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Journey's End: Conrad as Revenant in Alex Garland's *The Beach*

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To us he is no more a person
Now but a whole climate of opinion.

—W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud"

"Tell me why you're here."
"The horror." "What horror?"
"The horror." "What horror?"

—Alex Garland, *The Beach*

In his valuable contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, Gene Moore makes a strong case for Conrad's status as "a living part of our cultural self-awareness," an author with "a profound influence on the way we perceive and define the modern condition" (223). Conrad is still "living" in the culture in part because he wrote about political desperation, including terrorism, and, crucially, about the meeting of Western and non-Western worlds, a centuries-long event which is now variously understood as globalization or neocolonialism (Moore 223). It seems that virtually every writer who addresses the historical, political, or cultural dimensions of globalization is familiar with Conrad, or at least with a handful of phrases and characters he bequeathed to his readers. Every recluse at the end of a remote river, or exile in some tropical periphery, may be a "Mr. Kurtz"; any unbearable scene of social catastrophe may be described as "the horror, the horror." At the turn of another century, Moore's "modern condition" has evolved into the postmodern temper; and to examine Conrad's influ-

ence in the general culture today is perhaps to find subtly annotated those complex angles of vision he brought to the globalizing currents emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century. If Conrad has become, like Auden's Freud, "a whole climate of opinion," that climate has steadily changed, such that Conrad is sometimes less a "living part" than a peculiar ghost; or maybe not even a ghost, but a revenant, a displaced and remote cultural memory, an unfamiliar spirit returning briefly, and unbidden (Auden 217).

The Beach, Alex Garland's 1996 cult novel about Generation X backpackers in Thailand, is my case in point. Conrad is both present and absent in Garland's narrative. He is present as a literary model and absent, or diminished, as a cultural figure. He is both ghost and revenant: he is a ghost behind the novel's setting and cultural ideas, and a revenant within the story itself, making one short, crucial appearance near its end. There is, to cite my second epigraph, but one *direct* allusion to Conrad—to *Heart of Darkness*—in Garland's story, and what precisely it is doing there I will contend with later, but for the moment I want to situate Garland's work in a broader complex of influences and genre categories. This is a work that draws upon, and in some cases subverts, a number of traditions and influences: the island survival narrative, the dystopian novel, the *bildungsroman*, the fiction of adventure, the first-person profile in madness, and Vietnam War movies and memoirs. Garland himself has credited only two direct inspirations, J. G. Ballard's 1984 autobiographical novel, *Empire of the Sun*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's use of unreliable first person narration.¹ These, he says, he used as "text books" while composing his own novel ("Coasting It" 17). As Gene Moore points out, "influences flow into the popular imagination"—and thus into cultural production—in ways that are difficult to locate precisely (223). "Intertextuality," he adds, "has no beginning and no end" (223–4). Garland's novel is indeed an intriguing soup of generic and textual debt, without slavishly modeling itself on any one source. What I want to suggest is that, a single direct citation notwithstanding, the phantom urtext for Garland's narrative is Joseph Conrad, much of whose early fiction is set among the islands of the Dutch East Indies, in South China seaports, and in the Gulf of Siam, where Garland's story takes place. Initially, then, Conrad haunts *The Beach* in terms of geographical setting. In an article on Norman Rush's novel *Mating*, S. Ekema Agbaw and Karson L. Kiesinger assert that Conrad "continues to influence the Western imagination of Africa and the role of the European there" (49). The same can be said of the Western imagination of

Southeast Asia, as the work of Maugham, Greene, Theroux, Drabble, and others suggest.²

At a time of high imperial endeavor, Conrad's protagonists are in some instances clearly in quest of material interests, but they can also reach for something less tangible, the existential validation of adventure and experience achieved far from their Western origins, hoping to secure a measure of selfhood, to tell their own stories or leave stories behind them for others to tell. Almayer's story exemplifies the lure of material wealth while Lingard, as the "Rajah-laut," seeks both material rewards and the limitless possibilities of adventure (*Almayer's* 7). Jim, Patusan's "white lord," is in quest of a redeemed reputation and the realization of a romantic dream; and Marlow follows the younger man's misfortunes, triumphs, and defeats in order to bring back and reconstruct a narrative (*Lord* 336).

