

VALKYRIES OVER IRAQ

The trouble with war movies

By *Lawrence Weschler*



Early in 2003, a little more than ten years after the conclusion of the First Gulf War—which is to say the short, fast, clean, clear, and ever so painlessly triumphalist one—and on the very brink of what was rapidly seeming the inevitable launch of its far more complicated sequel, Anthony Swofford, a Marine sniper veteran of that first conflict, published a powerfully bleak memoir of his experiences there in the Kuwaiti amphitheater back in the early nineties, a bitterly cautionary screed, utterly pithed of illusion or easy consolations. Of all the revelations in Swofford's brisk chronicle, one of the most startling occurred near the book's very outset, as he described how Marines on the verge of being sent into battle goosed themselves into a blissed-out state of readiness by screening videos of movies depicting earlier wars, and in particular battle scenes from several of the bleakest Vietnam movies of all—

some of the most thoroughly illusion- and consolation-pithed films ever made—scenes, for example, like Robert Duvall's celebrated and notoriously blood-drenched Valkyrie helicopter raid in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

"There is talk," Swofford noted, "that many Vietnam films are antiwar, that the message is that war is inhumane. . . . But actually, Vietnam films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended." Swofford went on to allow as how Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan might well watch such films "and weep and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base . . . and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine

Lawrence Weschler, the director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University, is the author of many books, including Vermeer in Bosnia and the forthcoming Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences. His last article for Harper's Magazine, "Vanishing Point," appeared in the June 2005 issue.

Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn," Swofford went on, starkly. "Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not."

"The supposedly antiwar films have failed," Swofford concluded, a few paragraphs later, characterizing his euphoric state that distant afternoon. "As a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War, I want ammunition and alcohol

and dope, I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers."

One might have thought that such a bald appraisal would have given a new generation of filmmakers pause: maybe

trying to set such an account as Swofford's to film might not be a good idea after all, especially in the midst of a new war, with its fresh cadre of young men and women likewise being prepped for battle; maybe the viscerally immediate (*mediumless*) medium of cinema is simply incapable of projecting such measured and tentative reconsiderations.

And yet—such cautionary warnings be damned—a new team of filmmakers has taken on precisely this challenge. As that then-impending new war became fully engaged, producers Douglas Wick (*Gladiator*) and Lucy Fisher commissioned Vietnam-vet screenwriter Bill Broyles Jr. (*Apollo 13*, *Cast Away*, etc.) and English stage director Sam Mendes (*American Beauty* and *Road to Perdition*) to attempt to transfer Swofford's deeply distressing vision to the screen. With filming already complete and postproduction well under way (aiming for a November 4 release), the team has chosen to confront the challenge head-on, positioning that scene of battle-bound young Marines goaded into a lusty frenzy by a screening of that Valkyrie helicopter raid right near the beginning of the film as in some ways its central fulcrum, the very hinge of their entire new effort. And the result is indeed one of the most deeply affecting and disconcerting scenes in recent film history, thanks in no small part to the lavish ministrations of the film's editor, the legendary Walter Murch (*The Conversation*, *The Godfather* movies, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The English Patient*, etc., etc.),

who in this context has himself been having to harrow the distinctly unsettling task of revisiting and revisioning a scene he labored over for months almost thirty years ago as a crucial member of the original *Apocalypse Now* team, this time, alas, in an entirely new and even more disturbing light.

"At times I get to feeling like I'm inside my own Escher drawing," Murch admitted to me one evening. One hand, as it were, drawing the other into being: his past decisions shaping his current ones, and vice versa.

I was somewhat sympathetic to Murch's plight. After all, I was reporting for a magazine that had itself run an excerpt from Swofford's book during the run-up to the current war in the hope that it might help people come to their senses (a gambit that hadn't ended up proving all that effective either). At any rate, I'd begun dropping in on Murch at the film's postproduction studios in Manhattan's West Village (conveniently located roughly halfway between his own usual northern California haunts and those of Mendes in London). Tall, slim, hunched, unflappable (as if Zen centered), Murch would preside over his computerized flatbed, riffling through the original sequence from *Apocalypse Now*, looped onto one of the little monitors above, and then Mendes's rich trove of reaction shots, looped onto another monitor, meticulously interleaving the two for eventual projection onto the larger plasma screen over to the side.

The original scene: Duvall, playing Colonel Bill Kilgore, darling of the First Air Cavalry, preternaturally dapper, gung-ho, buff, completely uninterested in his new assignment (to deliver the Navy speedboat ferrying Martin Sheen's Willard character to the VC-infested mouth of the river they in turn would presently be needing to ascend as part of their Conradesque mission)—completely uninterested, that is, until he finds out that Sheen's team includes a spacey young Navy seaman who just happens to be a southern Californian surfing phenom, and that the delta beach in question, furthermore, just happens to sport the cleanest breaking waves up or down the entire Vietnamese coast. Kilgore is a true aficionado, and, as he memorably shoots back, self-evidently, when one of his junior officers counsels against an assault on such a well-defended Viet Cong stronghold, Why should they care about any VC defenders? "*Charlie don't surf.*" The next morning, his fleet of choppers idling at the ready, Kilgore has one of his boys let rip with the traditional bugle charge from every cavalry western you have ever seen. The helicopters peel off, thrillingly, and a few miles out from the village, Kilgore orders another of his men to engage the psy-ops loudspeakers, from out of which will soon come welling Wagner's "Ride of the

MAYBE TRYING TO SET SUCH AN ACCOUNT AS SWOFFORD'S TO FILM IS NOT A GOOD IDEA, ESPECIALLY IN THE MIDST OF A NEW WAR

Valkyries." "Scares the hell out of the slopes," Kilgore shouts out, by way of explanation, to his new surfing buddy. "My boys love it."

And how could they not? The music swells with the throbbing menace of propulsive inevitability. Suddenly, though, the Wagnerian soundtrack cuts out, and we are in a calm, almost pastoral, seaside village, peasants and teachers and their school charges padding about, intent on their various morning rituals, when VC guards come barreling into the village's central square, raising an urgent alarm. Everyone tries to scatter, as back to the fast-scudding chopper fleet we go, the Valkyrie theme in full lusty throttle, rockets opening out as the village comes into view over the horizon, machine guns flaring—all hell breaking loose. Carnage and mayhem, the scene goes on for what seems like ever, the VC and their peasant hosts suffering relentless casualties, as presently do some of Kilgore's men as well ("Fuck-ing savages," mutters Kilgore, surveying the scene from above, outraged at the gall of an enemy that deigns to oppose him). Talk about horror: in Conradian terms, this is the horror before *The Horror*—and Coppola and Murch are completely unflinching in their gaze.

