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# Global Trauma at Home: Technology, Modernity, *Deliverance*

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This paper hermeneutically examines the relationship between technology, masculinity, and modernity in John Boorman's film *Deliverance* (1972). It finds that the suburbanites who are victimized in Appalachia do not regress to a primal, premodern state but rely on their modern values to justify killing their assailants. The men's violence allegorizes the institutionalized violence of the power company that is damming the Cahulawassee River to power their suburban technological comforts. Hermeneutic analysis and critical theories of technology are combined to examine how each man reassesses his life, as one of modernity's beneficiaries, after encountering the displaced mountain people – modernity's others.

## I. INTRODUCTION

I do baptize thee now, in the name of modern technology.

Bobby, *Deliverance* (1972)



Modernity promises deliverance. Deliverance, however, means more than simply "the act of setting free, or fact of being free."[1] Deliverance also means "surrender." It is amid this tension between freedom and surrender that this essay examines how conceptions

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[1] Linda Ruth Williams reminds us at the outset of her well-known essay on *Deliverance* entitled "Blood Brothers" that the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a second

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of modernity as freedom continue to coexist uneasily with pessimistic assessments of modernity as a repressive, rule-based "iron cage," as Weber contended in *Economy and Society* (1922),[2] or as rationalised in ways that facilitate regression and totalitarian administration, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).[3] The events of history also remind us that modernity can enable the very barbarism that its foundational features (rationalization, bureaucratization, and democratization) were intended to foreclose. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, we find ourselves living in the midst of historical events which demonstrate that modernity has not dispensed with so much as incorporated and institutionalized the irrational violence it sought to discontinue.

In his dystopian analysis of late modernity and globalization *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004),[4] instance, Zygmunt Bauman builds upon theories of the modern condition developed by Siegfried Kracauer[5] and others to show how the wholly rational invisible hand of transnational capitalism does little to alleviate the suffering of "modernity's others," who are exploited, displaced, or simply abandoned in its wake. The "rational" movement of capital thus has rational and appealing effects (accumulation) and irrational *side* effects (suffering), which are also euphemized in the language of business as "externalities." Bauman's point, of course, is that this system of exchange is responsible for both "products," profit and waste, and that the rational exchange of capital for labour in advanced capitalism can have irrational and even barbarous side effects.

John Boorman's 1972 film *Deliverance*,[6] based on James Dickey's 1970 novel about four Atlanta businessmen who encounter modern-day barbarians on a weekend canoe trip in Appalachia,[7] remains one of the most gripping and influential representations of modernity's others in popular memory. Like the exploited populations Bauman addresses, the barbarous "mountain people" in *Deliverance* are the unwanted by-products of

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definition of deliverance as the "action of giving up; surrender." *Sight & Sound*, 9 (1994), 17–20, 17.

[2] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, first published 1922).

[3] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[4] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

[5] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

[6] John Boorman (dir.) *Deliverance* (motion picture) (Burbank: Warner Bros., 1972).

[7] James Dickey, *Deliverance* (novel) (New York: Dell, 1970).

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modernity, displaced by a hydroelectric dam that will destroy their river valley. The film's depiction of these wasted lives has had an "amazingly persistent cultural resonance" as an illustration of abject poverty and inbreeding in the American South.[8] The film's representation of otherness disturbs notions of modern, American selfhood precisely because it challenges the postcolonial paradigm wherein Americans and other Westerners fear the arrival of premodern, foreign barbarians at the gates of enlightened modernity. The mountain people, for instance, are Caucasian Americans living, secluded, within the United States, the paragon of modernity; and although some of them have "never seen a town before" they nonetheless find themselves embroiled in an economic relationship with suburban Atlantans, whose energy requirements necessitate the building of the dam that will destroy their community. These people are not, therefore, the outcasts of modernity living in isolation from its influence. Rather, they are bound up in its machinery but receive few of its benefits, and thus become identified with modernity's "'rejects,' 'wastrels,' 'garbage,' 'refuse' – with *waste*."[9]

Although my analysis focusses solely on Boorman's *Deliverance*, I compare several scenes from Dickey's source novel to their depictions on-screen with the hope of providing a more comprehensive portrait of the contesting interests behind these influential images. The 1971 screenplay by Dickey and Boorman,[10] which is markedly different from the final shooting script, also figures in my reading because its unfilmed scenes nonetheless shed light on the film that was ultimately produced. My examination of Boorman's film attempts to work past the inherited oppositions between modern and premodern, urban and rural, and rational and irrational, in order to emphasize that *both* the urban Atlanta capitalists who set out to challenge the raging river and the vengeful mountain people they encounter are the inbred offspring of modernity. And although the film represents the mountain people as the ones who are sexually depraved, inbred, and barbaric, a depiction that has attracted the lion's share of popular attention, I suggest that the ordeal on the river also forces each of the urban men to confront both the violence that underpins the modern, technocratic ideology of progress to which they

[8] Pamela E. Barnett, *Dangerous Desire: Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence since the Sixties* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 45.

[9] Bauman, 12; emphasis in original.

[10] James Dickey and John Boorman, *Deliverance: From the Novel by James Dickey*, 2nd draft (Hollywood: Script City, 1971). Like most screenplays, this co-authored version of the script contains scenes that were never filmed, including some that take place on the streets of Atlanta, which Dickey felt were crucial, and dialogue that varies somewhat from the shooting script.

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reluctantly subscribe – an ideology "materialized" by the dam – and their disturbing economic (if not genetic) relatedness to their others, who are excluded from its design.