Whatever their goals, failure and disillusionment typically await them, and their defeat mirrors a larger failure: the limits of imperial ambition. As Andrea White has pointed out, "Conrad's depiction of white men in the tropics is subversively unheroic," where "displacements and power struggles" and "multiple viewpoints" undermine racial authority (187). The final image recalled by Marlow in "Youth" is of the three open boats "with the tired men of the West sleeping, unconscious of the land and the people and the violence of the sunshine," while the "East looked at them without a sound" (*Youth* 41). These Western interlopers, their vulnerability and destitution, become an object of study, with the colonial gaze reversed. For the twenty-year-old Marlow, the voyage to Bangkok was above all "a deuce of an adventure," his first experience of the Orient, "a land of palms, spices, and yellow sands" (*Youth* 12, 18). This fabled region of the earth defines exotic otherness—*L'Extreme Orient* to the French architects of empire—and it is also, Marlow confides, "something you read about" (*Youth* 12). What is imagined has already been imagined, but by confirming the existence of the "mysterious East" he will be able to wear the badge and enjoy the status of experience (*Youth* 38). What he is forced to recognize is that what he had "read about" has been revised, and had been for some time (*Youth* 12). His first contact with Java is with an anchored steamer and the disembodied voice of a deck officer: "And the East spoke to me but with a Western voice" (*Youth* 39). In a sense the East is no longer there.

Even less so is it for Garland's end-of-the-century first-person protagonist, Richard, whose first, and distinctly postmodern, encounter

with Southeast Asia is Bangkok's backpacker central, Khao San Road, "a decompression chamber for those about to leave Thailand; a halfway house between East and West," where "heroin hippies" from the West direct him to the best deal in guest houses and Thai cleaning ladies effortlessly adopt the argot of the callow travelers they serve (*Beach* 5).³ His journey to Bangkok, which was also the *Judea's* intended destination, took not weeks and months at sea and in port, but a matter of ten hours by jetliner from Heathrow. But in his more limited way Richard is still seeking adventure and the privileged role of the storyteller his anticipated experiences will bestow upon him. If the young Marlow is not especially bookish (he struggles with and abandons Carlyle), his appetite for romance and heroic endeavor is at least inspired by his reading; specifically, a complete set of Byron and Frederick Burnaby's Central Asian journey, *Ride to Khiva*. Garland's Richard, however, the same age as Marlow and more alliterate than illiterate, can only refer to Hergé's *Tintin* comic books—*The Blue Lotus* in particular, which is set in the Far East—and the inevitable *Lonely Planet* guidebooks, which have for thirty years or more promoted and enshrined the backpacker experience.⁴ His imagination, as I shall illustrate, is stimulated not by written texts—compare also Jim's "light holiday literature"—but by television, movies, and video games; his "mysterious east" is consistently mediated through the image culture that dominates the last decades of the twentieth century (*Lord* 5; *Youth* 38). Between the turn of one century and the turn of another, between Conrad's ambitious but ultimately disillusioned adventurers and Garland's restless postcolonial travelers, lies a history of empires and their decline, of world war and cold war conflicts, regional economic resurgence, and the leveling effects of global tourism. Conrad's Eastern world continues to be shaped and exploited by Western power and ambition, as the West continues to face defeat and failure on its soil. Conrad's literary legacy informs *The Beach*; he is everywhere in the novel, but his visitations are oblique and his visibility confined to the shadows. He haunts the land that was once Siam and dogs the steps of the novel's narrator, a young traveler who has apparently not read *Heart of Darkness*, but has undoubtedly seen *Apocalypse Now*, while remaining ignorant of its provenance.

The first echo to register is in the depiction of travel, the traveler, and an awareness of a shrinking globe. At the beginning of *Lord Jim's* seventh chapter, there is a tart description of diners in a Singapore hotel, passengers from "an outward-bound mail-boat" with "a hundred-pounds-round-the-world tickets in their pockets" (77). They are a vivid

assembly of married couples bored with each other's company, young empty-headed girls, and grotesque old maids, all of them "just as intelligently receptive of new impressions as their trunks upstairs" (77). They would "preserve the gummed tickets on their portmanteaus as documentary evidence, as the only permanent trace of their improving enterprise" (77). The "adventure" stories they circulate are inspired only by the comedy of "shipboard scandal" (77). To Marlow, as to Conrad, these privileged bourgeois are clearly not the right sort. They have debased travel, their journey is artificial, and they have connected neither with the anticipation of passage nor with the drama of destination. They are tourists, in fact, and will never succeed in the enterprise of improvement, as they will add nothing to their knowledge of the world or to their knowledge of themselves. Conrad's anxiety about the multitudes that now have access to the globe, and about the erosion of the exotic and the obscure in a world so thoroughly mapped, is expressed vividly in his introduction to Richard Curle's *Into the East* and in his essay, "Geography and Some Explorers," both composed at the end of his career.⁵