Meanwhile, over on the other monitor, Murch samples some of Mendes's no less unflinching reaction footage, and if anything it is more horrifying yet. Bush père has just announced that Hussein's invasion of Kuwait will not be allowed to stand, and the Marines screening the Valkyrie scene there in their base auditorium (scores of extras, alongside Jake Gyllenhaal in the role of Swofford) are in a veritable paroxysm of ecstasy. It's like a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: they know every line, they mime every gesture (one grinning grunt, for example, taps a box of Hot Tamales against his shaven skull as, up on the screen, an airborne soldier taps a magazine of fresh ammo against his helmet), they scream out encouragement ("El Niño!" one of the boys cries out disconcertingly as a Vietnamese toddler momentarily hesitates in the midst of his class's hurried evacuation), they marvel at the technique (hand-banking along with the swerving Hueys) and exult at the exploding bodies, they soar with the swelling music (psy-ops, indeed—though, one is given to wonder, on just whom is it intended to ops?)—ecstatically they imbibe the smell of napalm in the morning and yes, it does, *it does*: it smells like . . . Victory.

And patiently, meticulously, Murch keeps interleaving the scenes. "It's probably best that I'm the one doing this," he avers one evening. "If it weren't me, some other editor would either be overly protective of the original—wary of breaking any of the precious china—or else just treating it all like raw material." Every transition evokes a rush of memory. For instance, that sudden cut

to the village, the music momentarily falling away: "Originally," Murch recalls, "Francis wanted to have the tape in the copter-borne player simply snap, the spool flailing spasmodically as the music went suddenly silent and the soldiers rushed frantically to repair the damage. I pleaded with him not to do that, it felt too clunkily contrived, and we went round and round ourselves with that one—but I could see his point, he was dead right in his basic intuition, and eventually we were able to come up with this alternative momentary change of focus and shift in sound density." Now, though, in the Mendes/Murch version, the music goes silent, and, uncannily, the auditoriumful of Marines simply takes up the slack, chanting along in the place of the momentarily absent melody. And as a vertiginous member of the current audience, in 2005, you don't know whether to be roused or appalled: in fact, you are both at once (and both at *each other*).

"The essential armature of that original scene," Murch recalled for me another evening, "that combination of the surfing mania and the Wagner, came directly out of John Milius's script, though there it was only a few pages at most, and Francis elaborated it all into that vast extended battle sequence, largely by incorporating the stories he was hearing out there on the set in the Philippines." Murch went quiet for a moment, rejiggering the cut between two of the takes he'd just been studying, forward and back. "It's a funny thing about Francis and Sam," he resumed. "Both of them were thirty-nine at the time they were shooting their respective films, films that in both cases were attempting to come to terms with military actions ten years prior that were only just then beginning to emerge, in part thanks to the films themselves, from an extended period of public occlusion.

"And there are other odd funny coincidences. For example, back in the late seventies, I was responsible for the sound design on the Valkyrie scene, and for months I'd been using the Georg Solti version with the Vienna Philharmonic. We were just about to lock on the sequence when



somebody had the sense to ask whether anybody'd secured permission to use that particular version, and maybe because the whole editing process had been a bit of a slapdash madhouse, in fact we hadn't, nobody had bothered, and presently it became apparent that Decca Europe had no intention of granting permission for its deployment in such a potentially controversial context. Disaster. We rushed over to Tower Records and brought back nineteen separate versions, only one of which remotely tracked with the rhythms of the editing we had done with the visuals: Leinsdorf, with the L.A. Philharmonic. But after we feathered Leinsdorf's version in and projected the results, it too turned out to be all wrong, not

so much because of the meter as because of the coloration: Leinsdorf emphasized the strings whereas Solti had brought the brass to the fore, and the scene really cried out for that acidic brass. So eventually Francis himself flew out to meet with Solti, and Solti said, 'Of course, Dear Boy, why didn't you ask me in the first place?' He ordered Decca to release the rights, only this all happened so late in the process that we weren't able to make use of the master tapes, we had to lift the music off a disc, which, actually, I suppose, is appropriate, since Kilgore probably did the same.

"But, as I say, funny coincidences: Because initially Francis was refusing the *Jarhead* team the right to use any footage from out of *Apocalypse Now*—he apparently wasn't pleased at the prospect of his complex film being reduced so narrowly to the aspect of its use as military pornography—and in the end, Sam had to plead with him personally to secure his tentative approval for use of the Valkyrie sequence. Though Francis still retains the right to refuse its use in the end, which would be a real disaster." Murch winced briefly, before resuming his customary Zen calm: "I expect it will be okay."

"**F**ilm is such a curious medium," Murch commented another afternoon, leaning with his long legs spread out from his high chair, his

back to the digital flatbed console. "The central dilemma of film compared to all other narrative media is that it's literal, in that what you see is what was literally there, and yet we as filmmakers in processing the narrative have to create a spaciousness, a sketchy ambiguity, that allows the audience themselves to piece it all together and make it powerfully their own." He paused for a moment. "The danger of a well-made bad movie, in this sense, is that it crushes the imagination of the audience."