## II. *DELIVERANCE* AND NEW HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

The fine line between rational pursuits and barbarous results has been a source of fascination for centuries. The link between rational men (often men of science with lofty goals) and the irrational violence they enable or carry out themselves has been explored in cultural forms as varied as Elizabethan drama (Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, 1589), early science fiction (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 1818), Victorian literature (Stevenson's *The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde*, 1886), colonial literature (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 1899), postmodernist war literature (Heller's *Catch-22*, 1961; O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, 1990), New Wave film in France (Godard's *Alphaville*, 1965, and *Week End*, 1967; Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*, 1966) and New Hollywood film in the United States (Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968; Coppola's *The Conversation*, 1974; and *Apocalypse Now*, 1979). *Deliverance* choreographs the confrontation between rationality and barbarity around the dam itself, a device that represents the epitome of "modern technology," in Heidegger's estimation,[11] with which both groups of men have complex relationships. And like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, its key intertextual reference, the film troubles the distinction between modernity and violence by depicting the rational, mechanized construction of the dam as a form of ecological violence (like the ivory trade in Conrad's story) and the mountain men's irrational attack on the urban invaders as revenge. In a landscape "raped" by progress, as Lewis (Burt Reynolds) puts it, Bobby (Ned Beatty) is raped by a mountain man whose shotgun-wielding friend fearfully stalks the men for the remainder of their journey.

If "one of the tasks of cinematic ideology is to enunciate fears and then to soothe them,"[12] *Deliverance* succeeds on the first score as a concretization of the major anxieties that afflicted Americans during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Vietnam War was of course the nexus of a global, ideological conflict between East and West. But within the United States, numerous conflicts, including those between social movements supporting and opposing the war, played out between North and South. These class- and race-driven anxieties materialize across a range of New Hollywood films,

[11] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1955), 17.

[12] Douglas Kellner, "Poltergeist: Suburban Ideology," *Jump Cut*, 28 (April 1983), 5–6, 5.

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such as Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) in which young American idealists (Hopper and Peter Fonda) are killed by Southern rednecks; John G. Avildsen's *Joe* (1970) in which the barbarous, working-class Joe (Peter Boyle) enlists a disillusioned ad executive (Dennis Patrick) in his tragic rampage against hippies and college students, evoking the historical killing of students at Kent State University on 4 May of that year; and Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), in which classical pianist Robert (Jack Nicholson) leaves the Pacific Northwest to work as a roughneck on an oilrig in the South because he disdains the values represented by his bourgeois pedigree.[13] The New Hollywood movement also registered American fears about modern technology and social control (Kubrick's *2001* and *Dr. Strangelove*, 1964; George Lucas's *THX 1138*, 1971), a striking example of which appears in Michelangelo Antonioni's American film *Zabriskie Point* (1970), whose protagonist flees from a southern California campus protest using the alias Karl Marx and whose conclusion depicts items of consumer culture – many of them technological – spectacularly exploding, one after the other in slow motion. *Deliverance* is particularly interesting because it encapsulates anxieties about both class and technology, enunciating (but not soothing) these concerns through the actions and ideologies of its four middle-class heroes.

The film's depiction of these ostensibly well-meaning men being traumatized by natives in an unfamiliar landscape connected with many viewers even as it disturbed them. Shot along the Chattanooga River in 1971 and released in July of 1972, the film was immediately recognized as a major work, receiving Academy Award nominations for best picture, directing, and editing. It enlivened heated debates in the popular press, but very few close readings of the film exist. Several scholars have read it as an allegory of the American experience battling an unknowable enemy in the wilderness of Vietnam,[14] as an "open text" that subverts the meaning of Christian iconography,[15] as a narrative about the confrontation between family men and the illegitimate inbred relations they encounter along the river,[16] and as a

[13] See Derek Nystrom, "Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood," *Cinema Journal*, 43, 3 (2004) for a detailed discussion of New Hollywood production practices and directorial autonomy that shaped such films as Avildsen's *Joe* and Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*.

[14] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 131.

[15] Davis W. Houck and C. J. S. Picart, "Opening the Text: Reading Gender, Christianity, and American Intervention in *Deliverance*," in David Blakesley, ed., *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

[16] Williams, "Blood Brothers," 17–20.

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grotesque representation of contaminating "white trash" bodies.[17] The film's ambivalent relationship with technological progress has received almost no scrutiny, however. It is, after all, the construction of the dam, which violently reconfigures the rural river valley and is compared directly with the controversial Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project, which displaced entire communities in the 1930s, that brings together modernity's beneficiaries and its victims in their moment of violent confrontation.

## III. TECHNOLOGY AND MODERNITY

In a film populated with biblical imagery, it should come as no surprise that an impending flood motivates the action. But it is the voracious energy demands of modern, suburban technologies, not God, that initiate the flood which displaces the rural Georgians into the mountains (to become "mountain people"), and attracts the urban men to the river for their showdown with nature. To varying degrees, Lewis (Reynolds), Bobby (Beatty), Drew (Ronny Cox) and Ed (Jon Voight) experience technology as the physical manifestation of progress in their everyday lives. But this experience is simultaneously emasculating (for Lewis), and comforting (for Bobby). They are aware as Atlantans that technological progress is determined as much by social interests as it is by technical possibilities, and that the formidable "interests of profit and dominance have channelled technical development," a process which "coincides fatally with the needs of control."[18] As their opening discussion, quoted below, makes clear, they are also aware that technology can ignore or even infringe upon the interests of less powerful groups of people. Frankfurt School theorists saw technology as "materialized ideology" for precisely this reason.[19]

Technologies not only respond to social and ideological forces but replicate them as well. Indeed, in his well-known essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger contends that technology "enframes" and characterizes our very experience of the modern world because it mediates how the world is "revealed" to us.[20] The hydroelectric dam is the epitome of modern technology for Heidegger because it alters the very "essence" of the river.[21] The dam "challenges forth" the river for its

[17] John Hartigan, "Reading Trash: *Deliverance* and the Poetics of White Trash," *Visual Anthropology Review*, 6, 2 (1992), 8–15.

