarcating the "other" world. And the detective accompanying Caulfield is an Elpenor figure, the sacrificial victim who pays with his life for the hero's journey to the beyond. Homer's Elpenor, the youngest of Odysseus' men, lost his life at Circe's palace (*Odyssey* 10.552–560).

15. Topography clearly assumes such a role in American Indian katabasis narratives. See Ramsey, "From 'Mythic' to 'Fictive'."

Most important for the journey shown in this film is the train, the film's clearest emblem of the hero's journey. We first see it in a distant shot snaking like a great silver dragon through the wild and mountainous terrain of western Canada. Since antiquity the underworld has been almost always located toward the west. Most of the action takes place on this train, at night and in the dark. The train traverses a spectacular katabatic world of steep mountainsides, narrow defiles, still lakes, rivers, and dark tunnels.

The hero brings the woman back to the real world, gains the knowledge she has, which is necessary to convict the crime boss, and secures his own version of treasure, this time measured not in dollars or gold but in the satisfaction of doing his job well. And like Odysseus and practically all archetypal heroes, he overcomes foes and obstacles by physical daring and by cunning and resourcefulness. The mythical underpinnings will no doubt escape the viewer's conscious awareness in all the excitement, but they are there.

Recent years have seen, ad nauseam, scandals and upheavals involving no less than the very president of the United States. Many citizens have come to believe that the country's highest office has, well, gone to hell as a result. So we may be justified to wonder if in the Clinton years films dealing with even a fictional U.S. president did not exhibit at least some katabatic features as well. No surprise: some—political thrillers—do.

A katabatic interlude occurs in the last half hour of Dwight Little's *Murder at 1600* (1997). Although the film is not strictly plotted as a katabasis, its ending involves the successful attempt of the hero and his two buddies to save the presidency for the president. They achieve this by descending into the tunnels that will conduct them underground into the White House, naturally in the nick of time. The cinematography lovingly exploits all the standard furniture of the katabatic descent, here through a sewer grill, into dank and dark subterranean passageways. The trio is pursued by a demonic opponent, who almost kills the hero but is shot dead by the hero's female companion. The waist-deep waters coursing through these tenebrous warrens evoke the riverine topography of the classical underworld.

Like *Murder at 1600*, Clint Eastwood's *Absolute Power* (also 1997) is not essentially a katabasis film. Its plot revolves around a detective's search for a young woman's killer. Yet an early sequence is clearly mapped on

the particulars of the katabasis tale, replete with some intriguing high-tech updates.

A thief, Luther, breaks into the mansion of wealthy Walter Sullivan during the night. This house contains vast treasure in the form of priceless paintings and, in the secret vault next to the master bedroom, coins, cash, and a variety of jewelry. Sullivan, a multibillionaire and political kingmaker, is a kind of Hades figure who is married, as was his mythical predecessor, to a younger woman. Sullivan even has specific associations with the earth; as we learn later, his father was a miner, and the son had become his heir. Lording it over all the earth's underground treasures, the Greek Hades was a god of extreme riches, as his Greek eponym, Ploutos ("Wealth"), and his Latin one, Dis ("Rich") make clear. There is no Cerberus guarding Sullivan's house, but there is, as the investigating detective later puts it, "a zillion-dollar security system." Luther gets around this electronic watchdog with a sophisticated electronic device. And rather than going down, he climbs the stairs to the bedroom, enters the vault, and robs the old man. While he is so occupied, Sullivan's wife and her lover—yes, the president—come home. Luther hides in the vault and becomes an unwilling witness to drunken foreplay that turns into rough sex and ends in the woman's murder. (It's that kind of president.)

Luther escapes with his treasure and with the knowledge of presidential complicity in crime and coverup. In the rest of the film, which consists of the murder investigation, the katabatic overtones introduced by the opening sequence reverberate throughout, both in the parallel plot of Luther rescuing another woman from death (his daughter) and in his emergence into safety from Sullivan's attempt on his life. Reinforcing the analogy to Hades, Sullivan is a death-dealer who hires an assassin to take out the man whom he erroneously believes to have murdered his wife. And he himself, we are forced to conclude, kills the president at the end. *Absolute Power* is a solid example of how the *katabasis*, while not central, can effectively strengthen a film's plot.

