

Rajko RADOVIĆ (Prague)

The Faculty of Media and Communications (FMK)

radovicr6878@gmail.com

ORCID number 0009-0008-3864-6604

THE OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE: TRACE, IMAGE AND APOCALYPSE IN MODERN CINEMA

This essay examines how desire and objects interact in modern cinema to produce what Gilles Deleuze calls cinematic singularity. I argue that this singularity emerges through the repetition of trace, image, and camera movement – elements that exceed established cinematic codes and resist the order of generality, resemblance, and quantification. Within this excess, modern cinema reveals obscure objects of desire that disturb narrative coherence and expose the instability of representation itself.

My argument unfolds through three case studies: Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), Jovan Jovanović's *Young and Healthy as a Rose* (1971), and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Each film stages a different moment in the transformation of the cinematic image. Antonioni's photographic investigation turns the trace into an unstable signifier, where visual evidence dissolves into uncertainty. Jovanović's Yugoslav countercultural experiment radicalizes the image as a site of ideological and libidinal excess. Coppola's war epic ultimately pushes the cinematic image toward apocalypse, where language itself begins to fracture under the pressure of historical violence. Across these films, the obscure objects of desire appear as returning signifiers of neurosis, fetishism, and psychic disturbance, bringing cinema close to what Julia Kristeva describes as the abject – "a flaw in Oedipus' impossible sovereignty, a flaw in his knowledge."

This epistemological rupture functions as a Lacanian *sinthome*: a point where subjectivity confronts its own otherness. The emergence of this cinematic singularity is crystallized in the iconic beach scene of *Apocalypse Now*, when Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore's celebrated "napalm" monologue transforms the language of military triumph into a strangely lyrical expression

of destruction. Here the breakdown of ideological discourse, reminiscent of Louis Althusser's notion of ideological apparatus, produces what Roland Barthes calls a "third meaning": an obtuse level of signification where language slips into a poetic register bordering on abjection.

Drawing on a transdisciplinary framework that includes philosophy (Baudrillard, Deleuze, Althusser), psychoanalysis (Lacan, Kristeva), semiotics (Eco, Saussure), political theory (Djilas, Debord), cultural studies (Vulović), quantum physics (Carroll), and classical film theory (Oudart), in this essay I explore how modern cinema stages the emergence of these singularities at the threshold between desire, image, and apocalypse.

Keywords: *singularity, sinthome, cinematic trace, third meaning, abjection, spectacle, simulation, ideological image*

Introduction – The Obscure Object of Desire

In this essay I argue that the relationship between desire and objects projected on the cinematic screen generates a new and unsettling singularity, what might be called a jettisoned object that escapes the order of generality and exceeds the symbolic rules governing narrative cinema. Appearing between the lines of the cinematic text, this object resists the codes of genre and the stabilizing structures of representation. It belongs to a zone of potentiality rather than meaning: a point where the image begins to detach itself from narrative logic and enters a field of excess.

Few films stage this emergence of the cinematic object more powerfully than Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). In the iconic closing sequence, the London photographer Thomas (David Hemmings) returns to Maryon Park – the site of a crime that may or may not have taken place. His walk through the deserted landscape is no longer the investigative routine typical of detective fiction. Rather, it resembles what Lacan describes as a *passage à l'acte*: a leap from interpretation into action, a moment when the subject abandons the symbolic framework that previously organized meaning. Thomas's attempt to recover the lost object of his desire, a photographic trace that might confirm the existence of a murder, opens what Julia Kristeva calls a "structure that is skewed, a topography of catastrophe" (Kristeva 1985: 9). Antonioni frames this movement visually. In a long establishing shot, the photographer approaches the precise location where he had earlier captured a seemingly romantic encounter between a younger woman and an older man in the park – an encounter that gradually reveals itself as part of a possible assassination. The path toward this site is framed by two trees forming a threshold,

a kind of gnostic gate through which the protagonist passes from the world of representation into a space where meaning begins to dissolve. Antonioni's cinema systematically undermines the conventions of the detective genre. The investigation does not clarify reality but instead produces uncertainty.

Here the film disrupts what Gilles Deleuze calls the regime of generality, which "belongs to the order of laws" – the symbolic order that organizes narrative causality (Deleuze 1994: 1). Thomas himself embodies this disruption. A fashion photographer who shows little interest in photography as an art form, he uses the stills camera as a vehicle of excess, a means of pushing beyond the limits of ordinary experience. Photography becomes a machine of *jouissance*, allowing him to enjoy what cannot otherwise be enjoyed. From the beginning of *Blow-Up*, Thomas is defined by a restless, detached gaze and a readiness to stray, drift and transgress boundaries. He first appears leaving a doss house – a British term for a cheap homeless shelter where he has been posing as a vagrant in order to photograph the authenticity of urban poverty. Yet the moment the scene ends he runs toward a sleek Rolls-Royce parked nearby, revealing the sudden return of his other identity: the celebrated fashion photographer of swinging London. Antonioni juxtaposes these worlds with ironic aloofness.