He was tightening that scene of the Marines ecstatic before the Valkyries yet further (four and a half minutes of *Apocalypse Now* time would eventually get compressed to just over one and a half minutes in *Jarhead*), and he now recalled how "Ride of the Valkyries" had played a key role at the very outset of film history, that at the climax of one of the first feature films ever made—the execrably racist and phenomenally successful 1915 paean to the Reconstructionist South, *The Birth of a Nation*—D. W. Griffith had directed the orchestras accompanying his film to play Wagner's rousing anthem as backdrop to his depiction of the galloping Klan raids on those uppity Negroes and their carpetbagger allies (a precedent, Murch assured me, of which he and Coppola and Milius, all good film students out of UCLA and USC, would certainly have been aware as they contrived the Duvall scene, with its sly replacement of one set of Colored People by another). That in turn got him to talking about the sheer marvel of the development in a medium that is less than a hundred years old. "How did those guys do it back then, with their ridiculously limited resources—or even us, with our comparatively better developed array. At least now we have computers. I mean, right in the middle of it, you can lose sight of the marvel of it all, how a couple hundred people can peel off for a year and emerge on the far side with this miraculously involving and coherent thing, a two-hour movie. I imagine a hundred years from now, people will look back on these things and regard them the way we marvel at Gothic cathedrals, Chartres and the like, each more marvelous than the one before, and yet how could they have done it, in their case with nothing more than human muscle and, literally, horsepower?" (It occurred to me in this context, reversing the terms of Murch's analogy, that the cathedrals themselves had been built to awe-strike the masses, that they were in a sense the *Apocalypse Now*s of their day, and that even as they sought to bring people closer to the god of love, they'd also, quite explicitly and effectively, served as recruitment devices for wars of inquisitorial carnage. For that matter, cathedrals, with their hidden organist and total-work-of-god *Weltanschauung*, were Wagnerian projects in their own right—or else maybe Wagner was



simply trying to tap back into their originary power in a subsequent, far less godly age.)

A few moments later, Murch descended (or should I say ascended?) an octave to his theory of the Three Fathers (for a richer elaboration of which, see the writer Michael Ondaatje's book-length interview with Murch, *The Conversations*), his own idiosyncratic genealogy of film, the notion that cinema rises at the intersection of Edison, Flaubert, and Beethoven. Edison, of course, standing in for all the innovations on the technical side; Flaubert, for the upsurge of realism (and specifically "closely observed realism," the way the French master could spend a whole page evoking how light and sound fell across an empty room, only in order to get at something far grander); and then Beethoven, with his expansion and exploitation of the idea of dynamics (the notion that "by aggressively expanding, contracting and transforming the rhythmic and orchestral structure of music, you could create unprecedented emotional resonance and power"). All of it leading to film, a technology ideally suited to the dynamic representation of closely observed reality.

Anyway, so somewhere in there I spent a weekend watching the original *Apocalypse Now* again and again, gnawing at this problem of whether it's even possible to imagine creating an antiwar film, or whether any depiction of war in film necessarily lends itself to military-pornographic exploitation.

I should perhaps note here that I'd been one of those who'd resisted the blandishments of the film when it first came out, in 1979—or rather, maybe the claims made on behalf of it and Michael Cimino's virtually simultaneous, equally ambitious, and similarly touted *Deer Hunter*. There was a lot of talk at the time about how these films were at last going to confront the moral depravity of the Vietnam War. "It was my thought," Coppola had said, "that if the American audience could look at the heart of what Vietnam was really like—what it looked like and felt like—then they would be only one small step away from putting it behind them." There was something strange in the air, this sense that we were somehow collectively going to be able to get Vietnam behind us by merely going to see *Apocalypse Now*, or, even more tenuously, by belonging to a country in which such a film could be created (even, or maybe especially, in the face of the government's opposition). What exactly was it that we seemed to be hoping that Coppola could do for us? There was moral hubris in Coppola's aspiration to single-handedly confront the Vietnam experience with such ferocious lucidity that he might wrest penance for the entire country in the process. And there was moral vacuousness

in our secret yearning that he'd be able to do so.

In the event, furthermore, there always seemed to me a flaw at the heart of both Cimino's and Coppola's efforts. I mean, it seemed to me kind of important to note that, in the case of the former, there were actually no recorded instances of Viet Cong or any Vietnamese engaging in Russian roulette human cockfights—or, in the case of the latter, of bands of Montagnard tribesmen, dazed by suffering, lining up behind a demented Special Forces officer, elevating him to godhood, and then following him over the precipice into orgiastic violence and debauchery from which, unable to rescue themselves, they had to be delivered by the arrival of another, albeit differently conflicted,

white man. If you complained along these lines at the time, as I remember doing to a friend of mine, you were likely to be told that no, no, you didn't understand, Vietnam was merely *the launching-off point*, that Cimino and Coppola were after *something much bigger* than Vietnam—the taproots of masculinity, the abyss of existential dread, the lure of violence, etc., etc.—ALL THE BIG THEMES—and presently names like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and of course Conrad (or in the case of Cimino, Hemingway) would start getting tossed around. And I just remember thinking, But wait, there is nothing bigger than Vietnam. Vietnam, and what we did there, is as big as we are ever going to get in our generation. Vietnam was all the theme a director could possibly hope to encompass. And there was something fundamentally flawed in a response that used it as a launching-off point for larger significations. (Wasn't that, after all, the origin of the Vietnam disaster in the first place? For Johnson and Rostow and Nixon, Vietnam had never been just about Vietnam either. It was always about Something Much Bigger. God save those poor souls, I remember thinking, from Americans tracking Big Themes.)

Having said that, even then I could acknowledge the evident power, the fierce integrity, and even the ferocious lucidity of much of the filmmaking in *Apocalypse Now*, especially across the first half of the picture—in particular the Valkyrie scene and, even more so, the sequence detailing the catastrophically botched meeting (a mini My Lai) of the Navy speedboat with that peasant sampan on the river. (It turns out, incidentally, that the latter scene was never in the original script, and that it got conceived and inserted only as the film was being shot, and, according to Coppola himself, at the specific urging of Walter Murch.)

THERE WAS MORAL VACUOUSNESS
IN OUR SECRET YEARNING THAT
COPPOLA COULD WREST PENANCE
FOR THE ENTIRE COUNTRY

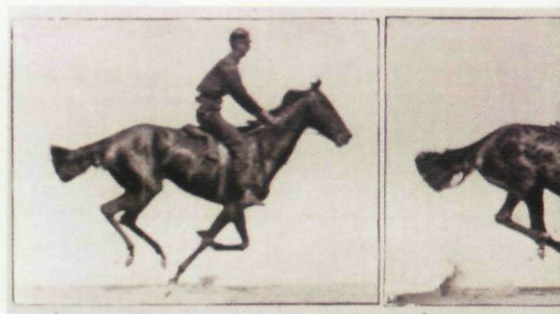
And one's admiration for the film—over and beyond the Big Theme terms its admirers set for it when it first came out—only increases with time, or so I found myself feeling, watching it again and again that weekend.