[18] Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 161 footnote 15, quoted in Andrew Feenberg, "From Critical Theory of Technology to Rational Critique of Rationality," *Social Epistemology*, 22, 1 (2008), 13.

[19] Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

[20] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 15.

[21] Ibid., 15.

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potential energy, violently "revealing" it as a "standing reserve" of electricity to be harvested and stored.[22] This technological mode of revealing alters how the natural world represents itself to us. Trees become lumber reserves, rivers become reservoirs of power, and people become human resources or human waste, which the mountain people in *Deliverance* spectacularly represent.

The film opens as the men drive through the woods of north Georgia, having left behind the comfort of their technologized lives in Atlanta in order to challenge the primal power of the Cahulawassee River. Under the leadership of the preachy American individualist, Lewis, and his contemplative friend, Ed, their showdown with nature will nonetheless see them "back home on Sunday evening in time for the football game." The trip is literally their last chance to master the legendary river because the hydroelectric dam, required "to push a little more power into Atlanta," as Lewis scoffs, is nearly complete and the river will become a "big, dead lake." Metaphorically, the trip represents their rebellion against the adventureless middle-class lives that they fear will consume them as they become company managers and family men, assuming the very complacent and institutionalized identities they once disdained. It is thus their anaesthetized, modern lives from which they initially seek deliverance. The men possess an uneasy awareness of their complicity with the development project, with the river's destruction, and with the impending eradication of an entire way of life in rural America. The first dialogue we hear in the film is this important exchange:

LEWIS: You wanna talk about vanishing wilderness?
BOBBY: Why are you so anxious about this?
LEWIS: Because they're building a dam across the Cahulawassee river. They're gonna flood the whole valley, Bobby. Damn it, they're drowning the river, man – just about the last wild, untamed, unpolluted, unfucked-up river in the South.
ED: That's progress.
LEWIS: That ain't progress. That's shit!

These opening lines link technological progress uneasily with waste. Throughout their journey, as the men bear witness to the wasteland created by the dam, they deliberate over the costs and benefits of progress, "modern technology," and "the system." The film's opening minutes intersperse scenes of the men driving toward the river with scenes of the power company's dump trucks hauling tonnes of earth out of deep ravines forged not by

[22] Ibid., 15.

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natural processes but by technology. These images of mechanized excavation present a wilderness penetrated and scarred by progress. Over these images, the men's discussion continues on the soundtrack and culminates in Lewis's exclamation that Atlantans "are gonna rape this whole Goddamn landscape" with their growing appetites for power. Boorman then presents us with the arresting image of an explosion detonated by the power company, which sends sheets of rock tumbling and in an instant violently redesigns the valley. The men and the development project are linked visually here, both advancing inexorably toward the sacred river because the men, obliviously at first, aim to master and order the river as only the power company has. The men are to varying degrees all modern in this way, and they endorse "the system" that supports their positions of middle-class privilege, whether they do so unwittingly or openly. One analysis of the novel has suggested that each man is a different version of "the American Adam" before and after the Fall.[23] Each man, I am contending, is also a unique embodiment of middle-class American masculinity in late modernity: each has a different relationship with technology; each represents a different form of faith in modernity and its comforts (Bobby), bureaucratic institutions (Drew), and ways of knowing (Ed); and each copes in his own way with the trauma of the attack. Ed, for instance, responds to Lewis's "extremist" conception of progress by suggesting that the dam "is a very clean way of making electric power" and that the dead lakes that result from the dams "provide many people with recreation," including his own father-in-law, who "has a houseboat on Lake Bowie." The sensitive family man, Drew, and the portly bachelor, Bobby, agree and thus Lewis appears to be the lone exception to their celebratory view of capitalism and their ignorance of and isolation from its consequences.

## IV. LEWIS



Lewis instead postures as the conservationist of the group by criticizing the ecological impact of progress. The power company's designs, according to his thinking, represent the teleological, progressive, rational aims of modernity, while his pursuit of the river is consistent with the nostalgic, regressive, Romantic (irrational) aims of premodernity, a time when men were

[23] Robert Armour, "*Deliverance*: Four Variations of the American Adam," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1, 3 (1973), 280–85.

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men, not yet dependent upon machines for their basic needs. Lewis delights in his role as the self-appointed leader of the group, haggling aggressively with the locals to transport their vehicles down the river, and stubbornly refusing their guidance through the dense woods, opting to race recklessly along the dirt roads to show the men that modern life has not yet crushed his natural instincts. "You better let them show us," suggests Ed. "You're missin' the whole point!" replies Lewis. The point of the trip for Lewis is precisely to get lost, to extract himself from the regimented security of city life and to reconnect with his nature, which in the film is inseparable from his masculinity: "Sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find anything!" exclaims Lewis as he finds their destination after several wrong turns, for which he is chided by the locals. But although "Lewis dominates the group with his swaggering bravado setting a standard against which all the men's performances are gauged," inconsistencies emerge in his behaviour and there is evidence "that he has gathered his three companions as foils for his own ego."[24]

During their first night around the campfire, Lewis claims to hear "something or someone" in the woods and disappears intrepidly in order to investigate, leaving the men feeling apprehensive and unprotected. He reappears from the darkness *behind* them, startling them momentarily. Although the film never reveals the source (if any) of the noise, Lewis arouses suspicion in the men by both introducing concern and soothing it. His performance has thus been read as "visibly contrived to make his friends nervous while he savors his own steely calm."[25] In this way, Lewis is no less manipulative than Ed, the refined ad executive and graphic designer, or Bobby, the slick insurance salesman, who are manipulators by trade. And by using untamed nature merely as the backdrop for his own ego fortification, Lewis's motivations are not as Romantic or nostalgic as they may appear. Lewis is, after all, the most driven of the men to conquer the river and master, if not beat, its unforgiving currents. In this way, he embodies the very will to master and manipulate nature that he despises in its modern, technological form. Although he works to be the least modern of the men – the least comfortable with technology, and the least willing to accept his own identity as a capitalist urbanite – his designs are surprisingly consistent with those of the power company whose project he deplores. This exchange

[24] Hal Aigner, "Deliverance," *Film Quarterly*, 26, 2 (Winter 1972–73), 40–42, 40.
[25] Ibid., 40.