Soon afterward Thomas encounters a troupe of white-faced student mimes careening through the streets, staging a theatrical parody of youth revolt while collecting donations from stunned passers-by. Thomas casually contributes a banknote before driving away to organize his next fashion shoot. These sequences unfold against the backdrop of the post-war welfare state at the height of its apparent stability. Yet Antonioni's film already hints at fractures within this social order. As Guy Debord would later describe it, modern society increasingly organizes itself through fragmented images that recombine into a "pseudo-world" that can only be contemplated rather than lived (Debord 1994: 1).

In *Blow-Up*, the coexistence of poverty, spectacle, fashion, and youth rebellion produces precisely such a fragmented social field. Nowhere is this logic clearer than in the celebrated studio sequence with Veruschka, the German supermodel whose elongated body becomes the focal point of Thomas's photographic assault. As he shouts instructions – "Right... that's good...now the head... that's great, that's good... more of that...again... work... work... go on... (Antonioni, 1966: 0:07:49)" – the relentless snapping of the camera saturates the space with signs. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, the scene approaches a state of semiotic excess in which the world becomes completely coded and mapped, leaving little room for imagination (Baudrillard, 1981). Yet it is precisely this saturation of signs that produces a rupture. In a sudden gesture

Thomas kisses Veruschka on the ear, momentarily breaking the ritualized choreography of the fashion shoot. Desire interrupts the spectacle. Here repetition takes on the meaning Deleuze gives it: a movement directed toward what cannot be replicated (Deleuze, 1994).

What emerges from this scene is not simply rising erotic tension but a trace of something that escapes representation altogether. The image begins to reveal what Kristeva describes as the abject, something “quite close” yet impossible to assimilate, something that fascinates desire without allowing itself to be possessed- something that has: “only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva, 1982: 2). This elusive object propels Thomas toward Maryon Park, toward an accidental encounter with a romantic couple and into the labyrinth of photographic enlargements that follow.

As he magnifies fragments of the images he captured, blurred shapes gradually emerge: shadows suggesting a face, an indistinct body in the grass, the outline of a revolver hidden among the trees. What he encounters in these enlargements is not evidence, but what Roland Barthes calls a “third meaning”, an obtuse layer of signification that resists narrative closure (Barthes, 1977).

This third singularity, I argue, extends beyond *Blow-Up*. It reappears in two further films that form the core of this essay: Jovan Jovanović’s *Young and Healthy as a Rose* (1971) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In Jovanović’s Yugoslav countercultural experiment, the cinematic image becomes entangled in the ideological spectacle of late socialism, anticipating the fractures that would later erupt in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In Coppola’s war epic, the image moves beyond spectacle toward a form of political and aesthetic excess in which language itself begins to break down. The trajectory that emerges across these films can therefore be described as a movement from trace to spectacle to apocalypse. Each stage marks a transformation in the relationship between desire and the cinematic image, revealing how modern cinema increasingly confronts the limits of representation itself.

The Trace and the Crisis of the Image – Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*

Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966), inspired by Julio Cortázar’s short story and produced by Carlo Ponti for Warner Bros., appears at first glance to belong to the tradition of the detective thriller. Yet the central question of the genre – Who has done it? – is here displaced by a more fundamental epistemological inquiry: What can be known at all? It is this shift that elevates *Blow-Up* into a distinctly modernist, even proto-postmodern meditation on the limits of perception and the instability of truth.

From its opening sequence, Antonioni signals a world in which the symbolic order has already begun to erode. The first shot frames the skeletal tower block of the Economist Plaza near Piccadilly, rendered as an architectural husk, an emptied structure that evokes the collapse of what Lacan would call the Big Other. Shot from a low angle and bathed in a cold, flat light, the space appears abandoned, devoid of narrative anchoring. The silence that dominates the diegetic field is abruptly shattered by the intrusion of sound from *off*-screen: the mechanical growl of an engine and the cacophony of youthful voices.

An American military jeep – an anachronistic relic of wartime presence – bursts into the frame, carrying a troupe of white-faced mimes who spill into the urban space with chaotic, rowdy, youthful energy. This sudden rupture disrupts what Roland Barthes defines as *studium*: the culturally legible field of meaning, and introduces instead a series of visual and auditory shocks that function as *punctum*: details that wound perception without resolving into coherent signification (Barthes, 1980). The painted faces, top hats, flailing batons, open mouths, erratic gestures, and nonsensical cries produce a field of fragmented impressions, a spectacle that resists narrative integration. Antonioni's gesture is both aesthetic and political. In place of the stable background structures that classical cinema often relies upon – what Louis Althusser would identify as the ideological apparatus of the state – there is only emptiness, discontinuity, and noise (Althusser, 1971). The Economist Plaza is framed by Antonioni as a mock effigy installation – an early pop art graveyard for what Žižek would name global capitalism “with a human face” (Žižek, 2012).

The repetitive movement of the jeep across the plaza, captured from multiple angles, produces an effect that recalls Jean Baudrillard's description of late capitalist culture as a space haunted by the “phantom of value” (Baudrillard 1981: 70). Yet this repetition is not merely nihilistic. It generates what Gilles Deleuze calls “non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities,” events that cannot be reduced to the logic of representation (Deleuze, 1994: 1).