And damn, *but damn*: that Valkyrie scene.

Kilgore's boy raises the bugle to his lips and lets rip with that cavalry charge, and I feel myself falling through a trapdoor of history, into, I suppose, an alternate genealogy . . .

The year being 1876, back in the days when cavalries still charged out *on horseback* . . .

July: Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer—preternaturally dapper, gung-ho, buff: oblivious—leads several mounted battalions of the Seventh Cavalry into wretched debacle at the Little Bighorn.



August: In Bayreuth, Richard Wagner inaugurates his stupendous Festspielhaus with the world premiere of his full Ring cycle, the way he has always intended it be performed, with armor-plated, horse-borne Valkyries striding powerfully onto the stage at the opening of the third act of the second play, a perfect manifestation of the Master's doctrine of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the all-around, all-convergent happening, with all the arts (music, stagecraft, painting, literature) combined (none claiming precedence over the others—in fact, as he specifically stipulates, with the orchestra removed from its traditional position and hidden away down below, such that its sounds will seem to be rising from all over) in order to lavish the audience in a veritable debauch of sensory experience.

That same year, railroad tycoon Leland Stanford purchases an estate in Palo Alto and, having done perhaps more than anyone else to render horses obsolete as transportation, turns to raising them for sport, having enlisted the photographer Eadweard Muybridge in a novel effort to capture their stampeding gait in the fullness of its being. Within a couple of years, Muybridge will do just that through his innovation of animal-motion studies, for all intents and purposes inventing cinema along the way.

Toward the end of that same year, the United States will see its most tightly contested presidential election to date. Samuel Tilden will actually win the popular tally and come within a single electoral vote of claiming the prize, only to see his mandate stolen by Rutherford B. Hayes, who triumphs by promising the Southern states that he will withdraw the federal army, thereby achieving the Klan dream of ending Reconstruction, an outcome immortalized not quite forty years later . . .

. . . as *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's own lavish *Gesamtkunstwerk*, featuring, as we have seen, at its climactic moment, the Klan riding on horseback to the rescue of embattled Southern white purity to the rousing strains of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyrie" . . .

. . . a theme taken up once more twenty-five years after that, back again in Germany, in countless Nazi

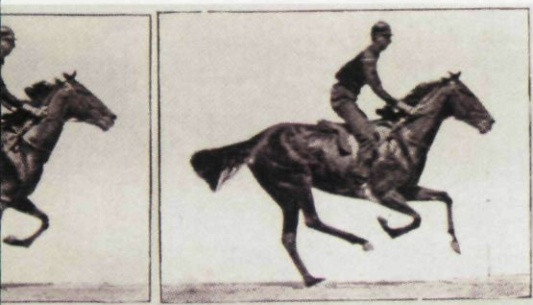
propaganda newsreels—the *Luftwaffe* in tight formation raining righteous terror down upon all the opponents of Aryan purity—thereby bearing out Theodor Adorno, who, as early as 1937, had been decrying how in "Wagner's case what predominates is already the totalitarian and seigneurial aspect of atomization; that devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality, which excludes all authentic dialectical interaction"—the composer-conductor (as Andreas Huyssen recently characterized matters in his remarkable essay "Adorno in Reverse") beating the audience into submission through orchestration that has "the tendency to drown out the individual instrument in favor of . . . large-scale melodic complexes," all culminating in a phantasmagoria, which is to say, in Adorno's words, "the illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal," with (Huyssen again) "the drama of the future, as Wagner called his *Gesamtkunstwerk*," prefiguring "that nightmarish regression into an archaic past which completes its trajectory in fascism." Having thus nailed Wagner and Nazism, Adorno would go on to seek refuge, through the war years, in southern California, where he would while away his days, sourly surveying what he came to see as Wagner's legacy in the machinations of the entire culture industry, and Hollywood movies in particular.

Custer's Defeat at the Little Bighorn (detail), by Kurz & Allison © CORBIS; Sketch for the stage design of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* at Bayreuth, 1876 (detail), by Joseph Hoffmann © National Archives of the Richard Wagner Foundation, Bayreuth; Photographs by Eadweard Muybridge © Image Select/Art Resource, N.Y.C.

Which in turn brings us to the film schools of southern California, a generation after that, steeped in some of the New Left critique of the Hollywood system that was Adorno's legacy, as well as in a whole set of soaringly *Gesamtkunstwerk* Sensurround ambitions of their own, from out of which would emerge the likes of Coppola and Milius and Murch, who, a few years after that—as a matter of fact in 1976, exactly one hundred years after Custer's debacle and Bayreuth's premiere and Stanford's purchase and Hayes's deal—would begin work on their own shattering masterpiece, complete with its ironically inverted homage to Griffith, that horrific Valkyrie raid of the choppers of the airborne cavalry, a scene that less than a generation later would be being deployed (pithed of all irony) to stiffen the resolve of an auditoriumful of jarheads at Twentynine Palms Marine Base bound for a

ring cinematic way, it's hard to avoid glorifying war. But that is only one thread in the total tapestry. I never really thought of the film as an antiwar film so much as a film about the dilemma of 'morality' in certain modern situations and more of an 'anti-lie' film. I guess," he concluded, "that to make a film that is truly antiwar, it would not be set anywhere near battlefields or theaters of war, but rather in human situations far from those."

John Milius, on the other hand, proved almost impossible to stopper, once I reached him by phone. Nor did I have any desire to do so. Famously voluble, with a legendary reputation for being borderline unhinged in the lavishness of his macho-patriotic self-presentations (in an early group shot of the team at Coppola's Zoetrope Studio, he cast himself as a Mexican bandito, with a big sombrero atop his beaming face and a belt of ammunition sashed round his ample



whole fresh war of their own, in a scene that, less than a generation after that, and in the midst of yet another whole new war, would itself be forming the fulcrum, the very hinge, of yet another effort to nail down the whole self-immolating, self-devouring, agonizedly churning monster of a perplex.

I type out an abbreviated version of the above and email it to Murch, and by way of reply he notes dryly how across his stay here in Manhattan, as he continues editing the picture, he has been a guest at the National Arts Club, off Gramercy Park, which is to say, the old Samuel Tilden mansion. So, go figure.

