CHAPTER 7

On Collapsing Boundaries Between Protagonist and Antagonist: Dante's Tricks and Others in *La Vie En Rose* and *Apocalypse Now* and in the Documentaries *Tarnation*, *Elena* and *Waltzing With Bashir*

The last chapter introduced us to the concept of shades that had taken over a character's point of view, and there we contrasted *dramatic* shades with Dantean shades, showing how each is a different form of space. We looked at shades in *dramatic* spaces—the examples of Lars and of the Japanese Man in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, where the story largely stayed in an empathetic realism outside of their own subjective experiences—and contrasted these with shades in *Dantean* space, where we share the shaded protagonist's point of view—this describes the protagonists of *Gravity*, *True Detective* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. In this chapter we go further into examples that more clearly depart from realism via deploying expressionist uses of sound and picture, taking us into Dantean characters whose perspective is overtly offered to us. This form of story space brings us within the suffering or joyful experience of a protagonist, announced clearly by a far more expressive use of aesthetic form, often marked by the blurring and breaking of established aesthetic boundaries, revealing a Dantean space of overtly-broken borders. This is the realm of immersive Dantean space.

A. D'Adamo, *Empathetic Space on Screen*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66772-0_7

Watching a Tragic Shade Seize Edith Piaf's Throat : The Long Dolly in La Vie En Rose

La Vie en Rose, the 2007 biopic about the life of Edith Piaf that won Marion Cotillard the Oscar for best actress, shows us an immersive Dantean space in the making. In the film's signature sequence, the virtuoso traveling shot that launches us into the final act, we see a ghost become a shade[1] that then takes possession of Piaf's space, mind and voice.

Her possession begins as we fade up from black in an intimate close-up of Piaf waking in bed. She lies there languorous with her lover Marcel, a professional boxer, who smiles and says he must get up (Fig. 7.1), put on his watch and go off on a flight to a professional fight in another city. A radiant Piaf leaps out of bed to bring him breakfast, her buoyant mood in striking contrast to her usual glum meanness, and the camera begins to follow her in what will become a four-minute uninterrupted traveling shot that serpentines through her apartment.

On her way to the kitchen the first disquieting note comes as Piaf passes a servant, a young girl who is inexplicably crying. She snaps at the girl in passing but carries on. As she travels through her apartment in a long dance with the steadicam, more somber servants are revealed, standing silently, half in shadow, and clearly possessed by some depressing reality that the singer doesn't yet share. She begins arguing with these

Fig. 7.1 *La Vie en Rose (2007)*

people as she looks for Marcel's watch and then, after returning to her bedroom, she starts hunting for Marcel himself, who seems to have disappeared. Her friend tries to calm her and to explain that Marcel's plane has crashed and he has died. Now she begins to panic and tries to escape them, her hands wavering in a palsy of grief and shock. She begins to cry (Fig. 10.11) and then to scream, and her staff reach out to her, apparently to calm her. But soon, in a moment reminiscent of Pina Bausch's dance-theater, they are pushing her past the camera which pivots to watch her stumble down a dark corridor. Suddenly beyond her at the end of this corridor the lights rise and we see she is going out, almost staggering, onto a stage. And now we begin a seamless sound transition (a là *Amadeus* (1984)) as we hear her launching into one of her more famous songs. Carried across the cut by the song's power we finally cut (again, a là *Amadeus*) to see her singing the tragic dirge in a grand opera house to a packed and mesmerized crowd.

The dead ghost of Marcel is transmuted by this sequence into the form of a shade of grief: the shade now takes possession of Piaf's sonorous voice and becomes the very nature of her song. The effect is powerfully empathetic: we understand that Piaf took this terrible sudden grief and thrust it into her singing over and over again, night after night, never truly leaving behind or getting over the death of Marcel.

But note how different the shade of Marcel is from those of the previous chapter: here realism is being discarded and inside her sensuous and diced-up temporal point-of-view, as unsure as she is whether the Marcel she woke up next to was real and has just left is a memory, or was in fact just a ghost and has already died. With Marcel's death her grasp and ours of the boundaries of time and space have collapsed, just as they do again at the end of the shot when she finds herself shoved down her apartment's hallway onto a grand stage before an audience. Now, lost and bewildered, she can only sing. Compassionate empathy is created in us with the help of this breaking of space and time and of source and score: this melding-together of memory and present brings us straight into her own mind and heart as she is deranged by grief. And with this an intensely dislikable character becomes hopelessly empathetic while the iconic shot of Piaf on stage is now imbued with a life and character.

Sometimes a character denies her own therapy or purgatorial arc and is in some sense generating and immersed in some long active distraction of self-punishment, and this is often staged in a spatial sense. Ugolino, for example, has a strategy of gnawing with frenzied focus on his enemy's

skull, thereby, making him be too busy to be forced to contemplate his actual psychic wounds. Piaf too is not in a therapy arc: we never see her get over this moment, or even really process it in any way. Instead it seems that from this moment onwards the shade of Marcel will always be with her, inflecting her singing voice with tragic timbres for the rest of her days.

Entering the Shade: Crossing Sensuous Boundaries as a Technique of Intensifying Empathetic Space

Note the difference between the external perspective on the shades of the last chapter and the striking sensual envelope of *La Vie en Rose*'s revelation scene: here we feel we are in some sense experiencing the apartment through the shrouded confusion of Piaf herself. The grim lighting, long tracking shot, time-confusions and musical transitions all tell us we are in some sense both outside and also inside Piaf's shattered mind, experiencing her long-term grief, and meeting and feeling the presence of Marcel the shade. A boundary is collapsed: by entering the shade's vision but yet not leaving this present world, the cinema envelope is in two worlds at once.