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follows the men's first bout with the river and illustrates how he and Bobby interpret their pursuit:

BOBBY: Yeah, we beat it didn't we? Didn't we beat that?
LEWIS: You don't beat it. You don't beat this river. Machines are gonna fail. And the system's gonna fail.
BOBBY: Then …
LEWIS: And then what? Then survival. Who has the ability to survive. That's the game: survive.

Lewis's survivalist rhetoric hints at a future world governed only by irrational chaos once the "machines" and "the system" have failed. Nature will thus emerge triumphant and people will once again have to learn to survive amid its primal forces. Getting in touch with his own primal instincts and strengths is thus his mission throughout the trip, a way of preparing for his own survival in the post-technological world he envisions. But although he resists participating in Bobby's imperialist delight at having beaten the river, the game of survival he describes is merely his own way of ordering and mastering the elements of untamed nature, which he attempts to do at every turn until he is rendered helpless by a broken leg later in the action. As their adventure escalates, it "becomes increasingly clear that little difference exists between Lewis's physical abilities and those of his reserved companions,"[26] with the exception, I would add, of his bow-hunting skills, which prove crucial during their pivotal encounter with the mountain men. Although he works tirelessly to distinguish himself from his companions, whom he sees as emasculated by modernity, he is more like them than he knows. And his appealing rhetoric is inconsistent from the start: "I ain't never been lost in my life!" he declares in earnest, before taking a wrong turn toward a dead end. Moments later, the man who has never been lost counsels the men that "sometimes you need to lose yourself before you can find anything." These inconsistencies, coupled with Lewis's penchant for Thoreau-inspired orations, lead Bobby and Drew to doubt the authenticity of his knowledge:

BOBBY: Does he think he's Tarzan, or what?
ED: He knows the woods, though. He really does.
DREW: Not really. He learned 'em, he doesn't feel 'em. That's his problem. He wants to be one with nature and he can't hack it.

[26] Ibid., 40.

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## V. BOBBY



These tense opening exchanges over how the men know and understand their relationships with modernity, represented by the dam and the city, and nature, represented by the river and "the woods," foreshadow the central encounter of the film between the city men and the country men. And this conflict is also concerned with *knowing*. When the salesman, Bobby, arrives with the men amongst the decaying log cabins and rusted cars that populate the obsolete Appalachian town, he surveys the junk and situates himself interestingly amid what he sees:

BOBBY: Christ, Drew! Drew, look at the junk. Look here. I think this is where everything finishes up. We just may be at the end of the line.
DREW: Hey, not so loud, Bobby. Let's not upset these people.
BOBBY: People? What people? This area may be evacuated already. [noticing a vehicle] That's my '51 Dodge! No, that's my car. That's my car. All my youth and passion spent in that back seat. It's all gone, you see. All gone. Rust and dust.

If Lewis is the least content with the trappings of consumer culture, and with his identity as a consumer, Bobby exhibits the strongest emotional connection to the world of things. He insures people's assets for a living, he defends the comforts they offer, and in two key scenes he reveals the extent to which modern comforts inhabit his lifeworld. After Lewis suggests that "there is something in the woods and the water that we have lost in the city," Bobby counters humorously: "I'll say one thing for 'the system.' 'The system' did produce the air mattress," a modern convenience that he also refers to as "the instant broad." Modern comforts are clearly feminine in the chauvinistic world of *Deliverance*, fetishized supplements that stand in for the elusive "something" that has been lost. It is not surprising, then, that in the homosocial (women have mere seconds of screen time, always indoors, in the tradition of the American western film, representing mothers, nurses, and "civilization"[27] itself) world of the film these technologies should also be linked with sexual gratification. Before Bobby crawls into his tent "to be mean to [his] air mattress," he lifts his shirt theatrically and crudely sprays his belly and crotch with mosquito repellent: "I do baptise thee now, in the name of modern technology," he proclaims, mimicking the inflection of a

[27] Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 134.

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southern preacher. Things, modern comforts, are mere devices, as well as the objects of deep semantic investment. For Bobby this investment has become a form of faith, which his ironic self-baptism makes clear. Like the air mattress, the '51 Dodge he spots upon their arrival is also simultaneously a "technical object" and a "domesticated" object of meaning and emotional investment,[28] which is once again coded sexually. If the "detached subject" in modernity "must be able to defer the consequences of action or reduce them in scope,"[29] then Bobby, the exultant consumer, has thus far been successful in deferring the consequences of his consumption, experiencing them minimally or not at all – only his corpulent body registers their impact. He has undergone the "autonomization of the subject," which has imbued him with a narrow understanding of the world centred around the accumulation of things, and armed him with a feeling of "indifference to the social and natural environment."[30] But his arrival in the Appalachian wasteland, "where everything finishes up," abruptly ends his isolation as a rational actor unaware of the reactions his actions might prompt. Bobby must confront "the end of the line," the conclusion of the capitalist narrative of accumulation, the terminus where the once meaningful, fetishized objects of consumer culture become waste.[31] Bobby's ambiguous grammar even links him directly with the vehicle: "It's all gone," he laments, "All gone," with the pronoun pointing both to the rusting car and to the "youth and passion" of his sexual encounters in its "back seat." Contrary to the suggestion that "Nature is the virile, erotic other in this film," juxtaposed with the "landscape of de-eroticization and de-valued objects" in which the car rusts,[32] I am suggesting that these de-valued technological objects have both technical properties and meaningful, experiential ones for the men, which we see in

[28] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, xi.