4. Science Fiction

The 1986 film *Cherry 2000*, directed by the relatively unknown Steve De Jarnatt, offers a flashy variation on the basic katabasis pattern. Sam Treadwell owns a Cherry 2000 robot, which is his beautiful live-in mistress. She is actually an android, externally indistinguishable from a real human being (an evocation of Michael Crichton's *Westworld* [1973] and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [1982]). After she shorts out during a love session on the floor and water clogs her circuits beyond repair, Sam realizes he loves her. When she cannot be fixed at the repair shop, Sam is given her miniaturized "personality disc" and told that a replacement husk is in all probability stored at a "Graveyard" in Zone 7, a dangerous land beyond civilization. His journey to the Graveyard to find a new Cherry husk for his disc is thus a replaced form of the hero's search for a lost woman. His guide is one of the most famous trappers of Zone 7, a woman, as it turns out, called E. Johnson. A large part of the film is given over to the katabatic journey proper, which they make in this sexy sybil's souped-up Thunderbird.

This journey is replete with and remarkably faithful to the ancestral themes we have come to expect for this part of the descent tale. The two travel mainly at night, avoiding the various marauding outlaw bands that dot the barren landscape through which they move. The Nevada desert scenery spectacularly embodies the theme of a barrier separating this world from the one below. In a striking scene, Johnson and Sam cross a vast chasm at whose bottom lies a great river. Plunging down through a cavernous hole into the "underworld," they are met by an old man fittingly attired as a spelunker, Six-Fingered Jake, a friend of Johnson and arch-trapper reputedly killed by the outlaws but still alive. This character, with his emblematic underworld attire and knowledge of the underground caverns, is a guide figure of the sort often encountered by the katabatic hero, an incarnation of Charon. Jake transports Sam and Johnson across the river on his spare barge, powered by two outboards in place of Charon's traditional punting pole.

Johnson reconditions an old plane and flies Sam to the Graveyard ahead of the pursuing outlaws. When they have arrived at the repository, the guide leads the hero in a final descent through a skylight into a ghostly, pale chamber where countless husks hang etiolated and lifeless in the eerie gloom. We cannot help but think of Anticleia's description of the spirits to her son Odysseus:

> The flesh and bones are no longer possessed of strength,
> but the powerful might of blazing fire overpowers them
> as soon as the personality has abandoned the white bones.
> And the spirit goes flying, flitting off like a dream.
> (*Odyssey* 11.219–222)

It is perhaps relevant to this ancient passage to note that, when the original Cherry shorted out electrically, she was enveloped in crackling flashes and fiery sparks and that her miniaturized laser disc containing the complex program for all her emotions and feelings ultimately traces its ancestry back to Homer's *thumos* ("personality, life-force"). Sam had re-

moved the disc from the original, the whole point of his journey being to find another husk in which to insert it.

As soon as he does, the new Cherry pops alive. But Sam soon recognizes that all her emotions are mere programs. In a climax fraught with shoot-outs with the outlaws and narrow escapes from disaster, Sam jettisons the newly activated Cherry and makes it back to earth with Johnson, with whom a romantic relationship had been developing as they proceeded deeper into the "underworld."

Needless to say, this particular twist on the typical ending, in which the hero abandons the woman he searched for and takes up with the sibyl, has no counterpart in Greek and Roman myth. In this film, however, it emerges naturally out of the paradigm and will strike the viewer as an ingenious and organically motivated innovation on a design now some five thousand years old.

Finally, the hero, who was at first a moping and rather helpless individual, undergoes a transformation as a result of his journey and, typologically speaking, returns with enhanced wisdom. For Sam learns, largely through the agency of Johnson, his sybil, to fend for himself and to improvise daringly as circumstances require. He comes to recognize what love is all about—at least in the American cinema of the 1980s.

Although this is not a well-known film, it should be. It adheres believably to the katabasis type but allows for some clever adaptations. Played with gentle humor, primarily thanks to Melanie Griffith's laid-back portrayal of the psychopompic sybil, it succeeds admirably as an example of the genre. A katabatic sleeper, as it were!

The concept driving *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), directed by Robert Longo and written by cyber-guru William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer*, extrapolates from contemporary technology and earlier films, such as *Westworld* and Mike Hodges's *The Terminal Man* (1974). As his name tells us, Johnny Mnemonic has some kind of plug-in interface in his skull and can upload several gigabytes of data. He turns himself into a data courier; once he has arrived at his destination, he plugs in and downloads. The only catch is that Johnny had to lose some of his original core memory to make room for this new ability—in his case, his childhood. On a long delivery trip from Beijing to Newark, his head is so crammed that he has periodic seizures and desperately needs to download, but the access code has gone astray.