Amelie also does something similar. First, as in Piaf's scene, it enters the shade's vision. It does this by simply carrying forwards the tropes of an 8-year-old's world into her adult life, and we make the connection between the two periods, seeing the adult Amelie as somehow still as childlike and innocent as she was the moment her mother died. But this film also hides the shade's power rather like the way the realism of *Gravity* hides that shade's power in Ryan's present. At first we do not really see Amelie as being controlled by or stuck in her childhood: the light childish playful tone of the film at first feels simply like a strong style-choice of emphatic and delightful caprice. The fact that its rather unique thoroughness is grounded in the first act's dramatic structure only becomes clear as we enter a second reading, a review of Amelie's motives and character.

Dante's Erasures of the Borders Between Self and World

With these examples we have entered the realm of expressionist technique, so marked by its non-realistic and boundary-breaking form, and these tactics also owe something to Dante's original invention. In *The Divine Comedy* Dante utilized many fascinating tactics of

border-breaking that throw further light on the nature of Dantean space, with its urge to break down the wall between past and present, between inner and outer realities, and between reader and story character.

To see how, let's recall that Dante's Hell is not just a bad place to be: it is a place where the traumatic memories of its inhabitants actually generate its architecture. This makes it a highly individualistic, highly personalized place, a teeming necropolis where so many sufferers exist in a singular space that is distinctly theirs, a space architected and made manifest by their specific values, fears, traumas and actions. As a result, their inner emotional experience is made three-dimensional: Farinata's agony wafts out to include Dante and Virgil like the smell and the smoke from his burning sepulcher.

We remember such characters so vividly because their space in Hell is a powerful evocation of both their story in life and their emotional pain being lived in our moment. Their tales are psychologically realistic *and* their past trauma is alive and breathing all around them and us. To achieve this Dante deployed space in many interesting ways: we have already explored how he used a traumatic memory to architect a current space, but now we can briefly mention four other aesthetic tactics separate that reinforce this double-visioning.

One trick was to continually conflate the different grammatical forms of the word 'in' (*dentro),* so that Dante's characters could poetically combine the external, physical sense of being immersed *in* the water or being *inside* the house with the inner psychological sense of being *in* love or *in* sorrow or *in* pain. He uses this repeatedly. Consider again Canto 7, line 123, where one regretful prisoner describes his mistake in life—harboring resentiment inside himself—as essentially incubating his current imprisonment in hellish muck: "(In life) we … nursed in ourselves sullen fumes, and (thus) come to misery in this black ooze." By bridging being 'in' the realm of thoughts and emotions to an external realm of ooze, he extends a sense of one's responsibility for cultivating the self to a form of environmental architecture. One's resentment and guilt about that resentment then somehow produces an actual ooze in which one is immersed.

This passage also shows another trick of Dante's—to reveal people immersed in water, mud, fire, ice, blood, or other enveloping environs that phenomenologically connect the body to a place. That immersive substance was often described in realistic detail in terms of how it caused continual agonies in the tortured. In the frozen lake of Caina Dante

takes this even further: near Ugolino two murderers are glued together and to the ice-lake by their tears which pour from their eyes and then freeze, further erasing the boundary between their prison and their body.

We can mention one last brilliant trick of Dante's for collapsing the boundary between the body and the emotional realm. At one point while locked in the tower Ugolino has a dreadful foreshadowing that he will ingest his children. It comes as they beseech him to eat them: he looks into their faces and "sees his own face" reflected there. This thought both reminds us all that one's children are "of one's flesh" while also foreshadowing his hungry cannibalization of their bodies. It is a powerful way to convey both Ugolino's fatherhood and his own intense horror of his coming dark marriage with their flesh.

All of these tricks deepen Dantean space in that they help erase the border between person, body, crime, emotion and hellish punishing environment. Cinema has taken up this same border-crossing, time-collapsing project, and it is especially clear in films with Dantean space. In fact perhaps it is actually *because* these stories require the cinematic elaboration of Dantean space that they are among the best examples in our tradition of 'total cinema,' that form of filmmaking where all of the craft departments are being employed in groundbreaking ways. Leaving the frame of standardized Hollywood realism, they can mine Romantic, Expressionistic, Gothic and other aesthetics to express the emotional conflict in their particular realm, opening a rich expressive range of craft-choices. After all, Dantean space offers a powerful art form of *subjectivity*, a way out of mimetic realism, a form of storytelling based on the character's point of view, one where we enter the sensual, emotional point of view of the main protagonist and 'see through their eyes,' 'walk in their shoes' and 'enter their heart, mind and imagination.' Such films can construct not just a plausible setting but rather any setting that reflects the character's inner dramatic tension, and this can take any form that the protagonist's imagination can lend it. And so the range of possible aesthetics are sharply expanded in stories expressing Dantean space.

For this reason cinema is often at its most powerful when it is expressing Dantean space. Cinema is always married to spectacle, but when spectacle is also a deep dramatic expression, the expression of the intimate inner conflicts, hopes and dreams of the main characters, then cinema is raised to a new level of intensity. A film then becomes a specifically *Dantean* spectacle, one serving a narrative drive, much more

powerful than conventional cinema's spectacle where the mis-en-scène generally serves only as a beautiful backdrop (in the film industry this form of production design is called 'eye-candy') or as the quiet and unobtrusive arena of the drama—places of mere dramatized space.

Come Be Trapped in My Family and My Mind: Dantean Space in Documentaries

Dantean space that takes advantage of these empathetic tropes of emotional breakdown is also powerfully realized in certain documentaries that are structured around traumatic personal and social memories. We think here of the examples of *Tarnation (2004)*, *Waltz with Bashir (2008)* and *Elena (2014)*. These three documentaries utilize the same dramatic machinery of traumatic event, Dantean characters, therapy arc and the elaboration of shaded space that we have been detailing: in fact these films often also use some of the same editing, soundtrack and music techniques we have described in earlier chapters to suture the viewer into the character's shifting memories as well as to create similar ghost and shade effects.

Tarnation

Tarnation is about a young gay man's investigation into the causes and effects of his mother's psychological breakdown. His journey leads him back into his own past, a childhood where he and his mother Renée both are extensively recorded performing for the camera, and his investigation eventually exposes the event that drove his mother mad: Renée was abused by his grandfather. He then journeys to Texas and takes his mother out of his grandparents' house and brings her to New York to care for her.