Crucially, language is absent. The lack of dialogue in these opening moments signals a breakdown in the symbolic order. The image begins to operate outside the structures that traditionally anchor meaning. What emerges instead is a field of drives, gestures, and visual intensities – what Julia Kristeva might describe as a movement toward the semiotic, where language yields to affect and perception.

This instability is further developed in the introduction of Thomas (David Hemmings), who emerges from a *doss house*, a shelter for the homeless. His disheveled appearance blurs the boundary between observer and participant, reinforcing the ambiguity of his identity. No words are exchanged; only

gestures mark his departure. Yet this scene is immediately disrupted by a cut that reveals his other identity: a successful fashion photographer who slips seamlessly into the circuits of London's cultural elite. Thomas embodies a form of subjectivity defined by oscillation rather than coherence. He moves between social scenes without fully belonging to any of them. When he encounters the troupe of mimes again and casually offers them money, the gesture appears both trivial and symptomatic. As Guy Debord suggests, modern society organizes itself through a "pseudo-world" of images, in which lived experience is replaced by representation (Debord, 1994). Thomas participates in this world, yet remains strangely detached from it.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the celebrated studio sequence with Veruschka. As Thomas directs the German super model – "Now the hand... again... work... work..." – the scene becomes saturated with signs. The repetitive snapping of the camera, the choreographed movements of the body against the body in the medium shots and confused glances charged with erotic desire in the close-ups, as well as the escalating intensity of the performance produce what Baudrillard would describe as a saturation of meaning (Baudrillard, 1981). Yet it is precisely at this point of maximum codification that a rupture occurs. Thomas suddenly kisses Veruschka on the ear, interrupting the ritualized flow of the shoot. Lust erupts within the spectacle. Here repetition assumes the function Deleuze assigns to it: a movement oriented toward what cannot be replicated (Deleuze, 1994). What emerges is not simply erotic tension but a trace of something that escapes representation. The image begins to approach what Kristeva calls the time of abjection, something which: "...is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity, and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (Kristeva, 1982: 9).

This elusive, jettisoned object propels Thomas toward Maryon Park and into the sequence that constitutes the epistemological core of the film.

In the darkroom, he enlarges fragments of the photographs he has taken. As the images are magnified, they dissolve into grain, blur, and abstraction. What initially appeared as evidence of an illicit tryst in the park becomes increasingly ambiguous: a shadow that might be a dead body, a shape that might be a shooting revolver, a trace that refuses to stabilize into meaning. At this point, the photographic image in *Blow-Up* begins to resemble not a stable representation but a field of fluctuating intensities. As the enlargements dissolve into grain, what appears is no longer an object but a vibration – an unstable configuration that emerges and disappears within the visual field. In this sense, the image can be thought, heuristically, alongside Sean Carroll's description of the physical world as constituted by fields whose vibrations register to us as particles (Carroll, 2012). What we perceive as a coherent object is, in fact,

only a momentary stabilization within a broader field of forces. Similarly, Antonioni's image does not reveal the object of desire; it produces fleeting singularities that oscillate between presence and absence.

The photographic trace thus ceases to function as evidence and becomes instead a site of emergence, where meaning flickers without ever fully materializing. In this process, the photographic image is transformed into what Roland Barthes calls a "third meaning" – an obtuse layer of signification that resists both denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1977). The image no longer confirms reality; it produces ambiguity. It becomes an open field of interpretation in Umberto Eco's sense of the "open work," inviting the spectator to complete its meaning while simultaneously withholding closure (Eco, 1989). Thomas himself becomes the performer of this openness. Like Eco's interpreter, he assembles fragments, constructs hypotheses, and projects meaning onto what remains fundamentally indeterminate. Yet the more he seeks to stabilize the image, the more it escapes him.

The object of his desire – the proof of a murder – reveals itself as what Lacan would call *objet petit a*: an impossible object that structures desire precisely through its absence (Lacan, 1976–77). Antonioni radicalizes this logic in the film's final movement. When Thomas returns to the park, the body has disappeared. The trace has vanished. What remains is only the memory of an image that may never have existed. The detective narrative collapses entirely.

This collapse is staged most explicitly in the final sequence, where the troupe of mimes first seen in the opening scene at the Economist Plaza reappears to perform a silent tennis match in Maryon Park. When Thomas retrieves the imaginary ball and throws it back into an equally imaginary play, he participates in a game of tennis governed by rules without substance, signifiers without referents. The gesture encapsulates the film's central insight: that reality itself has become inseparable from its representations.

In this sense, *Blow-Up* does not merely depict the crisis of the image, it enacts it. The photographic trace becomes a site of epistemological breakdown, where desire is no longer oriented toward knowledge but toward an absence that cannot be resolved. The obscure object of desire thus emerges as a void at the heart of the image. This void, however, does not remain confined to Antonioni's film. It reappears in different forms in the works that follow.

If *Blow-Up* reveals the instability of the trace, then the cinematic image in Jovan Jovanović's *Young and Healthy as a Rose* will become something else entirely: a site of ideological spectacle, where desire is no longer absent but overdetermined.