[29] Feenberg, "From Critical Theory of Technology," 20.

[30] Ibid., 19.

[31] Indeed, the film's anal fixation is firmly established by the rape scene, by the repeated references to "shit" that populate the screenplay, and by the depiction of phallic arrows piercing the bodies of three different men throughout the narrative. After Bobby is sodomized, Lewis shoots the first mountain man from behind and the camera lingers on the arrow that has penetrated his body, which bends lifelessly over a branch, an echo of Bobby's body which had been bent forcefully over a log during the rape. In the novel, Ed's "intestines contract" as he watches Bobby's assault, and the men then dig the grave for the mountain man with an old latrine shovel. The novel offers this depiction of a wasted landscape: "The ground came up easily, or what was on the ground. There was no earth; it was all leaves and rotten stuff. It had the smell of generations of mold. They might as well let the water in on it, I thought; this stuff is no good to anybody." See Dickey, *Deliverance* (novel), 114–17. The mountain men inhabit a world of "no earth" and "no good" in the novel, a Godless abyss modelled after Dante's *Inferno*. See Peggy Goodman Endel's reading of "the anality of evil" in "Dickey, Dante, and the Demonic: Reassessing *Deliverance*," *American Literature*, 60, 4 (1988), 611–24.

[32] Hartigan, "Reading Trash," 10.

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Bobby's eroticized memory of the car. The air mattress and the '51 Dodge belong as much "to the realm of meaning" as they do to the world of things, since "these two dimensions – device and meaning, technical and lifeworld practice – are inextricably intertwined."[33] A thing, therefore, can be experienced in various ways at once: the World Trade Center in New York City was an immense physical structure, for instance, a collection of technologies that enabled complex financial and communicational transactions to take place. The enduring impact of its destruction, however, hinges on its even greater symbolic significance as a site of emotional and ideological investment. The rhetorical power of *Deliverance*, one of the key cautionary spectacles of "economic guilt" from *its* era,[34] arises directly out of its ambivalent representation of the dam as a thing that has radically different meanings to different people. The car, once the site of erotic passion, is now stripped of its use value as a device, becoming "rust and dust," but not entirely of its meaning, which persists for Bobby alone, entangled in his memories of youth and passion.

Bobby's soliloquy is brought to a halt when a local man appears. Visibly nervous now, Bobby summons Lewis and meanders away from the confrontation. After the man agrees to sell them gasoline, Bobby works up the courage to approach him: "I love the way you wear that hat!" he remarks. The man responds tellingly with the words: "You don't *know* nothin'!" The camera frames Bobby, who is overweight, and the local man, who is emaciated, side by side with only a gas pump between them, creating a striking image of the ambivalence of modernity – one man reaps its benefits while the other is its outcast. If their bodies represent their different economic *relationships* with the world, their verbal exchange signals that they *know* the world differently as well. The lone object, the hat – like the dam or the car – can simultaneously be understood in very different ways. Moments later, when Drew and a seemingly inbred local boy realize that they know the same piece of music, "Duelling Banjos," and joyfully play it together in the film's second-most famous scene, it is really the very limits of their shared knowledge that are being exposed. The local man begins dancing a spastic jig along to the music, eliciting bewildered looks from our heroes. And when Drew excitedly extends his hand to the boy at the conclusion of the duet, the boy recoils and turns away coldly.

[33] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, xiii.

[34] For an analysis of "economic guilt" in horror films with rural American settings see Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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These initial confrontations set up the various quasi-biblical conflicts over forbidden knowledge, knowing, not knowing, and knowing too much that become increasingly tense as the narrative progresses: as we have seen, Lewis's knowledge of the woods is called into question; the men are chided as ignorant city folk for their failure to find their destination ("It's only the biggest fuckin' river in the state!" quips one local); the debates between the four city men are all struggles over valid and invalid knowledge, attempts to decide what they need to know to survive the perilous journey down the river; and knowing is at the centre of the conflict in the film's most infamous scene, which takes place after Ed and Bobby encounter a pair of mountain men on an isolated riverbank. The men are hideous, marked in class terms by "their rotting teeth and wild eyes" and by their thick drawls.[35] Startled by their appearance, Bobby blurts out, "How goes it?" to which one of the men snarls, "What in the *hell* do you think yer doin'?" In an attempt to alleviate the tension, Ed commits a major error, again related to knowing:

ED: Look, we don't want any trouble here. If you gentlemen have a still near here, that's fine with us.
BOBBY: Why sure. We'd never tell anybody where it is.
ED: You know something? You're right, we're lost. We don't know where in the hell we are.
TOOTHLESS MAN: A *still*?
BOBBY: Right, yeah, you're makin' whiskey up here. We'll buy some. We could use it.
MOUNTAIN MAN: Do you know what the *hell* you're talkin' about?
ED: We don't know what *you're* talking about.
MOUNTAIN MAN: You said something about makin' whiskey. Ain't that what you said?
ED: We don't know what you're doing, and we don't care. That's none of our business.
MOUNTAIN MAN: That's right, none of your goddamn business.

After Ed assumes that the mountain men might be illegally distilling whiskey, both he and Bobby attempt to make peace with them, reassuring them that they will keep their secret. But Ed's mobilization of this stereotype, that false form of knowledge that so often contaminates one's knowledge of the other, only agitates the mountain men. As our heroes attempt to extricate themselves from the confrontation, the shotgun-wielding Toothless Man speaks up: "Hold it," he says, "or I'll blow your guts out all over these woods." Ed and Bobby are led away from the riverbank and into the woods. As the Toothless Man binds Ed tightly by the neck to a tree, Bobby is made to strip.