Elena

Elena is about the actual and psychological search by Petra for her older sister Elena who disappeared two decades ago when Petra was a child. Elena left Brazil during the dictatorship years to become an actress in New York, where she disappeared without a trace. Now two decades later Petra too goes to New York to become an actress, and there she is filled with the saudade-like memories of her lost sister, growing closer to her own ghost until she cannot tell herself from her own sister.

Tarnation and *Elena* have some striking parallels: both investigate some fundamental, mysterious and radically disjunctive moment in a family's life, and both have access to diaries and to large bodies of family material made not simply to document events but originally created as performances, including very expressionistic moments of dance, symbolism and grotesque emotional overacting. This material, and the way it is re-contextualized and reprocessed by the filmmakers, then links the past fantasies, hopes and projections of family members and of the filmmaker with present fears and reflections. By creating layers of re-editing that use slowed-down and sped-up footage, added voice-over, subjective and defamiliarizing sound effects, color effects and layered musical scores, a rich cinematic space is created in which not only mood but also character and family arcs are revealed. Through this frame we are given glimpses into the inner life of these families, particularly at moments of charged family history that triggered some mysterious twisting of everyone's life, and then the effects of that twisting are again felt in the form of personal emotional spectacle. And as the protagonist investigates these memories and the present, slowly the mysterious force behind this twisting is revealed, allowing the protagonist (and perhaps other members of the family) to finally heal.

Waltz with Bashir

Waltz with Bashir is also interested in breaking out of traditional documentary form in many of the same ways, and it too slides frequently between sequences that claim objectivity and those anchored in the main character's subjectivity. Similarly, it also distrusts some specific established story that involved the main subject. In addition, its investigation to discover the truth also veers between reality, dream and nightmare. It too uses highly empathetic spaces that are anchored in a character's perceptions and are crafted Dantean spaces where the past keeps leaking into the present. And it too veers often between realistic and heightened and expressionistic uses of sound and sound effects that meld us to his sensibility.

However, the film's formal approach is different in two ways. First, it is entirely done in cartoon and cartoon-like rotoscope. And second, it is more overtly a therapy tale—in fact the story is framed by therapy sessions in a therapist's office—and it singularly investigates the suppressed memories of the main character, the events around an actual historical massacre of Palestinians that he was involved with as an Israeli soldier during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. With the therapist's and with friends' help he

is able to recall the trauma of the war and eventually of his own suppressed role in the massacre, and finally he can come to grips with his own feelings of guilt and responsibility that made him suppress the memory of this whole period of his life. Signifying this psychological breakthrough, the film's final images are real footage of the aftermath of the massacre.

Dantean Docs

All three of these very personal documentaries are empathetic Dantean documentaries, using the same mechanism of memory and machinery of empathy that we have been discussing to create spaces that reflect the tortured and torn psyche of their protagonists, revealing a subjectivity that is suspended between different times and environments. All three films are also mystery stories, with that form utilized in a specific way. Those forms are used to allow the protagonist to be an emotional detective of sorts, whose journey is overtly intended to be understood as a therapy story. To construct this journey, Dantean space is used to dramatize and delineate the changing personal stages of innocence, of corrupted and disturbed time, of recognition and investigation, and finally of freedom and a new start.

And all three films violate the usual boundaries of documentary film by using techniques of expressing subjective emotional states that are taken from narrative film. *Waltz with Bashir* does this through expressionistic sound design and graphic-novel-style cartoon versions of real footage, often cut in the style of a music video and sometimes overlain with the voiceover of a narrator remembering past events. *Tarnation* achieves this through radical music cuts married to complex editing cuts that often feature multiple screens, by radical post-production processing of images and by a richly-layered sound design, very unusual for documentary at the time: all of these techniques create a Dantean space where we enter first the mind of his electroshocked mother and then later into the filmmaker's own puzzled, anxious tortured memories and show them carried over into his anxious, tortured present. *Elena* uses most of the same techniques to break the border between realism and the subjective experience of trauma, but instead of mimicking *Tarnation*'s harsh confrontational aesthetic of anxiety and psychosis that seems at times like that of a slasher horror film, *Elena* strives to create a floating aesthetic of drift and lost souls, an echoey expanse that we might find in a romantic ghost story. All three create the

loss of borders of dream-states, but *Waltz with Bashir's* and *Tarnation*'s is closer to nightmare. And in all three films we are convinced by the Dantean spaces, which repeatedly border on chaos, that the protagonists might lose their minds, sucked into the land of shades and ghosts.

Living in a Collapsing Dantean Moment: *Apocalypse Now*

To look for the origins of some of these expressionistic techniques, one film in the canon suggests itself: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which is justly famous for its groundbreaking use of space, music, sound and its marriage of subjectivity and spectacle. And while Coppola himself acknowledges that the film is a flawed masterpiece, rightly locating the failures in a sagging and comparatively unchallenging third act, there are so many moments of true greatness in the first two acts that cinema history has forgiven the film its flaws. Nevertheless, it is useful to understand both the film's great power and its failures. We use our terminology to examine the linkages among its three iconic scenes: its mesmerizing opening, the famous Ride of the Valkyries set-piece which launches the film's dramatic action, and the attack on the DuLong bridge, a sequence which ends film's second act and launches it into its third act.

Though based somewhat loosely on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, the film transposes that novel's portraits of the Dutch colonial horrors being visited on the Congolese into the American military's horrors and misadventures being visited upon the people of Vietnam and Cambodia. In both versions of events the narration remains on the side of the oppressors, showing how their unfettered power in an apocalyptic landscape becomes a slow poison that destroys their souls and minds: the film focuses not on the effects of the war on the enemy but rather on a range of American soldiers and officers, and particularly on the inner struggles and character-arcs of the film's main character, special intelligence agent Benjamin Willard.

Willard is given his external objective in the film's first sequence where he is told by army and CIA officers that Kurtz has "gone insane" and must be "terminated with extreme prejudice". To kill Kurtz Willard must first navigate up a long river through Vietnam and then continue on into Cambodia to the jungle where, he is told, Kurtz romps viciously and with apparent moral abandon.