I took to trying to contact some of the other principals in the story. For example, Coppola himself, who proved to be traveling in Europe, raising money for a new project, and not terribly drawn, when I finally was able to track him down by email, to pursuing my various lines of inquiry. "Sorry," he explained. "I'm far away both geographically and every other way and not really interested anymore." Still, he did rouse himself from such disinterest enough to note how he didn't "really accept that AN is prowar, though I can see that if you depict such violent acts in a stir-

belly; his subsequent credits included *Conan the Barbarian*, *Red Dawn*, and now the HBO series *Rome*; and he famously inspired John Goodman's character in *The Big Lebowski*), he also turns out to be immensely likable, though I kept being reminded of the similarly bearish and larger-than-life artist Ed Kienholz, of whom the dealer Irving Blum once confided to me, "A quarter turn of the screw, just a quarter turn of the screw, and we could have had Adolf Hitler all over again."

"I'm always being portrayed as this extreme right-wing nutcase," Milius interrupted me at one point, perhaps sensing the way my associations were tending, "and though I happily admit to being a flagrant jingoist, I am just as much a seething Marxist as anything else—don't get me going on corporate greed or the so-called policies of the neocons."

I asked him about his inspiration for the Valkyrie scene. Was it true, as I had heard, that he had been banking off *The Birth of a Nation*?

"Nonsense," he insisted, "though it's true I had seen and studied and greatly admired that film in school, and was incidentally just about the only person in the room during the screening, Murch's and Lucas's and all their subsequent recollections notwithstanding. But, as it happens, it was a silent screening, there was no or-

chestral track, as I recall, so that wouldn't have been where I got it or what I was referencing."

(Murch stands by his version.)

"No," Milius continued, "it simply had to do with my being a surfer, surfing being my entire life in those days. Scratch the surface of any surfer and you'll find a marauding Viking at heart, if they'll only admit it. And that was the music streaming through my head out there on the waves during those years: Wagner and The Doors." Milius definitely doesn't strike one as a Beach Boys sort of guy.

"I was unusual in that crowd at film school, because I'd have given anything to be a Marine. As a surfer I'd spent a lot of time hanging out with the Marines off Pendleton, and I'd had every intention of joining up, in fact I tried, but I got rejected on health grounds, and I was devastated, I felt like I'd been rejected as a human being..."

What health grounds?

on since we left the caves. Only there was no way I could found my own unit, so I did the second best, which was to write it. Every writer wishes he could actually be doing the thing he writes about. And that Valkyrie scene came from a vision I had of the exhilaration of war—right alongside the terror and the horror and the fear of being snuffed out. *The glory of it!* Nowadays—unlike during the Victorian era, when the glory was all that got discussed—nowadays it's the horror that always gets talked about. And either one by itself, of course, is a ridiculous half-statement."

It turned out that Milius's specific vision (and its accompanying score) had a rather surprising origin. "By 1967, which is when we are talking about here, the Vietnam War had already turned frustrating: the soldiers being sent there had the same dedication as those who'd gone to fight in the Second World War, but it was becoming clear this was a botched job, they were being



"On account of my asthma, just like my hero Teddy Roosevelt, who started a war as assistant secretary of the navy, then resigned so as to be able to fight in it, only to get rejected owing to his asthma, at which point he went and founded his own unit—'Good, go,' his wife said, 'maybe you'll get it out of your system'—headed down to Cuba and ended up leading the most critical action in the most extraordinary way, the only man on horseback for the entire charge up San Juan Hill, getting shot at from all sides and surviving to tell the tale..."

(Now, there's a trapdoor for you: Teddy Roosevelt began serializing his best-selling account of those Rough Rider exploits in January 1899; the very next month, in February 1899, Joseph Conrad began publishing a novelistic rendering of an earlier set of adventures of his own, up the Congo River, albeit in an entirely different temper: *Heart of Darkness*.)

"That's what I was dying to be able to do," Milius continued, "to go prove myself in battle—the same as all young men long to do, if they are honest with themselves, whether it's right or wrong or even sane, which is a debate that's been going

wasted, it was becoming a futile exercise. The myth of invincibility was crumbling: 'Just wait till the Marines get here!' people used to say, only they'd been there for several years already, and it clearly wasn't working.

"And then, in the midst of all that, came the Six-Day War—this small beleaguered nation, Israel, vastly outnumbered, completely surrounded by a host of enemies who were themselves being outfitted by the same Soviet Union that was outfitting our enemies in Vietnam, and their elite forces just sliced through them all. And I was beside myself, transfixed, I couldn't stop imagining the exhilaration of being in a tank racing through burning Arab villages, like a descendant of King David himself. And tracking that victory day by day, I was throbbing to *The Doors*—'Light My Fire' was the big hit that summer—and of course to Wagner..."

To Wagner?

"Sure, absolutely!"

Wagner: as the soundtrack for an Israeli army victory?

"Absolutely. The Israeli Army prided itself on its Teutonic tactics. Sharon—and those were the

days when Ariel Sharon became one of my greatest heroes—had spent his time at Sandhurst”—the British West Point—“studying Rommel’s desert tank fighting methods almost exclusively.”

Are you, I asked Milius—I didn’t quite know how to put this delicately—yourself Jewish?

“Absolutely,” he replied. “My family came here in 1812! I had ancestors who rode with Quantrill.” (William Clark Quantrill: the fearsome Confederate guerrilla fighter who cut a swath through Bloody Kansas, sacking Lawrence at the height of the war, in 1863—within a year, as it happens, of the first concert performances, back in Europe, of the “Ride of the Valkyries”—a Klansman *avant la lettre* if ever there was one.) “My family always says I must be a product of regressive genes.”

I read him the passage from Swofford’s book about the afterlife of films like *Apocalypse Now* and asked him about his own feelings about the film’s legacy.

“I’m proud of it, are you kidding? *Proud*. I’m proud that we helped give the boys who came after a language. I love it how a few years afterwards, when the copters came barreling in on Grenada, they were playing the ‘Ride of the Valkyries.’ How, for that matter, you can’t hold an air assault anywhere in the world today without playing that music. A commander in a tight spot in Kabul calls in air support, and a few minutes later—I saw this on TV—he turns to the camera and says how he loves the smell of napalm in the morning. I know that sometimes I come off sounding like a fiend, but I love it that we gave him that mantra.