[35] Lowenstein, 131.

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Once again, the camera tightly frames Ed's face to register his response (a response complicated by Jon Voight's stardom, achieved in the role of a bisexual hustler in Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*, 1969). Fascinated earlier by the precision of the banjo duet, Ed is conversely horrified by the random and chaotic attack he is made to witness. Bobby is chased about, humiliated, and finally sodomized by the Mountain Man, who repeatedly calls him a pig and makes him squeal. When the men prepare for a similar assault on Ed, commenting on his "pretty mouth," he alone notices through the trees that Lewis and Drew have arrived quietly on the riverbank and that Lewis has trained his bow and arrow on the man nearest to him. In an echo of an earlier deer hunting scene, in which Ed loses his nerve, misses a young buck, and cries out effeminately, Lewis must now choose his target carefully and not miss. After a tense moment of calculation, Lewis succeeds in striking Bobby's rapist in the back with an arrow which protrudes through his chest. The surviving man attempts to fire his shotgun but Ed pries the weapon from him, forcing the man to flee unarmed back into the dark woods from which he appeared.[36]

## VI. DREW



A tense negotiation ensues over how civilized, rational, modern men ought to cope with and master this moment of irrational barbarity. And Drew relinquishes his supporting role, showcasing his skills as an orator. The attack replaces the river as the object against which the men must test themselves. Since they have killed a man, "shot him in the back," Drew, "the sane one" who "sat on a jury once," advocates taking the body down to the town of Aintry and contacting the authorities. But he faces opposition from Lewis who argues passionately against "bringing the social world into the game of natural drama which is unfolding":[37] "Shit, all these people are related," he

[36] Interestingly, despite acquiring a shotgun, a weapon technologically superior to their bow and arrow, the men decide to bury the gun in the shallow grave with the first mountain man. Later in the action, they sink the second mountain man's shotgun. They choose to relinquish these weapons because the guns represent evidence of their crimes, a choice which I am reading as rational and calculating. However, the choice to defend themselves solely with the bow and arrow has multiple implications in a narrative that explores themes of innocence and regression. For an alternative reading of the choice see Armour, "*Deliverance*: Four Variations," 280–85.

[37] Hartigan, 11.

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argues, "I'll be damned if I'll come back and stand trial with this man's aunt and uncle, maybe his mama and his daddy sittin' in the jury box." As Hartigan suggests, the rural "white trash" family is particularly menacing to modern, middle-class American values: "Unlike the families of the city men, which are detachable portions of their identity, 'kin' is a tangle of relations, not clearly delineated or hierarchized. Such perverse relations negate the humanity of the dead cracker … Only if the perverse body is buried can the Nature/Culture divide be re-solidified."[38] The sexual deviance of the "crackers" is literalized by Bobby's rape. But it threatens in other ways as well, from the "genetic deficiencies" Bobby callously points out upon their arrival as he peers in a cabin window at a sickly local woman and a young child, to the "sticky, genetically intensified web made by *too much family*," which "breaks open the membrane of civilisation" and "entirely undermin[es] the law":[39]

DREW: Well, I am telling you, Lewis. I don't want any part of it.
LEWIS: Well, you are part of it!
DREW: It is a matter of the law!
LEWIS: The law? The law? What law? Where's the law, Drew?

If the law is compromised by the bundle of inbred relations, as Lewis suggests, then these perverse relations also allow the men to rationalize disobeying it themselves. The white trash family not only threatens middle-class values but appears to pervert them as well. Appearing disturbingly at ease, now that the game of survival he had predicted has begun, Lewis advocates burying the corpse, rather than becoming entangled in a trial by rural jury: "We get connected up with that body and the law," he exclaims, "this thing's gonna be hangin' over us the rest of our lives!" Drew's moral position is also challenged by Bobby. Fearing the publicization of his rape more than the consequences of burying the body, which reveals an unsettling but unsurprising side of his character, Bobby wants his rapist disposed of as well. Repressing this "unspeakable" moment of victimization becomes the group's difficult task for the remainder of the film, and Ed's vote becomes the deciding one. Throughout the action, Ed has exhibited a deep attraction to Lewis's world view and pursuits: he enjoys Lewis's reckless driving; he defends Lewis's knowledge of the woods against Bobby's criticism; and in a scene later echoed in Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Ed, emulating Lewis, attempts to kill a deer with an arrow. "It all comes down to you, Ed," Drew tells him, only to be disappointed when Ed, after some deliberation, quietly utters: "I'm with Lewis."

[38] Ibid., 11.

[39] Williams, "Blood Brothers," 17; emphasis original.

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Drew behaves differently from this moment onward, until his disappearance minutes later. And like the mute boy with whom he communicated musically, Drew speaks no more. Instead he begins hastily digging the mountain man's grave. In Dickey's novel, Ed narrates the scene this way:

> Drew and I got down and helped with our hands. Bobby stood looking off into the trees. Drew dug in, losing himself in a practical job, figuring the best way to do it. The sweat stood in the holes of his blocky, pitted face, and his black hair, solid with thickness and hair lotion, shone sideways, hanging over one ear.[40]