Willard's external objective is the first major departure from the novel. In Conrad's original story the main character travels upriver not to

kill but to rescue Kurtz. The role of that narrator is like Dante's in the *Inferno*: a traveling observer of a series of personae, each with his own history and goal and each singularly warped by the many soul-destroying pressures of the land. In the film, Willard retains some of this observer role but with two major differences. Willard's external objective of killing the errant guerrilla leader Kurtz aligns Willard more closely with his intended target, allowing him to be a kind of stand-in, surrogate and echo of Kurtz. It also aligns him with the murderous and increasingly-crazed soldiers he meets as he heads up-river. In addition, in the film Willard gains a much clearer character arc and struggle than the novel's narrator because his adventures along the way push him to question his goal. The river becomes a path into his own interiority: he says the river "snaked through the war like a main circuit cable plugged right into Kurtz."[2] Willard's striving to get "upriver" through the war, and the conflict each episode presents to his external goal, can then compose his journey into his own heart of darkness. The film will end quietly (and, many feel, unsatisfyingly) as a redemption tale when Willard, after having brutally murdered Kurtz, throws down his sword and leads his surrogate son Lance through the enemy camp and out of the madness. As he passes through Kurtz's army, everyone throws down their weapons, apparently inspired by Willard's act to practice war no more.

Paralleling this journey is a shift in form that is announced even in the brief introduction (which serves as a kind of short overture): as Willard moves further up the river the film moves from an objective form of adrenalynic spectacle common to a dispassionate thriller to a Dantean form that mirrors Willard's own growing inner conflict and guilt. And in this journey through elaborate and emotional forms of spectacle, the film combines space with music and sound design in two very distinct ways to magnify and realize Willard's changing character.

This play with form and the breaking of sensual boundaries is announced right away in the condensed overture of the film's opening minutes. When we first meet Willard he is already in his own Inferno: he seems to be having flashbacks of a helicopter-led jungle airstrike from a previous mission, but it might be drugged-out visions or perhaps flash-forwards to later events in the film. If it is a flash-forwards these explosions might be from either the Valkyries episode from the middle of the film or from the final airstrike that ended some edits of the film.[3] And so immediately we are in an uncertain space: is this a real event? A memory? A psychological metaphor?

The questions deepen because right from the opening frames we experience a collapse of music, practical sound effects and manufactured sound effects: The Door's song "The End", which is itself nearly boundary-less in its noodling drug-like dreamy guitar solos that follow no clear musical time, is here marvelously deployed over dissolves of the jungle and of Willard's meditative face.[4] Originally written by the errant son of a navy admiral[5] about a romantic break-up, here the song plays as a love song to death, telling us that Willard is both in some sense addicted to ending the lives of others (we will learn he has already assassinated six people on earlier missions) and that he is suicidal himself. The song also sets up a pattern of paradoxically embedding the music of well-known anti-war bands—the Doors, the Stones, CCR, Hendrix—in this war film's soundscape, a device which continually complicates our sense of the characters' identities and torqued allegiances.

On the technical side "The End" is also a very early example of music that doubles as an acoustic bed, that is, an almost environmental set of sound that makes no or very slow and gentle melodic progression. As beds often do, this lulling, boundariless quality grants this opening a dreamy mood that stands outside of cinema time, a function quite different from the film's atonal, dissonant Moog-based main score that announces the film's growing psychological and plot tensions at the end of every sequence.

The song functions on a number of levels. A well-known pop song after its release in 1967, it places us in the film's Vietnam-era period.[6] More forcefully it serves as antagonist expression by introducing death, the film's antagonist. But it also subtly positions death as a friend, a welcome and familiar presence for the protagonist, which sets up the paradox of Willard's character. The music also sets genre-tone here—its disquieting quality and marriage to spectacular bombing gets our adrenaline going and announces this film will have real thriller episodes, but with dissolves to Willard in close-up staring straight at the audience, it also associates this spectacular violence with Willard's own altered, drunken and stoned mental state. Possibly, the lyrics suggest, this violence will be a tool or aspect of a spiritual journey.

The music also depends on an exoticism in its tonal choices: the guitar has a vague hint of orientalist place thanks to its vaguely-raga-like formal nature and its high-pitched twangs played in the high tonal range in the neighborhood of a sitar or a Chinese pipa. This plays problematically into the colonialist-era concepts of the film's source-material, which mapped the colonized zones as a 'dark zone,' a murky exotic land of

dissipation, simultaneously borderless, foreign and all-too-free of moral restraints, a place where white men escape civilization and rationality in a liminal zone of otherness where they can practice animalistic self-discovery and a personal spiritual journey. Finally, the song also quietly announces the film's own sympathy with the counter-cultural, anti-war movement, an allegiance that will not become completely clear until all the weapons are thrown down in the film's last moments.

These qualities of the Doors' song are emphasized by the very first trick by the film's sound designer Walter Murch. A drum-like percussive bed of processed synth sounds introduces the song over black—it is a beat of chopper-like noises resembling and layered into the Door's own processed guitar notes because both have long echoed sustains and a growing warbled rhythm of changing time, though the chopping sounds start with a dreamy breath and then end with sharp attack, similar to some reversed-sound footage. This sound effect, produced on a synthesizer, is placed in a very present score, yet it anticipates the approach of a slow-motion passing helicopter, shown first passing across a slow-mo shot of verdant green palm trees, announced by orange wisps of smoke and then passing in the extreme foreground, fragmented while in swooping attack mode. And dramatically, cued by Morrison's first sung line of lyrics, announcing "This is the End, Beautiful Friend," the entire tree-line explodes in slow motion, with orange flames from a massive napalm attack dominating the entire frame.

Note the borderlessness that has been achieved even in this first montage: already by collapsing the roles of music and sound effects, score and source, environment and space, and while showing deep backgrounds with surprising intrusions of extremely-close interrupting elements, Murch establishes a collapse of the subjective and objective. Our frame, sliding dreamily from balanced, calm, long volumes with a clean foreground to unbalanced and exploding volumes with continual and chaotic foregrounded intrusions, only adds to the effect.