Spectacle and the Ideological Image – *Young and Healthy as a Rose*

If Antonioni's *Blow-Up* traces the instability of the image at the threshold between modernity and postmodernity, Jovan Jovanović's *Young and Healthy as a Rose* (1971) emerges as a fully postmodern work – one that no longer interrogates the image but immerses itself in its spectacular excess. Where Antonioni reveals the fragility of the photographic trace, Jovanović confronts us with an image already saturated by ideology, performance, and simulation.

The film's final sequence, staged atop the rooftop of Hotel Jugoslavi-ja, condenses this logic into a single, devastating gesture. Here spectacle and violence converge. The protagonist Stiv (Dragan Nikolić) – a petty Belgrade criminal whose nihilistic drift gradually mutates into political terrorism – reappears as a self-styled leader, gathering quasi hippy followers with the charisma of a pop-cultural messiah. His transformation is neither ideological nor revolutionary in any classical sense. Rather, it is performative: a gesture of visibility within a system that has already converted all social relations into images. In this sense, Stiv resembles a distorted, socialist-era echo of figures such as Charles Manson: not a political actor, but a producer of spectacle. His rebellion is not directed against power so much as it is absorbed by the very mechanisms of representation that sustain it. As Guy Debord famously observed, “the specialization of images of the world has culminated in a world of autonomized images, where even the deceivers are deceived” (Debord, 1994: 1).

Jovanović's film stages precisely this paradox. Attempting to smuggle a subversive cinematic language into the Yugoslav system, under the guise of documentary realism, he produces a work for Dunav Film that exposes the spectacle of socialism, only to be reabsorbed by it. The film's subsequent banning underscores this tension: the spectacle tolerates critique only insofar as it remains legible within its own terms.

The rooftop sequence intensifies this dynamic. In a breathless, hand-held tracking movement, the camera follows Stiv as he performs a ritualized choreography of violence: brandishing a revolver, firing bullets into the void, grinning toward the setting sun. The gesture is theatrical, excessive, and ultimately self-destructive. When his body is riddled with police bullets and falls into the river nearby, the scene reads not as tragedy but as culmination: the completion of a spectacle that consumes its own protagonist.

Central to this sequence is the recurring image of the revolver – a Colt, held by both UDBA, state agents and hippy terrorists alike. This object operates on multiple levels. On the one hand, it functions as a direct intertextual re-

ference to Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), where Jean-Paul Belmondo's Michel Poiccard similarly wields a gun as an extension of cinematic identity. On the other imaginary level, this gesture establishes a meta-cinematic continuity linking American gangster films, the French New Wave, and Yugoslav Black Wave cinema. Violence becomes stylized, performative, another gesture within a broader economy of signs.

Yet in Jovanović's film, this gesture undergoes a crucial transformation. What in Godard appears as playful mimicry becomes, here, an empty repetition. Baudrillard's notion of the "disappearance of meaning" becomes fully operative (Baudrillard, 1981: 136). The revolver is no longer a tool of narrative causality; it is a fetish object, circulating within a system where signs refer only to other signs. The act of violence no longer produces meaning – it only produces visibility. In Lacanian terms, the revolver functions as an *objet petit a*: a displaced object of desire that structures the subject's relation to lack (Lacan, 1976–77).

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection further complicates this dynamic. The weapon occupies a threshold between inside and outside, self and Other, law and transgression, an unstable border that is both violent and permeable (Kristeva, 1982). What Stiv seeks through this object is not power but intensity: a confrontation with the limits of the symbolic order. This same logic is already inscribed in the film's opening sequence and governs the rest of the film's power dynamics.

The title appears over stark black-and-white stills of Stiv wearing a Union Jack shirt, a Colt raised in his left hand and aligned with the film's title. The image operates as what Barthes would call punctum: a detail that wounds the image, disrupting its coherence (Barthes, 1980). The juxtaposition of Western iconography, socialist context, and violent gesture produces an immediate semiotic instability. This instability is reinforced by the film's use of sound. A gunshot is heard from *off*-screen, establishing an acoustic link between image and violence before narrative causality is established. The gesture is both playful and subversive. The handwritten inscription "YU" (for Yugoslavia), rendered in childlike script, further destabilizes the signifying system. As Ferdinand de Saussure reminds us, the sign always exceeds the control of both individual and social intention (Saussure, 1983). Here, that excess becomes explicitly political. Stiv himself emerges as a product of ideological hybridity. As Radina Vučetić has shown in her analysis of *Coca-Cola socialism*, Yugoslavia occupied a unique position within the Cold War: formally socialist, yet deeply permeated by Western cultural and economic influences (Vučetić, 2012).

Stiv embodies this contradiction. His gestures, clothing, and desires are shaped as much by American popular culture as by the socialist environment in which he lives. He is both participant in and victim of this hybrid structure. Yet his rebellion remains fundamentally trapped within the symbolic order he seeks to escape. His acts of transgression: repeated car thefts, casual murder of a young couple who tried to rob him, playful drug abuse in safe houses, and sexual excess with a carefree lesbian scenesters, do not transcend the system; they reproduce its logic in intensified form. The spectacle absorbs his transgression, converting it into another image among images.