What follows is a standard katabasis narrative, even if its hero is a technofreak of the 2020s. All the katabatic territory is there: the night journeys through smoke-shrouded alleys in the urban wasteland of Newark, a descent into tunnel-like sewers, a female aide, a black Hermes who guides and protects the hero, the obstructing minions of the underworld, literally and figuratively, and the harmer who in the end turns helper. Johnny's ostensible search for a computer to download his data is really a hunt for his missing childhood, a far-out trip that quite literally blows his mind before it is rearranged the way it used to be and his past comes into focus again.

The film is a 1960s acid trip morphed for the cyber generation of the 1990s. But despite its intriguing premise, which weds ancient narrative typology to modern computer technology, the story crashes, largely because of the film's mindless iteration of dazzling technique. The special effects, however, are already outdated.

Johnny Mnemonic is a katabasis, so to speak, to a narrative nadir. But it prompts me to consider some of the dangers inherent in too close a reliance on typology and formula, even when they are as seemingly inexhaustible as those of the *katabasis*. My example is another thriller, *Conflict of Interest* (1993), directed by Gary Davis. It deals with a rogue cop, who is wound too tight and is stepping outside procedures in order to get a job done, and with a son and father getting to know each other. The typology is clearly there; in this case it takes the story of a father's search for and exculpation of his son who is unjustly accused of murder.

Everything we can expect from the pattern is present: the helping woman, the otherworldly landscape of a rock music club (named "The Wreck") of dark and dancing souls that gyrate, a nasty Hades figure with the biblical name Gideon, who has his thugs in constant attendance, a huge bouncer as guardian of the gates, and a Persephone-like dark woman named Eve, who belongs to Gideon but is rescued by the son. The hero's talisman, his police badge, enables him to enter this nightmarish underworld. He also receives the crucial help of a black cop friend. A twist on our expectations occurs when the son, initially the object of the father's frantic quest, becomes himself the quester and saves his father from making a huge mistake. In the end, as we expected, father and son are reconciled, and the detective validates himself in the eyes of son and society. His rehabilitation is a kind of rebirth.

The danger of excessive reliance on pattern, however, is that spontaneity and inventiveness run the risk of being forgotten; as with *Johnny Mnemonic*, form triumphs over substance. *Conflict of Interest* is ultimately uninteresting because it is too categorical in the way it unfolds its story. There is no deepening of the plot nor any apparent concern about the characters, who are merely generic types. The father's uncontrollable rage, for example, shows up too often and with far too limited variation in the acting and becomes quite tedious. We almost agree with the crooked cops that he is a pain in the ass.

John Boorman's *Beyond Rangoon* (1995) rings a variation on the heroic quest in that this narrative is not for treasure, friend, or spouse but rather the recovery of oneself. One of the most intense of the films dealt with in this essay, it is a hauntingly beautiful study of death and rebirth, of loss and recovery, of the interplay between the microcosms of personal desire and a macrocosm of political tyranny. It is not, I am sure, a film soon to be showing in today's Myanmar, the former Burma.

Laura, a doctor whose child and husband have been murdered, has gone on a trip deep into Burma in an effort to forget her grief. This proves to be as harrowing a journey into the katabatic heart of human darkness as any considered here. Tellingly, the photography in *Beyond Rangoon* is so lush as if to ask pointedly how a landscape of such exquisite beauty can nurture such sinister malevolence. A similar landscape, haunting and beautiful, serves the same thematic function in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), a film set in World War II.

This displaced underworld is represented by the despotic military of Burma and by a soldier's attempt to rape Laura in a village hospital. Here, emblematically, she as a doctor would heal and save lives, but she murders her assailant in cold blood in order to save herself. At last she has awakened from her lethargy and begins her extraordinary ascent to the safety of the upper world, symbolized by her desperate crossing over into Thailand.

The familiar geography of the katabasis is almost oppressive: thick, clinging jungles, swift and rapacious rivers demarcating zones of reality, swaying bridges across high gorges, maleficent soldiers, and helping denizens of this otherworld, which lies beyond the relative civilization of Rangoon but reveals a deeper reality of how lives are lived.

Laura, sleepless, goes out into the Rangoon night to watch the Democracy Movement and the courage of its leader in facing down an armed militia. But during her night foray she loses her passport. This loss suggests a loss of identity and accurately reflects her emotional state. She must wait until the American Embassy can issue her a replacement. While waiting, she walks around Rangoon and meets an older gentleman, Aung Ko, a former professor at the University of Rangoon who fell afoul of the military and now takes foreigners on tours. He is a Hermes figure, escorting Laura not only into the interior of Burma but also into the unknown territory of her inner self. In an example of ring composition at the end of the film, Aung Ko with dignity and fortitude faces down a soldier denying the refugees access to the bridge to Thailand and impresses Laura so much that this moment becomes the start of the descent that will lead to her return to herself and to her acceptance of a grief that is as inconsolable as its cause is inexplicable.