From here we will dissolve and crossfade through at least three realities: the subjective brooding shots of Willard which give this all the feeling of memories without any specific place in time, with shots of Willard staring at his ceiling fan in a hotel room, both crossfaded with shots of the violent orgy of the airstrike's hellish destruction and aftermath. Willard stares directly into the camera in close-up, and then a cut to a ceiling fan re-attributes the helicopter sound effects to Willard's mental filtering of memory and his present. The opening music montage ends with a dolly to the hotel window and the shifting sound perspective on a source helicopter sound, followed

by the first placed sourced sound effect: Willard's disembodied hand lifts the blinds to see an ordinary Saigon street far from the front lines.

Right away with Willard's confessional voiceover, recorded with a confident and intimate presence and affect, we learn we are taking this trip through his eyes, that our narrator is wrestling with guilt and combat PTSD, has divorced his wife and that he is reflecting on the coming journey from some placeless and never-revealed future moment of revelation. But the sequence's acoustic unreality continues, if in a subtle form: underneath this next montage of him alone in the hotel room, where we dissolve dreamily through scenes of Willard engaged in acts of self-abasement and dissipation, there is a quiet, trilling and hissing bed of exterior jungle environment playing throughout. Again the border between self and surroundings is unstable.

All of these tricks of the sliding nature of sound, music and space become a rhythm that will announce and punctuate the film's next four sequences. For example, we see them again in the famous "Ride of the Valkyries" scene that completes the film's set-up and launches the story's action. Willard and his boat crew are to be led to the mouth of the river by the Ninth Air Cavalry, itself commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore, who sports a cowboy hat and a mildly Texan accent. Suddenly Kilgore has a capricious idea: hearing off-handedly from a soldier who surfs that near the river's mouth is a wonderful point-break for surfing, Kilgore decides to attack the Vietcong village so that they can surf the point. Suddenly the crew finds itself in a flying V of military helicopters, swooping in spectacularly from the sea on an unnecessary bomber strike on a village and a children's school to clear the beach for surfing.

For many viewers this iconic moment has indelibly wed Wagner's overture to the film. In this scene Willard serves as an observer of Kilgore and his infectious ethos which ripples out among his crew. First, the scene makes it clear that there is no military objective in attacking the village: the captain chooses to do this simply because he admires surfing and there is a perfect point-break off-shore. By this brilliant step the entire external objective of this action leaps away from the expected plot-logic of winning the war, being instead the passing caprice of this demented figure who loves war simply for its adrenalynic spectacle.

Similarly, the use of the music in the attack takes us into Kilgore's joy and passion, wedding us to his own vision of what this war is about. Kilgore, devoid of empathy, is part of the dispassionate male culture we described in Chap. 2: in this early scene we stay visually and aurally

with his sense of war, following the firing of the bullets and the missiles, dwelling only on their spectacular operatic arrival and never seeing or hearing the actual pain or agony they inflict. This carefully-curated suturing introduces us to the addictive joys of war: only slowly as the film unfolds do we slide over to the receiving end of violence.

Many kinds of music would help this effort, but the screenwriter John Milius proposed this Wagner overture, chosen in the story by Kilgore. And now we see how music can create an operatic space that characterizes a layered character, deepening the resonance and spectacle that the character then provokes. This overture brings powerful historical associations: it evokes both the fantasies of the Overman sketched by Nietzsche, Wagner's friend and fan, and also the deeds and alluring darkness of the Nazis, who raised Wagner to state-cult status. The effect here is to ground Kilgore in—and force us to identify with—a European high culture sophistication of a Nietzschean bent joined to colonial and racist endeavors of the darkest kind.

Like the use in *Clockwork Orange* of European classical music to bond us to the violent character of Alex, here too we are unwillingly bonded to the joy of a violent protagonist, but with one difference. Here we see this character through the mediating presence of our narrator Willard who, while sensing all this dark joy, remains skeptical of Kilgore, somewhat like the narrator in the *Inferno* who observes and sometimes comments on the many sinners he meets. But we have also begun the journey of Willard's own inner emotional character arc: while his disapproving observation of the surreal madness of Kilgore both grants us a critical distance from it while also making Willard empathetic, it also reminds us of the explosions that opened the film, which seemed linked to Willard's own demons. It seems as if the same infectious and addictive power of this war's violence might be playing out within Willard as well.

Second, this scene's mixture of surfing and warfare, one of its many ironic mixes of Western war machine and recreation (itself quietly implicit in the very idea of a Hollywood war film), collapses another boundary that the music's introjection underlines. And yet even as we collapse so many boundaries, we also gain a new boundary in the form of a basic gender distinction: in contrast to the highly over-masculinized Kilgore and his all-male army, the village has a school with many young girls and many of the communist soldiers are women. As a result the screaming voices of the Valkyries, initially identified with the attack helicopters, will become more placeless as the attack unfolds, coming to

stand in for the rage and screams of the women being shot and killed and who are striking back as the attack unfolds but who are always held at arms-length in long-shot so we do not empathize directly with them.

And now we can see the many dramatic and Dantean layers at work in the use of *The Ride of the Valkyries*. First, this specific act of psychological warfare is a deep and fascinating expression of Kilgore's past, hinting at a fascist personal ideology along with a specific aestheticization of the adrenalynic violence that the war gives him the opportunity to explore, at high cost to many others. By invoking our codified high–low culture distinctions, Kilgore's love of this song suggests too that despite his quotidian Texan brogue and cowboy affectations he is educated and from an upper-class American family and therefore has a far-more knowing understanding of this entire experience than his cavalry soldiers. And suddenly with this new identity glimpsed, a cultural, social and colonial hierarchy maps onto the military machine that Kilgore rides like a bronco.