Drew's pitted face gazes into the pit he digs in a narcissistic moment of reflection. The grave he digs could be his own, whether or not he knows it, as his death moments later makes clear. Boorman's staging of this scene depicts Drew's digging as furious and erratic, an outlet for what might be growing madness. Drew's behaviour has also been read as his transformation "into the virtual embodiment of the hysterical woman,"[41] an echo of Bobby's feminization during the rape, which perhaps signals the necessity of his expulsion from this world of men. Vacantly staring ahead as the men flee the scene in their canoes, Drew ignores Ed's two requests that he wear his life jacket before his body jolts and topples awkwardly out of the canoe. Lewis yells repeatedly that "Drew's been shot," before the raging currents toss him and the others from their canoes, one of which is demolished against the rocks. Drew's meticulously ambiguous death, which angered critics,[42] continues to be a topic of debate: did Drew lose the will to live or was he shot? When Ed inspects Drew's body, which later surfaces, he concludes that a bullet had merely "grazed" him. The film's promotional posters and video jacket even play with this ambiguity: the tag line, "What did happen on the Cahulawassee River?" appears over an image of the mountain man's shotgun, which two disembodied hands aim at a distant canoe, emerging ominously from the river – an image not present in the film itself. The ambiguity of this scene and of its confused memory in the minds of viewers, to which the tagline refers, is embodied by "the contradiction at the heart of the word 'deliverance,'" which means both "liberation, release, rescue" and the "action of giving up; surrender."[43]

In a landscape violated by progress, Bobby, the bloated consumer, is the natural victim of the revenge rape according to the moral economy of the

[40] Dickey, *Deliverance* (novel), 117.
[41] Houck and Picart, "Opening the Text," 175.
[42] For examples of some reservations expressed by critics see S. Farber, "*Deliverance*, How it Delivers," *New York Times*, 20 Aug. 1972, and C. S. Samuels, "How Not to Film a Novel," *American Scholar*, 42, 1 (1972), 148–54.
[43] Williams, 17.

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film. But Drew, the sensitive believer in modernity's essential goodness – he believes country folk and city folk can play duets, if not live, together, and he believes that the benevolent "law" will surely redeem the men's actions as a "justifiable homicide" – is the natural casualty. If Lewis has internalized capitalist modernity's imperialist unconscious, and resolve to master nature, and Bobby's faith lies in its fetishized products and material comforts, then Drew represents and trusts its institutions. Although Drew, more than the others, acknowledges the humanity of the locals and shares a moment of joy with one of them, his blind faith in modern institutions nonetheless makes him the least likely of the men to question the values and practices of an institution like the power company, for whose profits the locals suffer. Lewis's repeated suggestion that "the system will fail," which culminates in his repudiation of the law, deeply disturbs Drew's delicate understanding of the world, leading to his deliverance from it – not his liberation, however, but his surrender. My reading of Drew's death as self-sacrifice, rather than murder, is evidenced by his identification with Christ throughout the film: the first words spoken to him are "Christ, Drew"; he attempts to befriend the mute, inbred boy as Jesus had befriended lepers and other social outcasts (and in the novel Drew cares for a son whose face is disfigured by birth defects); his mangled body surfaces from the river pinned against two large branches which form a cross behind him;[44] he is then eulogized as "the best of us" before Ed concludes the makeshift funeral by lowering his body slowly into the river. Drew, like Bobby before him, thus undergoes his own perverted baptism in the name of modern technology. And finally, Drew's death, following the men's sinful betrayal of his values, continues to invoke their guilt and haunts Ed in a recurring nightmare.

## VII. ED



Ed emerges in the film's final act as the "hero" none of the other men could be. Lewis's broken, protruding thighbone (Burt Reynolds, a former stuntman, actually fractured his tailbone filming the scene) silences him and completes his trajectory from the arrogant self-appointed leader of the group at the outset to its damaged, whimpering liability. Likewise,

[44] Houck and Picart, 178.

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Bobby's violated, unstable psyche and his size restrict him from executing the plan that he concocts with the others. The task falls to Ed, significantly, to carry out the film's most calculated murder. He must scale a cliff in order to track and kill the second mountain man who has been watching them from high above. Throughout the action, Ed has quietly embodied the deepest contradictions explored in the film: a genteel, pipe-smoking ad man obsessed with order and symmetry (the camera creeps in tight on his face to register his fascination as Drew and the boy with the banjo begin to create ordered melodies from a seemingly random collection of notes), he is nonetheless attracted to pursuits that violate these principles: joining Lewis on numerous weekend trips, hunting deer, shooting rapids, and even opting to bury the first mountain man rather than involve the law. Ed's deer hunting scene, in which he is attracted to and repulsed by killing, literalizes the contradiction he lives. And even though he cannot kill the deer initially, after Bobby's attack Ed reveals himself to be simultaneously the most modern and violent of the group.

Ed makes explicit connections between the knowledge demanded of him by his occupation and the knowledge he needs to survive the nightmare on the river and to escape its legal consequences. In the novel Ed "is drawn toward the possibilities of layout, design, and harmonious composition in the visual world, the power that correct design can exert over discordant materials."[45] And in the film, Ed's opening remarks and his godlike profession as a "designer" symbolize his complicity with the "correct design" currently being exerted by the power company over the "discordant materials" and peoples of the Cahulawassee river valley. His "aptitude for ordering sensory experience"[46] also connects him explicitly with the project of modernity, defined by Bauman:

> The modern mind was born together with the idea that *the world can be changed*. Modernity is about rejecting the world as it has been thus far … The modern way of being consists in compulsive, obsessive change: in the refutation of what "merely is" in the name of what could, and by the same token ought, to be put in its place.[47]

All of the men embody this world view in varying increments, but Ed personifies the most unconscious, fundamental assumptions of modernity. As a designer and a capitalist aesthete, he assumes that "the world can be changed." In fact, he can only envision the world as it could or ought to be. In a scene from the novel, which appeared in the second draft of the

[45] Michael Glenday, "*Deliverance* and the Aesthetics of Survival," *American Literature*, 56, 2 (1984), 149–61, 151.
[46] Ibid., 158.
[47] Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 23; emphasis in original.