While they are out in the countryside, the military cracks down on "hooligans," and a return to Rangoon is imperative. But the soldiers are after Laura and Aung Ko. The plot now shifts to that of an escape film and becomes a journey within a journey. When she sees Aung Ko being beaten by soldiers and one of his former students getting shot for trying to protect him, Laura comes to his help. Now she turns into her own Hermes, guiding herself and the wounded Aung Ko back to safety. Crashing their car into a river while being pursued by soldiers, she must rescue Aung Ko; in the process she loses her replacement passport. Drenched by the river and covered in shoreline mud, she is no longer Laura, American citizen grieving for her loss, but a survivor and rescuer who initiates a process of spiritual rebirth from the riparian slime.[16]

On a raft heading for Rangoon Laura nurses Aung Ko back to health. Back in Rangoon, she is arrested in front of the American Embassy and barely escapes in the chaos of a huge demonstration. With Aung Ko and others she finally makes it across the river to a camp in Thailand, where she begins to help in the hospital compound.

At the start of the film, Laura is preoccupied with herself to the point of obsession with her grief. She constantly wears dark sunglasses, as if she wished to shut out the world and not see it the way it is in both its ugliness and beauty. Her soul itself is blind. In the last dream she has about her murdered son and husband, just before crossing over to Thailand, her boy comes to her in the night and tells her that she has to let go of him. Laura then tells Aung Ko that she can no longer hold on to her child. Nobody can remain with the dead. (We are reminded of Odysseus' meeting with his mother in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*.) But this does not mean that Laura will ever forget her child. Indeed, children are a leitmotif throughout the film, at every turn reminding her of her own lost son and of hope for the future.

In an early scene Laura buys a small bird and sets it free, but the birder whistles it back and cages it again. At this stage Laura is not ready herself to be free, but she will be after she has gone through all that is in store for her. Observing and moving among an oppressed and suffering people who are able to endure inspires her. Their fight for freedom from external dictatorship parallels her own struggle, at first clumsy but later intense, to liberate herself of interior tyranny.

16. For the emergence of a similarly "encrusted" rebirth hero see my "Spiritual Rebirth of the Hero: *Odyssey* 5," *The Classical Journal*, 61 (1966), 206–210, especially 209 (on *Odyssey* 5.455–457 and 6.224–226): Odysseus is "bespattered with the unsightly dross that still clings to him from his watery womb."

Boorman's moving film works out the katabasis theme intricately and persuasively. *Beyond Rangoon* could certainly lend itself to postcolonial or feminist analysis. The former would revolve around the oppressive political character of the regime in Burma and its collusive maintenance by Western oil companies, a point never broached in the film itself, of course. The latter could focus on the clear oppression of the female protagonist or underscore the fact that all the doctors in the film are women. But the film strikes me as much more rewardingly explored in terms of its katabatic design.

Pure Country (1992), directed by Christopher Cain, is superficially rather different from *Beyond Rangoon* but at a deeper level pointedly similar. It, too, deals with the quest not for friend or treasure but for self.

A burned-out country-and-western artist, played by a real-life performer, walks away from it all to find out who he is and what he values. True, we have seen this before—herein actually lies the interest in this film. How is the variation played out this time? The hero has something akin to a nervous breakdown on stage, trapped in a dazzle of stage lights, fireworks, and crazed fans screaming in the dark arena like the souls of the damned. After the show, he tells his drummer and boyhood friend that he needs to go for a walk. The journey begins.

When the protagonist sings in the opening number about the heartland, the meaning of his song is not the American Midwest but the territory of the emotions, the land his journey will let him explore. First he returns to his childhood home. With a shave and a haircut he divests himself of his old life. His grandmother, a kind of sibyl ("there are no answers, only the search"), can hardly recognize him in his changed appearance. This is the first of a series of Odyssean recognition scenes in which he alternatively hides and reveals himself, until in a final recognition scene he proves to the woman he loves who he really is. Sound familiar—from about three millennia ago? There is even a seductive and willful woman reminiscent of Homer's Circe, although she here embodies both the helping and the hindering female, characters common in tales of journeys and quests since the time of Odysseus. This film is an urbane reworking of the classical katabasis paradigm in a story about the pressures of contemporary musical tours.