“I’m proud to join the long line of military pornographers,” he concluded with a dramatic flourish, “right up there with Homer and Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Hemingway.”

I asked him how he would feel, though, if his mantras started being used to jazz up young recruits for a stupid war, one unworthy of...

“It would be great”—he didn’t even let me finish my question—“completely fine with me. Those boys need mantras like that, they need to be juiced. They constitute the point of the spear, and the point needs to be juiced, to be oiled, to be kept ready, whether it’s for a good war or a bad war. And we, the rest of us, in turn need people like that who will be willing and eager to constitute the point of that spear. Otherwise we will just end up like Rome, with the barbarians coming pouring in over the gates. That’s always been the case. Always will be.”

He subsided for a moment and then resumed, somewhat mysteriously at first. “Homer,” he pronounced. “Homer. Can you believe what those assholes did to him with that film *Troy*.” He was clearly taking a fellow pornographer’s umbrage. “Completely embarrassing. Me and my kid, we wanted to take a DVD of the thing, tie it by a ca-

ble to our car’s bumper, and drag it up and down Hollywood Boulevard.” He fell silent for another moment. “Hollywood,” he resumed. “The only thing I can think of remotely as horrible as war: there are stories, things I have seen in that town that, believe me, I would never tell anyone.”

Have you ever actually listened to the words the Valkyries are singing at one another as they ride out onto the stage amid all that surging music? Or, for that matter, thought about what they are actually doing? They are bearing all these battle-slaughtered soldiers up to Valhalla so that, revived to zombiehood, they can be conscripted into guarding the fortress of the gods through all eternity (*this is what anybody longs someday to be able to do?*) . . . and, as such, the goddess sisters are calling out to one another:

Hoyotoho, hoyotoho! Heiaha! Heiaha! Here Helmwig, bring your horse here—Put your stallion next to Ortlinde’s mare, your bay will enjoy grazing with my gray—Who is hanging from your saddle?—Sintolt the Hegeling—Then take your bay away from my mare. Ortlinde’s mare carries Wittig the Irming—I always saw them at enmity, Sintolt and Wittig—Heiaha! My mare is being jostled by the stallion—The warrior’s quarrel even antagonizes the horses—Quiet, Bruno! Don’t disturb the peace—Into the woods with your horses for grazing and resting—Keep the mares far apart until our heroes’ hatred has calmed—Hoyotoho, hoyotoho!

Really inspiring stuff.

(Though, actually, if you stop to think about it, maybe those jostled horses are a nice little touch of closely observed reality in terms of what actual wars are actually like, which is to say, as boring as all hell. Indeed, that such banality could be rendered so exciting may be the essence of Wagner, whether or not he understood his own mission as such.)

It’s true,” Anthony Swofford was acknowledging one afternoon when I went to visit him in the Chelsea studio where he was putting the finishing touches on his next book, a novel. “When you watch that whole Valkyrie episode in the original movie, there is indeed, right in the middle of it, this incredibly bloody and terrifying scene of one of Kilgore’s men, this black soldier, terribly wounded, stretched out screaming in agony as the medics try to tend to him—but later, you don’t really remember him. It’s Kilgore who you remember, at least if you’re young and impressionable, with all his manly bravado. Him

MILIUS FELL SILENT.

“HOLLYWOOD,” HE RESUMED. “THE ONLY THING I CAN THINK OF REMOTELY AS HORRIBLE AS WAR”

and those racing helicopters. Those are the images that have kids enlisting, that and the whole general sense of heightened clarity and vividness—which, incidentally, is true: at times life *can* be clearer and more vivid in the military. At another point in the film, Martin Sheen's character says something like, 'You'd never find out about yourself like this working in some fucking factory in Ohio'—and there's something to that too.

"And yet, still, when you look at how the longer-term veterans razz the newbies—and there's a lot of that both in my book and in the film—partly it's just standard fraternity hazing, but part of it, too, I'm convinced, is that they can't believe these kids were so stupid as to fall for all that crap and end up in this hellhole, and they're punishing them out of their own projected sense of ever having been such fools as to fall for it themselves."

I asked him if he worried about the long-term resonances and the afterlife of the film they were now making of *his* book.

"Well," he said, "while it's true that it was in part

they just can't grasp the warning, it's simply not the part that gets through. Those boys who went off to the Second World War, for example, had been raised on a steady stream of First World War movies, all through the twenties and thirties, films like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with their shattering exposés of trench warfare, but all they remembered, when the time came, were the parades and the tossed flowers and the swooning girls at the outset. And we for our part were primed with *Sands of Iwo Jima* and all those other Second World War films."

Broyles served as a lieutenant with the Marines in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970, the first half of his term with a platoon west of Danang, the second half as a general's aide. "I spent most of my combat tour in Vietnam trudging through its jungles and rice paddies without incident," he wrote in a remarkably searching cover story on "Why Men Love War" in the November 1984 *Esquire*, "but I have seen enough of war to know that I never want to fight again and that I would do everything



my hope, in writing *Jarhead*, that the horrors of war psychosis might permeate a bit deeper into the culture, I'm not sure that it should be the goal of a narrative film, for example, to turn people against war. And while art should expand rather than constrict people's moral range, as an artist you can't control the audience, only the art." He took a deep breath. "And frankly, I wouldn't be at all surprised if two years from now, when the DVD comes out, you were to find a roomful of Marines at the Twentynine Palms Base screening the damn thing and working themselves into their own ecstatic rapture."

He paused. "That's just how it is."

"It's an endless cycle," Bill Broyles Jr., *Jarhead's* screenwriter, concurred, a few days later, when I reached him by phone at his Wyoming home. "Older men write about the truth of war as a cautionary tale, but young men hear the stories, they read the books and see the films, and

in my power to keep my son from fighting." The piece, which, notwithstanding that credo, then went on to anatomize the compelling lure of war—the sorts of things, he admitted, that veterans have a terrible time trying to explain to their friends and families when they come home, and that most don't even try—featured a haunting photo of Broyles and his then young child beneath a looming war monument. That boy is today on his third tour of duty in Iraq. "Yeah," Broyles admitted, when I pointed out the irony of the situation. "A lot of the time I spent working on this project, I kept thinking about me in Vietnam in 1970 and Swofford in the Gulf twenty years later and my own son there now, and there were days when I indeed got to feeling like some sort of medium."