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screenplay,[48] he studies a map of the Cahulawassee River and decides that it is "certainly not much from the standpoint of design."[49] Importantly, it is ambiguous whether Ed is referring to the map or to the natural landscape it signifies. But it is clear that the map disappoints and confuses his sensibility precisely because it represents a wilderness area as it *is*. As a man who can only see land and resources as they *could be*, once developed, he reflects on his confused reaction to the map's or the landscape's poor design, revealing a conflicted fascination with it: "[My] eye could not leave the whole; there was a harmony of some kind. Maybe, I thought, it's because this tries to show what *exists*."[50] The ambiguous "harmony" he detects troubles him because it never demands that he reshape and remake its chaotic elements in order to achieve some measure of symmetry or utility. In other words, nature left alone leaves his formidable talents untapped. Nature, unchallenged, renders him obsolete.

Ed also understands as a designer that history, like the decaying Appalachian town, is "a museum/graveyard of designs tried, used up, rejected and abandoned in the ongoing war of conquest and/or attrition waged against nature."[51] Perhaps his perspective on his own place in history explains why Ed defends the violent enframing and redesigning of nature that this "war" entails: as he experiences them, dams generate power and lakes for recreation. Power and leisure are benefits of modernity worth defending. The towns now deep beneath these lakes hardly register in his line of reasoning. By defending his lifestyle of consumption and leisure in the opening scene, Ed foreshadows the violent, calculated manner with which he must climactically defend it. Although Ed must use a bow and arrow to kill the second mountain man, which suggests his regression to a more primitive state, the violent plan he carries out is entirely rationalized, calculated, meticulously planned by the group, and not primal at all. Climbing through the night, he reaches a dizzying ledge and aims carefully at the unsuspecting mountain man before releasing an arrow. His laboured attempt at accuracy, at the climax of which he yells "release," sends him falling backwards onto one of his own arrows, which pierces his thigh from behind and creates a "sexual scenario" which is "far from subtle."[52] Ed, once impotent with the weapon, has redeemed his previous failure and realized his murderous potential. But he, too, is marked physically by the phallic arrow and contaminated psychologically by his ordeal with the mountain men. Moments later,

[48] Dickey and Boorman, *Deliverance: From the Novel by James Dickey*, 5.
[49] Dickey, *Deliverance* (novel), 11.
[50] Ibid., 11; italics mine.
[51] Bauman, 23.
[52] Williams, 18.

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as he is lowering the man's corpse down the cliff, the body begins sliding beyond Ed's control, making him lose his footing and fall toward the river far below. As this frightening scene plays out, we once again hear a banjo on the soundtrack. But the notes are far from harmonious, as they were during the opening duet that fascinated Ed. Instead, the strings are plucked violently and at random, producing the sound of an instrument being torn apart. The soundscape reminds us that the rational, calculated plan to dispose of the mountain man is never far from irrational chaos. As the corpse plunges into the river, an underwater shot shows Ed tumble into the water above it, only to become intimately entangled with the body's lifeless limbs which seem to embrace him lovingly. Ed struggles to free himself from its clutches for several terrifying moments. And even though he succeeds, and he and Bobby ultimately sink the corpse with a stone, Ed never feels entirely safe from its suffocating reach. The corpse's pale hand comes to symbolize the threat of vengeance represented by modernity's others; but understood as a depiction of Ed's unconscious in turmoil, the hand also represents the lurking, repressed violence residing in the modern self.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Previous readings of the film have suggested that the men regress to a primitive, animal-like state in order to justify burying the dead mountain man and hunting down and killing his friend. My suggestion has been that their rational, modern values in fact help them carry out these acts of violence, acts which are consistent with the institutionalized violence carried out by the power company and necessitated by voracious urban appetites for technological comforts. Like the arresting images of timed explosions, uprooted churches on trailers, and bulldozers mechanically exhuming bodies from graveyards, which populate this narrative of progress, the violence of which the men partake is uniquely modern. The same modern quest to enframe nature and control its irrational forces, which has allowed the development project to dam the river, also allows the men to rationalize the film's most calculated murder.

*Deliverance* highlights complicated connections between modernity and violence by literalizing the brutality that can reside, as a constant possibility, within the modern, technocratic narrative of progress. Repressing this violence, the film seems to suggest, is a central concern in modern life. The intermittent "surfacing" of the barbarous, however, ensures that the work of repression is never done. In the final scene, Ed awakens from a nightmare beside his wife (Belinda Beatty), haunted by guilt, which his dream work

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manifests as the lifeless hand reaching out from the stagnant lake that was supposed to inter the three corpses forever. But the water cannot contain this groping hand, which reaches for Ed and longs to entangle him once again. The film, too, is unwilling to contain Ed's trauma. Rather than fading to black to enclose its own narrative, the film's credits roll over Ed's sleepless, haunted face. Beaded with sweat, the face addresses us urgently as if to question where our allegiance lies and indeed whether we would have done things differently. These final domestic scenes in which Ed is comforted by his wife and child (Charley Boorman) may appear to offer a soothing and conventional conclusion. Their function, however, is neither comforting nor conclusive at all since they re-establish him, problematically, as one of modernity's beneficiaries, but one who now understands the price of his comfort. Ed's journey, like Marlow's river voyage in *Heart of Darkness*, has enlightened him. But this new knowledge only adds to his anguish and fails to resolve the film's class conflict or to restabilize any soothing notion of American masculinity, heroism, or selfhood. The knowledge he has gained through his exposure to modernity's others, and to his own brutal capabilities, forces him to recognize the interdependence between violence and comfort – increasingly palpable in the twenty-first century[53] – that characterizes modern life, and thus to live, in Conrad's famous estimation, "in the midst of the incomprehensible."[54]

[53] Christopher Dickey, for instance, compared his father's story to the current crisis of masculinity represented by the US-led invasion of Iraq, a country he suggests is akin to the river in *Deliverance*. See "War and Deliverance," *Newsweek*, 17 Oct. 2007, n.p.

[54] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 2000; first published 1899), 20.

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