Meanwhile Kilgore's addiction to this adrenalynic violence, akin to his love for surfing, is underlined by his wonderful final line in the scene: "Someday this war's gonna end", delivered sadly as he exits. In this moment we and Willard gain a glimpse of Kilgore's desperate future and are left wondering, where will Kilgore get his fix when the war ends? What will he do to engage his own operatic fantasies of power once he no longer commands the air cavalry like this? Will he be as lost as Willard was in the film's opening when he had no mission? And with this question we not only begin to meet the obscure Kurtz but also begin to see Willard becoming both more self-conscious and also more clearly implicated in a Kilgore-like addiction to the beautified violence of the film's opening montage.

Now Willard travels on upriver, approaching the land of Kurtz, and finds himself unwillingly in the riveting boat scene. Here Willard finally sloughs off his observer role: after the drugged-out young American crew botches a simple stop-and-search of an innocent Vietnamese family's boat, killing two and injuring their young daughter, Willard cold-bloodedly executes the injured girl to prevent them from stopping to find her medical help. After killing the girl on the boat, Willard muses in voiceover that he is beginning to understand Kurtz's ruthless and murderous methods of total war: in this landscape, pragmatic instrumental logic of war feels much cleaner than trying to be compassionate, which he tells himself can only be a lie.

And after these insights and events, the boat arrives by night (the first night in the film) at the DuLong bridge. Willard tells us this is a charged boundary, the geographic border between Vietnam and Cambodia, the political line between a quasi-legal war and an illegal, undeclared and secret one. And this is the last outpost of Americans, the gateway to enter the realm of Kurtz.

The spectacle quickly grows very intense with desperate soldiers trying to swim out to the boat to escape, with bombs exploding and flames roaring, and strings of Christmas lights swaying along the bridge's wires. The shifting volumes of space are lit by moving beds of light and darkness, all periodically lit up or backlit by explosive fireballs on the bridge. In the earlier Valkyrie sequence we experienced the exhilaration and power of firing bullets and bombs. Here we are on the receiving end, experiencing the long-term effects of being bombed. We learn this hellscape is oddly a static and permanent state of affairs: the bridge is destroyed every night and then rebuilt every day, a sisyphian waste of lives and effort, done simply so that the American generals can claim the road is still open. Willard now leaves the boat to find the person in command here who should have further orders, and now Willard is joined by the soldier Lance, who has just dropped acid. As they set off together into this new hellscape Lance has a parallel with Kilgore in the Valkyries scene: once again Willard is in the company of someone having an intense experience that is in a real sense leaking out into his own perception.

And now the sound and cinematic boundaries begin to collapse. As Willard hunts through the amorphous compound, three forms of music play: the drunken circus merry-go-round strains that seem to be score, the cacophonic tinny Hendrix guitar-solos that are sourced off the cheap tape-deck of a soldier (but often feel score) and the plucked cable twangs that seem to be the cable-bridge snapping but might be score horror sounds from some experimental composer. (In 1979 they would also carry a fresh sense of science fiction warfare for their marked similarity to the laser cannon and blaster sound effects in *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (1977).) The circus music that plays here is warbled, like so much sound in this film, and then slides into groaning rhythms as if it is the voice of the American war-machine itself, trapped and floundering here in the mud.

Meanwhile a masterful mixing of sounds unfold that are hard or impossible to source, making a new demand on the viewer to make sense of this place. A shrill bed of crickets subtly rises and falls to help mix and dislocate the screams and shouts and snatches of dialogue from many

different soldiers, which is never blended into hubbub and so makes constant demands on us to integrate it into the unfolding story. At one point a disembodied voice screams at us to "listen to the music!" Gradually this command seems to be placed: it seems to have been shouted by a barely-glimpsed soldier, briefly encountered by Willard, who is grappling with another desperate, possibly insane soldier, in the mud of a trench: maybe he is trying to get the screaming soldier to concentrate on the sound of some distant music in order to calm him. The conflict and emotions of this wrestling pair are in stark contrast to others that Willard passes just meters away, who lie passively, laconic and seemingly bored. Then there is one whole short dialogue: "Goddamn it nigger you stepped on my face!" "I thought you were dead." "Well you thought wrong!" We are unsure if the speaker is Lance because this takes place with absolutely no clear visual clue of who is speaking. Marking a trope of subjective Dantean space, all clear answers and attributions are carefully erased, as are the borders between source and score, environment and sound effect, music and bed.

And now the Hendrix can be heard, cut across by a percussive machine-gun fire as Willard approaches the army bunker. Adding to the confusion, for a dramatic stretch both sounds dominate this space without having any apparent source, then finally are revealed to be coming from the bunker. The Hendrix is akin to an earlier use of other pop songs in helping us appreciate the soldiers' access to energetic, anti-war, pro-drug protest music. But the density of the shifting soundscape is emphasized again by swirling search-lights that keep changing the visual volume and contours of scenes, almost as if we are inside an accordion. Sometimes the cuts are hidden inside the drops to blackness so that when the swirling search-light returns we suddenly find ourselves inside a new shot.

Willard now meets a panicked soldier firing wildly into the darkness at a lone Vietcong soldier who we are told is 'inside the wire' and can be heard cursing out the Americans. An inexplicable red light starts flashing in the background—easy to miss among the pyrotechnics—and a character called "The Roach" comes out, triggering a terrific acoustic reversal. Now the tape-deck playing the guitar is clicked off and a new quiet rushes in: all score and most source sounds fade as the Roach listens to and tries to echo-locate the screaming Vietnamese soldier. Everyone else stares at the Roach, listening with focus like him, wondering if and how he can do this. As his voodoo necklaces rattle and his large eyes stare vacantly, a calm, laconic affect comes out in his voice and movements, a relaxed centeredness similar to Willard's relaxed, intimate voiceover. In

the quietest dramatic moment in the entire film (a charged taut silence that creates its own new tension paralleled only with Kurtz's moment of death and release which will mark the end of the drama) a massive shift in acoustical presence takes place: after all the cacophony of machine-gun fire, competing music, the bursting of bombs and the wreckage of the bridge, we now hear only crickets and the tiny rustle of the Roach's voodoo necklace. Listening, the Roach says, "He's close, man: *real* close."—a line which then becomes Willard's own line minutes later in the voiceover as he senses the closeness of Kurtz. In this way it is as if Willard and his crew never fully leave this unreal zone of the bridge behind.