6. The Vietnam War Film

I come finally to a consideration of the katabasis in films based on the collective American descent into the hell of Vietnam. For example, the graphic portrayal of a displaced underworld in *Platoon* (1986), written and directed by Oliver Stone, is striking. The topography of hell is the Vietnamese landscape of a clinging, claustrophobic jungle, crawling, like any katabatic terrain, with impeding monsters, here shown as preying insects and leeches, venomous snakes, and murderous Viet Cong. The film emphasizes the idea of rebirth after the ascent, which is an underlying assumption of the whole katabasis narrative, both verbally and visually by the frames that enclose the narrative. At the start of the film, new infantry are seen disembarking through dust and smoke from a transport plane, and we hear the new recruit Taylor muttering that it feels like hell here. At the very end, as he ascends in a helicopter from the jungle charnel house created by the great firefight he has just survived, he observes sotto voce that he feels like a child who has been born of two fathers: Barnes, the psychopathic sergeant, and Elias, the crusading sergeant. These two have condensed into his personal *psychopompos* guiding him through hell; in order for him to become his own self, both are killed. The child must be freed of paternal influences before he can grow up to be an adult in his own right.

Elias is consistently portrayed as a thoughtful and caring soldier and comes to represent a model of good soldiering for Taylor, but Barnes shoots Elias in cold blood and leaves him for dead. When Taylor realizes what Barnes has done, he gets into a fight with the sergeant and is almost killed by him in the "underworld," an underground bunker that some of the soldiers have built for relaxing and indulging in drugs. Shortly thereafter, as if to cancel the potentially evil influence of Barnes that he might bring back from Vietnam, Taylor kills him. Because this film has strong overtones of a *Bildungsroman*, it seems appropriate that the hero should be seen as liberated from the continuing intrusion of the spiritual ancestry of Elias and Barnes on his life after he returns to America.

Although this is perhaps fortuitous, Taylor's first name is Chris. While he is no more a saint than anyone else, the name of this katabatic protagonist nevertheless evokes the name of Christ, the katabatic protagonist of Christianity's central myth of death, descent, and resurrection. And the major engagement that leads to Taylor's "rebirth" begins on New Year's Day, a symbolic day of renewals and beginnings, when, in Taylor's words, they are all marching through the jungle like "ghosts in a landscape," a phrase that recalls the ghosts who inhabit the Homeric underworld.

At the start of the film Taylor is an inexperienced grunt. Indeed, he makes an issue of this point in a letter he is writing to his grandmother. Like the other soldiers, most of whom he sees as American society's underclass forced to fight in Vietnam, he thinks of himself as a loser at the bottom of the barrel; since he is so far down in the mud, he can only go up.

(This metaphorical direction has immediate relevance to the katabatic themes of going down and up again.) He emerges from his journey through hell as someone who has learned to refashion himself and his values out of the meaninglessness of war, and he will live with this awareness in the world to which he returns.

There are, moreover, a number of incidents throughout the film that function as katabatic insets that comment by way of parallelism or antithesis on the overarching katabasis informing the film as a whole. An early parallel is the minor inset when Taylor thinks he has been shot and is dying from what is only a slight head wound; however, another soldier is killed, and Barnes takes the opportunity to make of him a memento mori for the rest of the soldiers who did not die this time. Shortly after this first baptism of fire, a black soldier, who should be understood as a psychopompic figure, introduces Taylor into the "underworld"; his introduction of Taylor to the others is significant, for he calls him not "Taylor" but "Chris." This abbreviated evocation of the Christian archetype of death and resurrection parallels the larger theme of the katabasis and foreshadows the hero's ultimate return from the harrowing experience of Vietnam. For in both this small "underworld" and in Vietnam as a whole, he enters an innocent, passes certain ritualized initiation ceremonies, and emerges a different character: from the "underworld," as accepted by the other grunts, and from Vietnam, accepted by himself.

Parallel to this is the incident in which Elias descends into the cavernous, riverine tunnels of a Viet Cong underground bunker, where he confronts and kills the enemy deep in their lair; his safe ascent again signals the emergence of the katabatic hero from the underground enemy entrenched in this part of the countryside. In antithetical fashion, in one inset the soldiers cross a river and climb up a hill to invade a village, brutalize some peasants, almost rape some of the children, torch the entire compound, and drive off the still living as though they were cattle. This invasion of a microcosm of Vietnam can also be seen as an inverted katabatic episode in that the directions are reversed, enemies rather than friends are led back, and the hero, along with Elias, opposes rather than promotes the operations undertaken. As in most films about Vietnam, much of the action takes place either in nocturnal darkness or in the tenebrous passageways beneath the covering jungle canopy, and fires burn everywhere in a land scored by rivers large and small.