He'd greatly admired *Apocalypse Now* at the time of its release, and was likewise disturbed (if not entirely surprised) by the depiction of its reception years later by the Marines at

Twentynine Palms in Swofford's book. I asked him whether he wasn't worried that a similar sort of reception might greet their current work years from now. "If kids at Pendleton get intoxicated by some of the things that they will be seeing in our film, it's not our fault." But wouldn't it bother him? "Absolutely, but we would still have to create scenes that are true. Otherwise you end up in a situation like those old literary trials in the Soviet Union, worrying whether something is socially constructive or not, and everything descends to the level of farce. And the truth is that while normal civilian life exists along a sort of spectrum, war pushes that spectrum out at both ends—it is both much more horrible and much better than anything else. And if you *are* going to depict it honestly, that is how it is going to be."

Even so, Broyles chose to foreground the distinctly unsettling and problematic aspects of that Valkyrie screening at Twentynine Palms in his screenplay of Swofford's book. It comes at

through that room, if fear is the least overtly expressed, it is nevertheless the dominant one."

"I was never in the army myself," the film's director, Sam Mendes, was telling me a few days later, when I paid a call on him at the sound studios where he and Murch and their team were laying in a temporary dub, prepping the film for previews. "Nor was I ever particularly drawn to war movies as distinct from movies per se." (His comment reminded me of that of a friend of mine, who, when I laid out some of the themes I was pursuing with this piece, noted how *Apocalypse Now* had never made *him* want to go out and make war, though it had made him want to go out and make movies.) "As it happens," Mendes continued, "in 2001, a psychic told me that my next project was going to be a war movie, and at the time I just said, 'No way.' But then I was sent the *Jarhead* book, and I was particularly drawn to the ways Swofford was laying blame for war culture



roughly the same moment in the film of *Jarhead*, structurally speaking, as does the Valkyrie scene in *Apocalypse Now*, and it carries much the same wallop (of course, in some senses, literally so). And it features all sorts of mirrorings beyond that obvious one. For one thing, the audience in the theater watching *Jarhead* is momentarily forced to identify, as an audience, with the audience on the screen, and as such to be roused right along with it (and then to be appalled at that arousal, and maybe even more so at its persistence). Then, as well, as Broyles points out, the scene really cleaves Swofford's story in two: "It constitutes the transition between their thinking they may yet be going to war and their *knowing* they are going to war, and the screen in this context is both preparing them and shielding them. The exuberance and the passion surging through the room masks a terrible fear: it's as if they can exult that Game Day is finally here, and yet this is no game, and they know it. And of all the emotions churning

on popular culture, or at least exploring their sources in each other, and then, too, the way he was so powerfully evoking the relationship between war and sex, for example, the rapture of the Marines during the screening of *Apocalypse Now*, all those boys together, how it really got to be like a good rough fuck for them."

Out of the corner of his eye, he'd been watching the screening of a few alternative versions of a later scene on the sound studio's screen—a blasted desertscape with a surreal black-orange sky, oil rigs shooting up geysers of fire and smoke in the distance, and an oil-drenched white horse (!) staggering into the foreground—and he relayed a series of quick responses over to Murch before resuming. "I mean, my own sense of war, such as it is, and in particular of the Vietnam War, was shaped by Vietnam movies." Born in England in 1965, Mendes would have been ten as the Vietnam War ended, and not yet fifteen when Coppola's film came out. "I remember getting involved in a de-

bate in college as to whether *Apocalypse Now* was pro- or antiwar, which was silly in a sense, since it is so obviously antiwar; but obviously part of its power came from the way it evoked the attractions of war, the virtually genetic pull, the way in which war may be the closest men get to something approaching the intensity of childbirth.

"Not that way, the other way, the way we had it before," he telegraphed over to Murch, who stabbed at a few buttons on his console. "Another thing that really appealed to me in Swofford's book," he went on, "was its evocation of that theme of waiting, of these highly trained, testosterone-buzzed Marines, prepositioned and then stranded out there in the desert for weeks and presently months on end, all hepped up with nothing to do but slowly go mad. As it happens, back in 1990, in the months leading up to the Gulf War itself, I had been rehearsing a production of *Troilus and Cressida* with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and there, too, in what is after all Shakespeare's major take on Homeric material, a considerable burden of the play falls around this theme of waiting—with everybody standing around waiting for Achilles to rouse himself from out of that epic funk of his—or so it came to seem to me at the time, and I shaded some of our readings in that direction. Of course, things eventually went so fast that by the time we finally got the thing onstage, the war was already fought and over."

I shaded *our* conversation over to Swofford's other theme of war films as necessarily military-pornographic. "I actually disagree with Tony there," Mendes indicated. "I can think of several war films where that wouldn't really apply. I mean, for instance, the first twenty minutes in *Saving Private Ryan*: nobody witnessing that would have come out wishing that he could take a walk on that beach." But what about the rest of the picture? "Well, yeah," he concurred. "I suppose so. And there is the old problem of its being hard to make a picture about the downside of the porno industry, say, without slipping in a bit of titillation. There simply *are* people who find this kind of stuff a turn-on."

I asked him if he worried about the potential afterlife of his images.

"Not really," he replied, "in part because this was a different sort of war. You look at the Vietnam films, and it's as if they have LSD coursing through their veins, and the kids raised on those films were fully expecting a similar sort of rush when they got sent off to war. Instead, they got sent out to the desert, and all they really got was bottled water at room temperature, with room temperature often hovering around a hundred degrees."

He laughed mildly and then got up to return to his seat by Murch's side at the central console. On the screen, the oil-drenched horse stared

dolefully out in momentary freeze frame, all four legs planted solidly on the ground, hooves sinking into the muck.