Finally, the Roach fires and kills the unseen soldier. And when this pregnant silence ends a change will have happened in the central goals of the film: Willard has crossed over into Cambodia and, we begin to think as the boat heads into the land of Kurtz, he has also stepped across into some new metaphysical state of being. And like the sequences of the Valkyrie attack and the killing on the boat, this remarkable sequence also ends with a cut-line that hangs in the air. When the Roach is asked by Willard "Soldier, do you know who's in command here?" the Roach answers simply "Yeah." And then turns away. The answer floats in the dark, disembodied and unseen like so much else here. With Willard we wonder, who *is* in charge here? No-one? The Devil? Kurtz? Willard himself? We saw a red flag of a Black Power fist briefly in the background where the Roach lives. Is white hegemony in charge here? The filmmakers' carefully-designed glimpses of many answers ends our scene without giving a clear, fixed conclusion.

The overall envelope of cinematic effect, with its carefully-engineered demands and glimpses that force us to interpret space and information as best we can from scraps and fragments, is arguably the subjective, sensual, acoustic and cinematic highlight of the film. On one level we feel this break is the natural dramatic conclusion of the past hour and a half of the story: it is as if Willard's own rhythm of meeting many different condemned American men has accelerated, as if he has here reached a low circle of hell where the tightly-set concentric circles of the damned are packed more closely together. Or perhaps this scene shows the weight on Willard of his own assassinations, such as his recent killing of the innocent girl on the boat. Perhaps Willard has now entered his own purgatorial space and is facing his shades. Or perhaps his mind is simply breaking down.

Perhaps all of these interpretations work here, but one cinematic change is clear. With all of this new technique, subjective intensity and

work demanded of the viewer to try to make sense of what is unfolding, we no longer stand apart from the war as Willard has done for the first hour. This space is very unlike our Kilgore-like perspective in the Valkyrie scene, and completely different from the cold realistic objectivity of the moment when Willard killed the young girl on the boat. The chaos of the bridge scene is so direct and personally experienced that we and Willard are both demanded to make sense of all this madness.

And so, like the film's opening, this scene creates a form of protagonist bonding that transforms the adrenalynic spectacle of the war, granting it a personal and emotional force. When the Dulong bridge becomes a Dantean space for Willard, our own confusion over the collapse of the usual boundaries between source and score and between music, sound effects and environmental sound beds, serves another purpose beyond illustrating Willard's situation: it also draws us much more closely into his point of view and conflicted emotional journey.

Meanwhile the careful sound-mixing in this scene, the way that source and score begin to bleed into each other, reminds us of similar techniques used when we first meet Willard. Here too sounds shift us from the dispassionate space we enjoyed in the Valkyries sequence to a Dantean space expressing Willard's character and arc.

On Prismatic Characters : Is There a Shade in This Story? Is This Dispassionate, Dramatic or Dantean Space? Is Willard a Dramatic or a Dantean Character?

When Ugolino looked into the faces of his children whom he knew he would soon eat, he saw his own face looking back at him. Already he is losing his mind: even as he sees his paternity there his imagination is already flash-forwarding to when they will be part of his own flesh. Shades can have all sorts of warping temporal and sensual effects on a protagonist, as we have seen in this journey from *The Divine Comedy* to the Dulong bridge. However, while nearly all the stories examined in the last two chapters feature the death of a person who then shapes the present-day vision and actions of the main character, there are other stories that *can be read* as shade tales but do not need to be read this way. In fact, it is not clear they should be.

Apocalypse Now has this quality. We cannot tell if Willard, the protagonist of *Apocalypse Now*, is a Dantean character with a Dantean

moment in his past, or if he is a dramatic character who is simply executing his orders as he wends his way through an insane world. The problem is a lack of knowledge: we are unsure if the situation is insane or if *he* is insane and, if he is the source of this sensual chaos, why exactly that is happening. Part of the problem is that we can never tell at any point in the film if Willard's mental breakdown that opens the film is a result of taking drugs and alcohol while being recently divorced or if it is caused by the fact that he had already killed six others before this story even starts. We never see anything about those earlier killings: we only know with his opening voiceover that something that has happened here in Vietnam has caused his divorce and his breakdown and prevents him from going back home to the USA. He says he was given the mission to find Kurtz "for my sins", but we cannot tell if he is being ironic or confessional or both.

We also cannot tell if he is in any way marked by his assassination of the girl on the boat, and if that is in any way responsible for the Hell he is then tipped into from the DuLong Bridge onwards. Is Willard suffering from a shade? Perhaps: we can't tell. And so, as we see in other films, we cannot be sure in the end of Willard's final character arc. As a result his arc, and simultaneously the major cinematic spaces of the film, can be read two ways because Willis is a prismatic character: he can be read to have two distinctly different inner lives, creating a cognitively shifting and shimmering character.

There are many prismatic characters in our tradition. Take painting in particular. *The Absinth Drinker* of Degas, for example, vibrates brilliantly between two forms of portraiture. At first glance we see the woman and the setting, a neorealist portraiture of a haggard woman caught in a moment of complete despondency. She sits at a table in a café, ignored by the man seated next to her. But then we notice other details. First, where is the support for the table? Degas has made the tabletop seem to float. And the odd fluorescence of the lighting, the complex contrasts of the surfaces, which show both deep scores and a diaphanous glow, are both harshly real and dreamily softened. All of this makes us begin to suspect we too are seeing this world through the absinthe-blurred eyes of the woman. This is the same erasure of the boundary between realism and a subjective expressionism that we saw in *Apocalypse Now*. And, as in that film, we cannot tell if this is a Dantean space or just a drugged-out dramatic space of a subjective point-of-view: with this painfully sympathetic absinth drinker we are given no biographical information to tell what we are seeing.