The shape of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) owes a diffused but unmistakable allegiance to the katabasis type. Indeed, although it is less schematic than *Platoon* in its overt deployment of the specific details characterizing the pattern, the film involves two katabases: the sojourn of the young men at Parris Island and Joker's campaign in Vietnam. Each complements and comments on the other.

The boot camp is a world unto itself, separated from the mainland by a body of water. It proves to be a harrowing hell for the raw recruits who, during the opening sequence, are emblematically shorn of their connections to "this world" by the barbers trimming their hair down to the skull. The sadistic drill sergeant Hartman, who runs their "other world," has set himself up as a minor deity empowered to remold them into killing-machine Marines, and they must do constant obeisance to him and his torturous training regimen. One of them, Pyle, finally snaps and, at night in a communal toilet room, with Joker, the film's protagonist and narrator, looking on helplessly, takes a kind of communal vengeance on Hartman by killing him and then himself.[17] Cut to Saigon.

This world, ten thousand miles from the United States, is steeped in deceit, corruption, and death. On several occasions the men characterize it implicitly as the otherworld when they speak of eventually "rotating back to the world" if they are not first killed. Joker works for the army newspaper and is sent upcountry to join the platoon of his boot camp buddy Cowboy. The topography of his journey is consistently infernal: dark billowing smoke, flames, bombed-out buildings, death, killing, a demarcating Perfume River, corpses, a mass grave, and a virtually invisible enemy. Entering an urban shell of concrete rubble, the men are pinned down by sniper fire, and some of them are killed. A rescue party is sent to "take out the gooks" and recover the corpses of the dead, a resonatingly Homeric motif, as is seen in the mutilation of Sarpedon's corpse (*Iliad* 16.545–546) or the fight over the body of Patroclus (*Iliad* 17.700–736).[18] In the final confrontation with the enemy, Joker enters a cavernous edifice of twisted girders and pitted foundations eerily lit by dancing fires, only to discover that what appeared to be a large concentration of hostile

17. A persistent metaphor for the otherworlds of boot camp and Vietnam is the word "shit"; to endure the horrors of being in either hell is, with an appropriate awareness of direction, "to be in deep shit." Doherty, "Full Metal Genre," comments sensibly on this use of language and speaks of "a veritable fecal obsession" (27). Aristophanes uses the same metaphor in *Peace*, where the "world without peace . . . is visualized in images of excrement," among others; quoted from Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 63. See also Kenneth J. Reckford, "'Let Them Eat Cakes'—Three Food Notes to Aristophanes' *Peace*," in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Glenn W. Bowersock, Walter Burkert, and Michael C. J. Putnam (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 192–193; and C. H. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 110.

18. On this theme in general see Charles Segal, *The Theme of the Mutilation of the Corpse in the "Iliad"* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

troops who have been decimating the Americans' ranks turns out in reality to be a single woman, really not much more than a girl. Joker, acting for the men, kills her after she has been mortally wounded.

The narrative is unified by Hartman's death at the end of the boot camp sequence, during which emphasis had repeatedly been placed on equating rifles with girlfriends and even valuing weapons over penises, and by this final scene of the killing of the woman sniper.[19] The men have already had a number of debasing encounters with Vietnamese prostitutes, and whether it is literally with a military weapon or symbolically with a bodily tool, they end up raping and destroying the country. And herein lies the chilling irony of the film, for in reversing the normal katabatic pattern in which heroes rescue a woman abducted into hell, Kubrick has the men prove themselves by killing a woman who is an inhabitant of hell, her real home. The ironic parallel with Pyle's shooting of Hartman is unmistakable. Like Pyle, Joker now becomes a liberator in that he, too, destroys a communal nemesis, but in so doing he invalidates the whole point of the traditional journey down, which is to *save* the woman. The frightening inversion of values in *Full Metal Jacket* becomes clear when Joker turns out to be the one who *kills* the woman. If we understand Joker as a Pyle and the sniper as a Hartman, we realize that there is little if any difference between the Vietnamese and the American persecutor and apparently little difference between the deadly actions of Pyle and Joker. In Joker's case the murder is justified by the murderous behavior of the Oriental woman, now close to death, but in Pyle's case the justification of murdering the white man who had turned them all into state-sanctioned killers is morally ambiguous at best. When, within the larger narrative perspective of the katabasis, the killing of a woman is right, something is very much wrong. What does America stand for? Where is hell?