This is most evident in the film's closing address to the camera. Breaking the fourth wall, Stiv delivers a nihilistic monologue: "Gangsters only die in gangster movies. In life it's the other way around. There is justice only in movies" (Jovanović, 1971: 1:11:39). This gesture echoes Godard, yet its tone is markedly different. Where Belmondo's address in a stolen American car retains a degree of ironic distance, Stiv's speech is already fully internalized within the logic of simulation. He does not expose the illusion – he inhabits it.

Here Jean-Pierre Oudart's concept of suture becomes crucial. Cinema, as Oudart argues, produces its subject through the very process of representation (Oudart, 1990). In Jovanović's film, this process is radicalized. The subject is no longer stabilized by the image; it is dissolved within it through ceaseless camera movement and blurring of the line between "being in character" and "being a character". Stiv this way becomes a signifying object, an effect of the cinematic apparatus rather than its origin.

This dissolution is inseparable from the broader ideological context. Milovan Djilas's analysis of the "new class" – the bureaucratic elite that emerged within socialist systems – provides a key framework. Djilas says: "Everything happened differently in the U.S.S.R. and other Communist countries from what the leaders-even such prominent ones as Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Bukharin-anticipated. They expected that the state would rapidly wither away, that democracy would be strengthened. The reverse happened" (Djilas, 1957: 37). He argues that one of the most consequential outcomes of this social reversal was that this new class, the ruling apparatchik nomenclature reproduces many of the structures of earlier ruling classes, while introducing new forms of ideological control.

In Jovanović's film, this control manifests as what might be called a simulacrum of political correctness: a system in which ideological conformity operates not through belief, but through performance. The visual field of the film reflects this contradiction. Monumental images of Tito dominate the urban landscape, functioning as official signifiers of socialist unity. Yet these images appear increasingly hollow, what Barthes would identify as puncta

that reveal the wound within the symbolic order (Barthes, 1980). At street level, Western consumer goods: cars, fashion, music, circulate freely, undermining the ideological coherence of the system. The result is a fragmented visual economy in which competing sign systems coexist without resolution.

Jovanović locates the crisis not only in the image but in language itself. Stiv's voice, frequently delivered as voice-over, functions as a phobic object in Kristeva's sense (Kristeva, 1982). As a misplaced metaphor, it is saturated with abjection, hovering at the edge of meaning without ever stabilizing. He speaks, yet never fully means what he says. Language becomes detached from intention, drifting toward nonsense or prolix excess. This breakdown of language corresponds to a broader transformation of desire.

In Lacanian terms, desire is structured by lack and mediated by the symbolic order. In *Young and Healthy as a Rose*, however, this mediation collapses. Desire is, in fact, exposed as fragile. It recedes into want and drives- the drives that become immediate, excessive, and ultimately self-destructive. Stiv's trajectory: from petty criminal and potential informant material for the state security UDBA to self-aggrandizing, quasi-revolutionary figure, does not resolve this lack but intensifies it. The result is a cinematic image that functions as spectacle in Debord's sense: a self-sustaining system of representation that replaces lived reality (Debord, 1994).

Yet Jovanović pushes beyond Debord. The spectacle here is not merely a surface phenomenon; it is saturated with abjection, violence, and excess. It anticipates what will later emerge in post-Yugoslav cinema as a full-blown aesthetics of collapse. In this sense, the obscure object of desire undergoes a transformation. In *Blow-Up*, it appeared as absence – a trace that resisted meaning. In *Young and Healthy as a Rose*, it becomes ideological illusion: a promise of freedom that cannot be realized within the existing symbolic framework.

Stiv desires a form of autonomy that the system cannot accommodate, yet his attempts to attain it only reproduce the system's logic in more extreme form. Thus the film stages a paradox at the heart of late socialism. Rebellion is not external to the system; it is one of its modes of operation. The spectacle thrives on transgression, incorporating it as another form of visibility. This dynamic prepares the ground for the final movement of this essay.

If Jovanović's film reveals the image as spectacle, saturated, excessive, and ideologically charged, then Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* will push this logic further still. There, the image will no longer merely represent or simulate reality; it will collapse into a state of apocalyptic intensity, where meaning itself dissolves under the pressure of sensory and political excess.

Apocalypse of the Image – Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

If Antonioni's *Blow-Up* reveals the instability of the image as trace, and Jovanović's *Young and Healthy as a Rose* exposes its ideological capture as spectacle, then Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) marks the moment at which the cinematic image exceeds both regimes and enters the domain of apocalyptic excess. Here, the image no longer signifies, nor merely seduces, it engulfs. Cinema ceases to represent war and instead becomes indistinguishable from it.