A somewhat similar case exists with the twisted faces and worlds of Francis Bacon. These characters seem to be wrestling psychically with their condition, but are they? Are they snapshots of moments of crisis? Are they portraits of permanent states of affairs? And if so, are they self-aware or are we alone alert to their condition? This question takes us back to Dante: does Ugolino realize he is in Hell? Does any of us? As we have seen, the problem with being in a Dantean space is gaining a place to stand outside of its shaded vision. Like the most powerful of shades, such spaces often hide from us either behind the shield of akrasia or because they are so much a part of our self they cannot be separated enough from our perceptions to be clearly seen for themselves.

A similar prismatic problem of interpretation is encountered with Lee, the protagonist of *Secretary*, whose deep motives have also been erased from our view. By the film's end we see her happy, but we never actually learn why she likes to pee in her wedding dress and be debased by Edward. At one early point we see that she self-injures: a series of cuts she makes to her thigh hint at some kind of past abuse, but we are given no access to this, and so we cannot be sure if by the story's end she has landed in her own Heaven or Hell. Her man Edward can even seem like a kind of hero: he does, after all command her to never again harm herself, thereby invoking a communal empathy. But if on the other hand we think there are long dark fingers extending from some abusive events in Lee's past that are puppeting her into this abusive relationship with Edward (which is not at all an odd assumption in view of the many bandaids on her leg), then we see Lee as a Dantean character trapped in goals and desires not entirely her own, a version of Lee that lies closer to the original protagonist in the short story by Mary Gaitskill.

As usual we depend on the film's music to give us emotional and character clues, but here too Angelo Badalamenti's score does its best to cover Lee's tracks. The theme-song gives no hint of real dangers or darkness: instead we are cued to think of tango, games, ironic comedy, fantasies, and possible references to erotic films, but nothing tells us about Lee's need to be dominated and debased. Lee's own theme, "Broken Blossoms", grants her fantasies some comically-broad sardonic tones (conveyed by the faintly rubber-banding bass which is cross-faded with a friendly strip-tease-like guitar riff). The filmmakers' erasure of all clues to Lee's past, along with the gamification of her abasement and the moon-faced seemingly genuine grins of Maggie Gyllenhaal, lets us feel she has finally found the one man who can make her happy. But this conclusion results from an act of erasure: rather than giving a genuine

account of a BDSM character the filmmakers have made a deliberate decision to hide Lee's motive.

This refusal to explicate the character or reveal her backstory carries from the script across to the performance and the soundtrack, creating an ambiguous, prismatic and titillating narrative. In the end we are left wondering, is Lee now enslaved or enlightened? As the film's tag-line directs, we have to "assume the position:" we have to assume something about Lee to decide just what her own arc is, what we and she are enjoying, and what the meaning of the space of the office really amounts to. Is it an echo of places where she was abused? Is it a safe space where she can finally express her true self? Or is it just a strange realistic space? We might call this kind of cognitively shifting character a prismatic character. For the same reason, the spaces such characters generate also shimmer with a productive, provocative uncertainty, and so we might call both Lee's office and Willard's Dulong bridge prismatic spaces.[7,8]

Notes

1. The shot itself seems clearly inspired by the great moment late in the film *Amadeus* when a sick, weary and debt-ridden Mozart comes home to his apartment to find his wife and child gone. He is then lectured by his mother-in-law for being a useless philandering drunkard. Mozart has a revelation as she stands over him raving on and on: the film cuts from her to a heavyset female actor singing curses in a lovely high-pitched voice. We dolly out and find ourselves at Mozart's grinning enthusiastic conducting of his new opera. The edit illustrates his genius at transmuting a screeching complaint into a moment of beauty in a famous opera: in a great dramatic reversal (marking a complete change in his fortunes), Mozart is directing with ecstatic energy and the crowd is cheering, just as his mother-in-law's grating voice served to dramatize his own hung-over misery, its lovely slide into the rising source sounds of the performance, and then of the cheering of the crowds, serves as an emotional envelope reflecting Mozart's emotional transition into joy. This marvelous sequence does not utilize Dantean space but is simply a dramatic entrance into the point of view of an artist in a moment of inspiration.
   LVER takes this core idea of dramatizing a reversal through musical performance. And yet it transforms it in two ways. First, the film adopts a signature trick of the filmmaker Emir Kusturica of using the continuous shot of a traveling camera to move away from a place and then return to it later to see a magical change. This camera shot appears repeatedly in his

films but the best use is perhaps in the lime-making kiln scene in *Time of the Gypsies*. (I may be wrong to attribute the shot to my old teacher: however I haven't been able to locate this trick in other filmmakers before him.)
Second, this moment for Piaf, while being about how a singer puts her experiences into her music, is not a temporary moment of joy as in *Amadeus*, but a scarring and permanent moment of trauma that, we infer, marked a new, tragic and permanent inflection of her singing.

2. *Apocalypse Now*, 9: 45.
3. The version in the film has been remixed from the original source tapes by Walter Murch.
4. James (1981).
5. At least, so far in the film this seems to be what is happening. The problem of the film comes as Willard finds Kurtz. Now despite our expectations, there is no clear moments of penance or self-insight or release for Willard: we have nothing of the power of, for example, Ripley's great face-off with the Mother alien. Willard is able to kill Kurtz and then simply walk away. Perhaps we are to understand he has killed his demon, but the sequence lacks any sense of struggle and the cinematic control here lacks the operatic and Dantean power of the earlier descents into Hell. Lacking the subjective intensities of the opening and of the Dulong Bridge, without the operatic power of the Valkyrian attack or even the adrenalynic surprise of the boat killing, and uninformed by any of the moral complexity of the boat scene, this last sequence disappoints. Moreover, its comparative lack of emotional spectacle fails to mark the true release of Willard from his Dantean space.
6. For more on the connection between American music, politics and popular culture in this period see D'Adamo (2015, 2017).
7. See particularly *In the Metro* (Marc 2002).
8. Dedicated to Francesco Casetti and John Hare.

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