Apocalypse Now (1979), written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, is an inverted katabasis tale. Its protagonist, Willard, is sent upriver in Vietnam not to rescue a friend but rather to kill an American officer who has come to be seen as an enemy of his country's interests. He is to cross over into Cambodia and "terminate with extreme prejudice" a renegade field commander, Kurtz, a highly decorated hero and former leader of the Special Forces. The man has carved out a small empire for himself deep in the jungle, and his native troops worship him like a god. The film is steeped in such typical emblems of the katabasis as enclosing jungles, nocturnal patrols, and bridges and borders typically demarcating this world from that.

Most striking, however, is the centrality of the patrol boat that takes Willard on a perilous passage up a broad river snaking through the dense and enclosing Vietnamese jungle. The vessel takes Willard both geographically and symbolically farther and farther away from the civilized security of Saigon into an increasingly dangerous landscape. Passing the last American outpost, itself a bombed-out encampment of lost and leaderless G.I.s, he continues across the border into Cambodia. The black chief who skillfully guides the patrol boat past one danger after another is a mix between Charon and Hermes, being both the helmsman of the infernal skiff and the conductor into the underworld. The fact that he is killed before Willard and his men reach their destination underscores the inverted nature of this narrative.

The film is based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and is also influenced by T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and a brief but highly significant camera pan of a copy of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in Kurtz's corpse-filled precinct is crucial for an appreciation of the film's conclusion. This, then, is a mythic tale of sacrificial death and ritual resurrection, appropriately linked to the katabasis of a dying-and-rising god, Willard. A famous scene at the end intercuts the ritual hacking to death of a sacrificial bull by the montagnards with Willard cutting up Kurtz and thus serves to point out the latter's death as sacrifice on the barbaric altar of American political and military expediency. The pattern deployed here relies heavily on the theories of Frazer: *Rex est mortuus, vivat rex* ("The king is dead, long live the king"). No sooner has Willard completed his mission and killed Kurtz than the natives bow down to him and offer precisely the kind of religious obeisance they once offered Kurtz, as described at the beginning of the film by the general briefing Willard.

In a manner of speaking, Willard has been resurrected. At the start of the film he was lost to home and family and half crazy as well; now he is a god. Yet in the very last scene, as he starts off downriver on the patrol boat in the utter black of night, his grotesquely camouflaged face fills the screen—dark eyes staring, the last words of Kurtz echoing in his mind: "The horror! The horror!" This is a katabatic protagonist who will never return to "this world" a psychically whole individual, ready to assume roles of responsibility and leadership.

Platoon and *Full Metal Jacket* stick to the fundamental katabasis theme of the hero's death and rebirth. But *Apocalypse Now* takes a grimmer view

19. Throughout the story there is much talk about "cocks," "queers," "jerking off," and "pussy." Although this use of language is only peripherally related to the katabasis theme, the film develops the terminology of nonnormative sexual behavior as metaphor for nonnormative behavior in general to a remarkable degree. Similarly, war as nonnormative behavior is the topic of Joker's discussion with a superior who objects to his wearing a symbol of peace, a normative form of human interaction. The language as such is typical of soldiers and hence consistent with their realistic portrayal. In general, sex and talk about sex in the film seem to function as subtext for male initiation into manhood, an important result of the hero's return from his katabasis.

and examines the effect of the descent on an individual man who, as noted, is not likely, in any wholesome sense of the word, to return, as did Odysseus, for example. The other two films show us protagonists who seem to have been able to internalize and appropriate their harrowing otherworld experiences without being overwhelmed by them, but *Apocalypse Now* elaborates a much bleaker vision of the hero's future, leaving him stuck forever in his own private inferno.[20]

The recent revival of the war film genre—Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Malick's *The Thin Red Line*—gives us additional examples of katabases, here set in World War II. *Saving Private Ryan* begins with what may well be the most harrowing portrayal yet made on film of a living hell. With only some warning from the film's exposition of what is to come, viewers are more or less forcibly thrust into the nightmare world of Omaha Beach. They, and the hero, survive and ascend from it only to be thrown into another descent, that of a dangerous mission behind enemy lines. (This one the hero does not survive.) If, in General Sherman's words, "war is hell," then cinematic katabases such as those in the films here mentioned come closer than any other creative medium to bringing this point home to people who have not themselves undergone such experiences.

7. Conclusion

I have looked at some cases of a rather common vision informing narratives, the mapping of the katabasis typology onto essentially non-underworld stories set in modern times and even in the future. It remains for me to consider briefly why the concept is so widespread in a medium so hugely popular and culturally international.