The film opens not with narrative orientation but with hallucination. A series of dissolving images: a jungle over which hover American helicopters, burning trees and drifting smoke, a pair of eyes emerging from flames, the rhythmic rotation of helicopter blades, forms a kaleidoscopic visual field in which perception itself appears unstable. This is not yet Deleuze's movement-image properly ordered into sensory-motor continuity, but an image in the process of disintegration: a fractured perceptual field in which time, memory, and sensation collapse into one another (Deleuze, 1986). The Vietnamese jungle, filmed on location in the Philippines, immediately loses geographical specificity and becomes instead a psychic landscape: the interior terrain of Captain Benjamin Willard's (Martin Sheen) own unstable frame of mind. Over these images, Jim Morrison's voice emerges, singing "This is the end / Beautiful friend / This is the end / My only friend..." (Coppola, 1979: 0:01:15). In Saussurean terms, the voice should function as an "instrument of thought," anchoring meaning. Coppola, however, deploys it as rupture (Saussure, 1983: 18). The soundtrack does not stabilize the image but fractures it further, producing a disjunction between sound and vision that destabilizes the diegetic field from the outset. With the crucial intervention of editor Walter Murch, sound becomes autonomous, no longer subordinate to narrative, but operating as an independent force.

This opening sequence establishes what might be called the film's governing logic: the breakdown of the sensory-motor schema. As Deleuze argues, classical cinema organizes perception, affection, and action into a coherent chain (Deleuze, 1986). In *Apocalypse Now*, this chain collapses. Perception no longer leads to action; instead, it circulates within a closed circuit of affect and hallucination. The result is a cinema of excess: what Deleuze would identify as a movement toward the time-image, but here pushed further into something apocalyptic; an image that can no longer sustain meaning. Coppola's montage: Willard's upside-down face, the burning jungle, the ceiling fan in Saigon hotel room rotating like helicopter blades, produces a composite psychic space in which inside and outside become indistinguishable.

This is precisely what Julia Kristeva describes as the terrain of abjection: a zone in which boundaries collapse, where the subject confronts what cannot be assimilated (Kristeva, 1982). Willard's face, suspended between wakefulness and delirium, becomes the site of this collapse. His consciousness is not a repository of memory but a battlefield – Vietnam internalized.

In this sense, Coppola radically departs from Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* on which it is based. Whereas Conrad's Marlow narrates a journey into the moral darkness of 19th century colonial capitalism, Coppola transforms that journey into an ontological descent that seems timeless. The "heart of darkness" is no longer a place or system but a condition of perception itself. Willard does not investigate the war; he is already consumed by it. Jean Baudrillard's provocative claim that *Apocalypse Now* "is a war" rather than a film becomes crucial here (Baudrillard, 1981: 59). For Baudrillard, Coppola reproduces the logic of American warfare: excess of means, technological overproduction, and the transformation of conflict into spectacle (Baudrillard, 1981). Yet the film goes further. It does not merely simulate war, it reveals war as simulation. The spectacle no longer masks reality; it becomes reality's only form.

This transformation is most evident in the film's treatment of language. Captain Willard's voice-over, shaped by Michael Herr's Vietnam reportage, initially functions within the conventions of film noir: a subjective guide through narrative space. Gradually, however, it detaches from its referential function. Language ceases to communicate and instead becomes incantatory, drifting toward poetic delirium. Statements such as "Saigon... shit. I'm only in Saigon!", "...Each time I look around the walls moved in a little tighter..." or "Everyone gets everything he wants – I wanted a mission. And for my sins they gave me one" (Coppola, 1979: 0:07:48) no longer organize meaning but register psychic disintegration.

The famous Nha Trang briefing scene exemplifies this shift. Gathered around a table, military officials present Willard with his mission: to "terminate with extreme prejudice" Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). The scene appears to restore order: hierarchy, protocol, rational discourse. Yet this order is hollow. The language of command is saturated with euphemism, its meaning deferred and displaced. Like the imaginary tennis match in *Blow-Up*, the exchange operates according to rules without substance. The "mission" is less an objective than a symbolic placeholder – an empty signifier sustaining the illusion of coherence. The introduction of Kurtz through recorded voice intensifies this collapse. Marlon Brando's disembodied speech: rambling, enigmatic, detached from context, functions as what Lacan would call the Real: an intrusion that resists symbolization. Kurtz is not simply a character but a limit point, a figure through whom language itself breaks down. This very rap-

ture, the border between the language and the Real is what becomes Captain Willard's own way out of the vicious circle of abjection – “the twisted braid of affects and thoughts.” As he accepts responsibility for the black op operation up the Nung river, the rogue Colonel's well-documented war crimes in the bush are transformed in Willard's mind eye into items of fascination, dark, elusive objects of desire. Kurtz's very insanity is what makes Willard want to terminate the Colonel with extreme prejudice on the one hand and to take his place in the jungle, to become him on the other.

This trajectory from being “at a loss for words” failure to communicate to casual madness with deadly consequences outbursts proliferation culminates in one of the film's most iconic sequences: Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore's napalm monologue. Standing amid destruction and carnage, Kilgore declares: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning... it smells like victory” (Coppola, 1979:0:49:22). Here, language reaches a point of absolute disjunction. The statement no longer refers to victory in any strategic or ideological sense; it transforms destruction into aesthetic experience. War is no longer fought for meaning, it is consumed as sensation. In this moment, the obscure object of desire reaches its final mutation. In *Blow-Up*, it appeared as absence; in Jovanović's film, as ideological illusion. In *Apocalypse Now*, it becomes pure annihilation. Desire no longer seeks an object as such, it seeks its own dissolution. What is desired is not victory, nor even power, but the intensity of destruction itself.