The next night I joined the team on the other side of the Hudson, at the Edgewater Multiplex, for a screening of the current version of the film before a preview audience of ordinary potential customers. When the press guy from Universal, with whom I'd spoken in advance, asked me about the general drift of my article and I proceeded to hint at some of its probable themes, he interrupted so as to make me understand, in no uncertain terms, that "the studio is definitely *not* positioning this as an antiwar film." When I now proceeded to mention that comment to Murch, he laughed indulgently. "Yeah," he said, "they're definitely getting a little antsy with this one." I asked Murch how close the team was to the final finished version of the film, and he pointed out that the current iteration featured filler music in spots, standing in for the final score Thomas Newman was still busy composing, and there were special effects, especially involving the oil-well fires, that still needed to be laid in, that in fact they'd likely be tweaking it right up to the end, the editor famously being, as he quipped drolly, "like the sous-chef who's still sprinkling pepper onto the main course as they ferry it out into the dining room."

The lights darkened and the Universal logo scrolled onto the screen in its full Wagnerian glory, after which the hall went black and the film proper began with Gyllenhaal/Swofford's uninflected voice-over welling up from out of the darkness. "A story. A man fires a rifle for many years . . ." And we were off.

And as the film continued to unfurl, I became increasingly convinced that, actually, Mendes and Broyles and Murch could well be pulling off the unlikely achievement of a war film that might in fact never be susceptible to military pornographic co-optation.

This was in part due to the fierceness with which that very issue had gotten laid out early on in the Valkyrie sequence, which in its latest iteration was implicating the theater audience all the more forcefully by starting out from behind the Marines, over their shoulders, our rows of seats in the movie theater blending right into theirs up there on the screen in an uncanny illusion, with that doubling somehow magically serving to inoculate the film against any similar form of eventual co-optation.

Furthermore, that scene itself began to ramify in all sorts of important ways through the rest of the film—specifically this question of war as sex, or, to phrase it more directly, who gets *to* fuck and who gets *fucked* in war. As it happened, the First Gulf War did not include the usual retinue of brothels and prostitutes along the sidelines: once

posted in the remote desert, the grunts (and they were all men in that war, or at least in this film rendition) were simply stuck there, and stuck, specifically, to stew anxiously over the increasingly suspect fidelity of their loved ones back home: all sorts of fevered speculation continuously swirling around this theme (as if in grim fugue-like counterpoint to the similarly repeated Marine motto of “*Semper fi*”), culminating in particular in a devastating scene (conspicuously bookended, as it were, to the earlier *Apocalypse Now* homage) in which one of the grunt’s wives sends him a video of *The Deer Hunter*, and everyone gathers round the VCR all excited for a reprise of their earlier pornographic rapture, which only increases in intensity when it turns out that the wife has in fact spliced some actual hard-core pornographic footage into the reel, which presently turns out to be of her herself ostentatiously fucking the slob next door as a way of getting even with her husband for all his imagined infidelities. From deer hunter to cuckold in one sickeningly fell swoop: horned revelations, indeed.

Beyond that, this particular war turned out to be unlike virtually any other in that the ground forces didn’t even get to follow through with any triumphalist fucking-over of the enemy. After months of preparation, most of it with the grunts grimly languishing out there in the sweltering desert, the war, when it finally did come, proved an entirely one-sided affair, the side in question being the sky, from which the uncontested allied air forces rained down unutterable horror upon the vastly outgunned Iraqi conscript army, with the allied ground forces held in abeyance till the war was almost entirely over. In the film, one of Swofford’s unit’s only two actual engagements, and far and away the more terrifying one, turns out to be with friendly fire. Later, as they march in, a helicopter goes swooping by overhead, playing a song by The Doors over its loudspeakers, and one of the grunts shouts bitterly that they can’t even have their own music! The Swofford character in particular, a sniper honed and trained within an inch of his life, literally never gets to fire a shot. “Yeah, there was just too little war to go around with that one,” is how Milius parsed matters for me, empathetically, when we spoke about the First Gulf War. Broyles, for his part, noted how with that war, unlike Vietnam or most any other, both sides of the spectrum, the death-terror and the killing-glory, got squeezed way in.

But not the horror. For it turns out the Marines in this instance, though they ended up doing hardly any fighting of their own, were nevertheless conscripted into the role of witnesses and forced, Buchenwald-like, to stumble in upon the appalling aftereffects of some of those air raids (the famous turkey shoots, as they were referred to at the time). A mini-version of the notorious

Highway of Death, a burnt-out traffic jam of twisted metal and charred human remains, stands in, in this film, for the mini-My Lai of the sampan massacre in *Apocalypse Now*, and there is nothing the slightest bit glorious about it. The footage left the Edgewater audience as gut-punched as the soldiers up there on the screen. At one point, the Swofford character wanders off on his own over a berm, coming down upon a scene of yet more unspeakable carnage; when he returns and his staff sergeant asks him what he saw, he shakes his head blankly and mumbles, “Nothing.” (I’ve always been convinced that Auden meant it in an active sense when he said, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” and that scene serves as a perfect instance.)

And Nothing, too, is what you see in the pithed-out face of the homeless, washed-out Vietnam vet—haunted veteran himself, one wonders, of something very like Kilgore’s Valkyrie shock forces?—who toward the end of the film clamors onto the bus ferrying our returning heroes through their measly homecoming parade and slurringly thanks them for having done the country proud and restored the Marines to their former honor. *Semper fi, semper fi! Hoyotoho!*

Samuel Fuller once said that for a film to be truly true to the actual nature of war, bullets would need to be spraying out from the screen, taking out members of the audience at random, one by one, in scattershot carnage. This, of course, is not that film. But to the extent that Coppola was right in his insight that an antiwar film might of necessity need to exclude the depiction of war fighting itself (at the time I’d thought he had been referring to something like *Grand Illusion* or *King of Hearts*), the Gulf War of 1990 may turn out to have been almost unique in lending itself to that sort of treatment (at least from the American side).

Alas, its follow-on war, the one in which we are enmired today, is nothing like that. And as the haunted veteran Swofford character himself clearly realizes at the end of this movie, standing ten years on and staring out from his middle-American suburban studio window into a scene that seems to transmogrify before his and our very eyes (to transmogrify and then to ramify with yet further bitter intensity with each passing month since Broyles and Mendes and Murch first composed the scene), we are still, yes, We are *all* still in that desert. ■



Copyright of Harper's Magazine is the property of Harper's Magazine Foundation and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.