20. Much the same may be said about Brian de Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989). On this film and on Vietnam war films in general see, for example, Stephen Hunter, "Changing Film Images of Vietnam," in *Violent Screen: A Critic's 13 Years on the Front Lines of Movie Mayhem* (Baltimore: Bancroft, 1995), 213–218. On literature and film dealing with the return from the war see James Campbell, "Coming Home: Difference and Reconciliation in Narratives of Return to 'the World,'" in *The United States and Viet Nam from War to Peace*, ed. Richard M. Slabey (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996), 198–207. On Vietnam narratives see also Andrew Britton, "Sideshows: Hollywood in Vietnam," *Movie*, 27–28 (1981), 2–23; *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); and Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For analogies between the Vietnam war and Greek myth see Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1993; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

As I indicated at the outset, the genealogy of film suggests that the thematic as much as the narrative devices of drama and literature are built into the medium. And since these elements in literature go back largely to ancient sources, it is not surprising that some of the strictly mechanical patterns are embedded in numerous films. Since there appears to be a tacit and, in my view, erroneous assumption that ancient literature—the classics—is inaccessible to all but those with extensive knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, how can it be that such a prevalent aspect of a supposedly inaccessible body of works is so pervasive in the most popular of popular media? Obviously the pattern speaks to something deeply human, for whether the mass audiences or the filmmakers consciously recognize it as such or not, the cinematic katabasis continues to entertain viewers not only brought up in the Western tradition but in practically any other culture as well. This may simply be a less than compendious way of saying that what is at heart mythic is at heart universal. The whole concept of C. G. Jung's *Tiefenpsychologie* and its archetypes is a complex elaboration on such a view, and if one accepts, as many do not, his articulation of the innateness of these psychic operators, then the appeal of the katabasis type is freed from any kind of anchoring in specific cultural traditions.

Whatever one's larger attitude to this question, I offer, on a less theoretical scale, the observation that the thematic displacement of katabasis themes shifts onto the narrative the power of a death tale, or part of a death tale, and hence lends to it a certain urgency and import beyond the surface structure of the story presented. For example, when Heracles takes the cattle of Geryon, although there is no reference to a physical descent into a lower world, the adventure clearly takes him beyond the normative world and forces him to confront, in Geryon, a death demon (in triplicate at that!), whom he must overpower before being able to abscond with his new-found wealth.[21] Of the films examined here, this associative connection is most evident in the ones about Vietnam and lifts them out of the particular to a more universal application. Not everyone may have been a Willard in Vietnam, but everyone has journeyed into the dark and perilous Cambodia of the self or the heart of his or her own darkness—some not as deeply, some more so; some with less success, others with more. The protagonists of the western as well as of the science-fiction tale and the detective thriller likewise make their descent into the varied katabatic landscapes to which their quests bring them. The pattern endures because it has been our own since Gilgamesh first went in search of

21. See G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970; rpt. 1974), 185–186.

immortality in the fourth or third millennium B.C. Extrapolating from the last five thousand years, we may assume that the pattern will in all likelihood continue to be central to how we tell our stories, in word or in image, and to our vision of ourselves. The enduring nature of this underpinning myth with its origins in the earliest Western narratives seems to be beyond dispute.

II

Verbal Odysseus: Narrative Strategy in the *Odyssey* and in *The Usual Suspects*

Hanna M. Roisman

In 1905 the American anthropologist Matilda Stevenson reported the following case, which had occurred among the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico: A teen-age boy was accused of witchcraft when a twelve-year-old girl was stricken with a nervous seizure right after he had taken her by the hands. At his trial before a court of priests, the boy initially pleaded his innocence and denied having any occult powers, but his truthful defense was of no avail. Sorcery was a crime punishable by death, and, despite his youth, the boy was in great danger. So he changed his strategy. He admitted to having inherited magic powers, which even enabled him to assume the shapes of animals. When asked to demonstrate these powers, he gave a sad speech in which he regretted their loss after the incident with the girl. Relieved that he was no longer a sorcerer, the priests set him free.[1]

This story is instructive. The clever boy realized that telling the truth would not save him from death, but that fabricating a story which upheld the Zuñi system of beliefs would. By both admitting and denying that he had supernatural powers, he brought his story into accord with what the people believed and were able to understand. They certainly were unable to believe or understand that his touching of the girl's hands had not produced her seizure since they could not figure out any other cause for it.

1. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, *The Zuñi Indians: Extract from the Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1905; rpt. New York: Johnson, 1970), 398–406. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* [vol. 1], tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963; rpt. 1978), 172–175, provides an analysis. I am grateful to Lauris A. McKee for drawing my attention to this story.

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