Coppola's film thus stages what might be called the apocalypse of the image. The cinematic apparatus, pushed to its limits, produces a form of hyperreality in which representation collapses into experience. The war is no longer something to be depicted; it is something to be generated, repeated, and consumed. In Baudrillardian terms, simulation no longer imitates reality, it replaces it (Baudrillard, 1981). At this point, the breakdown of the sensory-motor schema becomes total. Action no longer follows perception; instead, images proliferate without consequence, forming what Deleuze describes as a direct presentation of time. Yet even this formulation proves insufficient.

For *Apocalypse Now* does not simply present time, it engulfs the spectator in a continuous present of excess, an “apocalyptic now” in which past, present, and future collapse. The journey upriver, ostensibly a narrative progression toward Kurtz, becomes instead a descent into increasingly autonomous zones of spectacle: the helicopter assault, the Playboy show, the Do Lung Bridge. Each episode operates as a self-contained system, detached from causal continuity. War appears not as a coherent conflict but as a series of intensities, events without narrative necessity. In this sense, Coppola's film anticipates a new configuration of global conflict. The Vietnam War becomes a prototype for what will follow: forever wars waged as media events, sustain-

ned by spectacle, devoid of clear objectives, off ramp or endpoints. The image no longer documents history; it produces it.

Thus, *Apocalypse Now* marks the final stage in the trajectory traced by this essay. From trace (*Blow-Up*) to spectacle (*Young and Healthy as a Rose*) to apocalypse, the cinematic image undergoes a progressive detachment from meaning. What remains is not interpretation but immersion: a field of intensities in which desire, violence, and representation converge. The obscure object of desire, once elusive, then ideological, now dissolves entirely. In its place emerges a void, an excess without object, a desire without limit. This is the apocalypse of the image: not the end of cinema, but its transformation into something indistinguishable from the catastrophe it depicts.

Conclusion

In the opening sequence of Jovan Jovanović's *Young and Healthy as a Rose*, the protagonist Stiv drinks Coca-Cola while driving a stolen car. Both objects belong to the same ideological field: signs of consumption circulating within a system that promises freedom while reproducing control. Yet, as Stiv catches his own reflection in the rear-view mirror and spontaneously sings an improvised Coca-Cola jingle, this act becomes something else – a performative rupture. What appears as mimicry of capitalist advertising functions instead as a subversive gesture against the Yugoslav socialist ideological order. This sonic interruption within the diegetic field operates as a form of cinematic guerrilla warfare: a moment in which voice detaches from meaning and begins to act.

This destabilization of the sensory-motor schema extends a process already initiated in *Blow-Up*. There, the disappearance of the photographic trace, the inability to confirm the existence of a murder, culminates in the silent tennis match with an imaginary ball. When Thomas accepts the rules of this simulated game, he does not succumb to illusion but produces what Lacan would term a *sinthome*: a heretic mode of subjective stabilization in the absence of symbolic certainty. The camera, tracking the invisible trajectory of the non-existent ball, generates a paradoxical objectivity, an image that produces reality precisely through its absence. In this moment, cinema no longer records the world; it creates it.

Language, however, does not survive this transformation. The silent exchange between Thomas and the white-faced mimes marks a decisive break: the collapse of language as a stable system mediating between subject and object. Desire detaches from language and enters the domain of *jouissance*, an enjoyment of the impossible that exceeds signification. This movement

away from language intensifies in *Young and Healthy as a Rose*, where Stiv's speech becomes excessive, prolix performative, and ultimately indifferent to meaning as such. His voice-over no longer structures narrative; it generates spectacle. What matters is not what is said, but how it resonates within the field of appearances.

This betrayal of language as a coherent system finds its terminal form in *Apocalypse Now*. Captain Willard's voice-over begins within the conventions of film noir narration but gradually dissolves into fragmented, incantatory discourse. Language no longer communicates; it drifts. In the briefing scene with the three COMSEC intelligence representatives, military speech is saturated with euphemism, its silences more meaningful than its words. What appears as rational discourse is in fact a simulation of coherence masking the absence of any stable ideological ground. At this point, the breakdown of language corresponds to a broader disintegration of the social structure. In Althusserian terms, the relation between infrastructure and superstructure: between material conditions and ideological representation, loses its coherence. What emerges in its place is a field of improvisation, where signs circulate without fixed referents and meaning becomes contingent, unstable, and reversible.

This trajectory: from trace to spectacle to apocalypse, extends beyond the films themselves into the wider cinematic and historical field. *Taxi Driver* (1976) can be read as a crucial intermediary text. Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), a Vietnam veteran alienated within his own society, embodies the same crisis of language and perception. His neo-noir voice-over continues the fractured interiority of Willard, while his final act of orgiastic violence echoes Stiv's performative terrorism on the rooftop of hotel Jugoslavija. Here, the obscure object of desire reappears as nihilistic martyrdom: an attempt to reclaim meaning through destruction. In this expanded constellation, *Taxi Driver* functions both as aftermath and prelude—a hinge between the spectacle of Vietnam and the apocalyptic logic that follows.

If *Apocalypse Now* marks the implosion of ideological language within the war itself, Scorsese's film relocates that implosion within the metropolitan center. The war does not end; it returns in another form. What ultimately emerges across these films is not simply a crisis of representation but a transformation of the cinematic image itself. The obscure object of desire, initially structured by absence, then captured by ideology, finally dissolves into pure intensity. Desire no longer seeks an object; it persists as a force without direction, a drive sustained by its own excess.

In this sense, the trajectory traced in this essay culminates in a broader historical condition. The collapse of language, the proliferation of spectacle, and the emergence of simulation converge in what may be understood as the

final stage of our modernity: a world in which reality is no longer opposed to representation but indistinguishable from it. War, desire, and cinema enter the same circuit of production. The end of language, then, is not silence but orgiastic noise, an endless circulation of images, sounds, and signs without stable meaning. To inhabit this condition is not to witness the end of history, but to experience it as spectacle: an ongoing performance in which the distinction between event and image has disappeared.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London: New Left Books.
- Antonioni, M. (1966). *Blow-Up* [film], UK/Italy: Bridge Films.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana Press.
- Barthes, R. (1980). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, London: Vintage.
- Baudrillard, J. (1981). *Simulacres et Simulation*, Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- Carroll, S. (2012). *The Particle at the End of the Universe*, New York: Dutton.
- Coppola, F. F. (1979). *Apocalypse Now* [film], USA: Zoetrope Studios.
- Debord, G. (1994). *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Djilas, M. (1957). *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, New York: Praeger.
- Eco, U. (1989). *The Open Work*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jovanović, J. (1971). *Young and Healthy as a Rose* [film], Yugoslavia: Duvan Film.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1976–77). *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome (1975–1976)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, Paris: Ornicar.
- Oudart, J.-P. (1990). ‘1969–1972: The Politics of Representation’, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 3.
- Saussure, F. de (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*, London: Duckworth.
- Vučetić, R. (2012). *Koka-Kola socijalizam*, Belgrade: Službeni Glasnik.
- Žižek, S. (2012). *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso.

MRAČNI PREDMET ŽELJE: TRAG, SLIKA I APOKALIPSA U MODERNOM FILMU

Ovaj rad ispituje na koji način želja i objekti međusobno djeluju u modernom filmu kako bi proizveli ono što Gilles Deleuze naziva kinematografskom singularnošću. Zastupam stav da se ova singularnost javlja kroz ponavljanje traga, slike i pokreta kamere – elemenata koji nadilaze ustaljene filmske kodove i opiru se poretku opštosti, sličnosti i kvantifikacije. Unutar toga viška, moderni film otkriva mračne predmete želje koji narušavaju narativnu koherenciju i razotkrivaju nestabilnost same reprezentacije.

Moja argumentacija razvija se kroz tri studije slučaja: film *Blow-Up* (1966) Michelangela Antonionia, film *Mlad i zdrav kao ruža* (1971) Jovana Jovanovića i film *Apokalipsa sada* (1979) Francisa Forda Coppole. Svaki od ovih filmova označava poseban trenutak u transformaciji filmske slike. Antonionijeva fotografska istraga pretvara trag u nestabilan označitelj, đe se vizuelni dokaz rastvara u neizvjesnosti. Jovanovićevo jugoslovensko kontrakulturno ostvarenje radikalizuje sliku kao mjesto ideološkog i libidinalnog viška. Kopolin ratni ep na kraju potiskuje filmsku sliku prema apokalipsi, đe se i sam jezik počinje raspadati pod pritiskom historijskog nasilja. Kroz ove filmove, mračni predmeti želje pojavljuju se kao povratni označitelji neuroze, fetišizma i psihičkog poremećaja, približavajući film onome što Julia Kristeva opisuje kao „pukotinu u nemogućoj suverenosti Edipa, pukotinu u njegovom znanju“.

Ova epistemološka pukotina funkcionise kao lakanovski *nedostižni predmet koji održava želju*: tačka u kojoj se subjektivnost suočava sa sopstvenom drugošću. Pojava ove kinematografske singularnosti kristališe se u antologijskoj sceni na plaži u filmu *Apokalipsa sada*, kada monolog potpukovnika Kilgora o „napalm“ preobražava jezik vojne pobjede u neobično lirsku artikulaciju destrukcije. Ovđe raspad ideološkog diskursa, nalik pojmu ideoloških aparata kod Louisa Althussera, proizvodi ono što Roland Barthes naziva „trećim značenjem“: tup nivo označavanja na kojem jezik klizi u poetski registar na granici zazornog.

Polazeći od transdisciplinarnog okvira koji obuhvata filozofiju (Jean Baudrillard, Deleuze, Althusser), psihoanalizu (Jacques Lacan, Kristeva), semiotiku (Umberto Eco, Ferdinand de Saussure), političku teoriju (Milovan Đilas, Guy Debord), studije kulture (Vulović), kvantnu fiziku (Carroll) i klasičnu teoriju filma (Oudart), u ovom radu istražujem kako moderni film oblikuje pojavu ovih singularnosti na pragu između želje, slike i apokalipse.

Ključne riječi: *singularnost, sinthome, filmski trag, treće značenje, zazorno, spektakl, simulacija, ideološka slika*