What Conrad pessimistically identifies in his preface to Curle is the monoculture familiar to the late twentieth century. The "spirit of modern travel," according to Conrad, has been facilitated by the shortcut of the Suez Canal, enabling the incurious and the uninspired to circle the globe in great numbers with blank notebooks at the ready (*Into* xxv). The "conditions of an explored earth" mean the end of "heroic travel" and the triumph of an undifferentiated modernity (xx, xviii). In "Geography and Some Explorers" Conrad outlines a chronology of exploration and discovery from "geography fabulous" to "geography militant" and finally to "geography triumphant," which marked the disappearance of *terrae incognitae* and the monotonous re-appearance of what he calls, in his Preface to Curle, "beaten tracks" (*Last* 8, 13; *Into* xxv). That triumph is clearly evident in "Youth" with Marlow's arrival in Java and in Marlow's contempt for the leisured traveling class in *Lord Jim*. For Michael Valdez Moses, Conrad's suspicion of the "global process [. . .] the imminent westernization of the world" makes that narrative the "prototype of the postcolonial novel" (67); and John W. Griffith detects in *A Personal Record* a "nascent cultural relativism" and a growing conviction in Conrad that the world is now one country, a prospect that does not invite celebration (42). Garland's Richard, with his coach seat and his discount ticket, represents a more serious abbreviation of the adventure and experience of jour-

neying. We might call it “geography couchant.” Richard’s backpacker identity, shaped by the promises of mass market guidebooks, hints at a kind of entropy unimagined by Conrad in his coining of the term “geography triumphant,” which for him was the last definition in a series (*Last* 9). But those round-the-world travelers cocooned in the Singapore hotel dining room are the not-so-remote ancestors of the community to which Richard belongs: from upper-middle-class privilege, cabin trunks, and the captain’s table, to the comparative affluence of an empowered younger generation addicted to budget travel and far-flung destinations, and burdened only by backpacks. Colonial desire for the “conquest of the earth” is revised as a neocolonial desire, acted out by these new “world travelers,” to seek “spontaneous experiences in the excitement of complete strangeness,” and to capture and consume that strangeness before it becomes familiar and understood, a project Conrad would have deemed belated by the 1920s (*Youth* 50; Cohen 89).

There are traces of this culture in Richard’s motivation for travel and that of his companions—they are all captivated by the utopian dream, the hedonistic possibilities, of the perfect beach—but the liturgy of the guidebook, specifically the *Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand*, has drawn them all to the international cocoon of Khao San Road with its cheap guesthouses and Internet cafes, and to this extent Richard is a member of a very large tribe, one still distantly related to Conrad’s hotel guests. This new breed of traveler may disdain traditional tourist itineraries and privilege the individual whim over the institutionalized agenda, but as Cohen points out, “in its social dynamic mass drifter-tourism develops a tendency parallel to that observed in ordinary mass tourism: a loss of interest in local people, customs, and landscape, and a growing orientation to the in-group” (99). The “complete strangeness” of a foreign destination becomes less appealing, and also less likely to be found (Cohen 89). Richard is certainly not in Thailand to meet Thais, and is barely conscious of them: “I suddenly found myself surrounded by Thais. I’d half-forgotten what country I was in, stuck in backpacker land, and it took me a few minutes to adjust to the change” (*Beach* 29). He is not a child of the 1960s, one of those dedicated “hippie” travelers, chasing what human geographer David Crouch has called “the vanishing horizon of authenticity” (241).⁶ The stimulation of departure, passage, and arrival are absent, rendered unreal by the speed of air travel and the neutral space of international airports (Leed 25–108).⁷ He sees this Bangkok street for what it is, a “decompression chamber,”

where you encounter other travelers who are all planning the same excursions to the same places to there engage in the same activities, all prescribed and guaranteed by the same guidebook (*Beach* 5). Richard's single allusion to *Planet* culture pinpoints his own uneasy relationship with what the "world traveler" experience has become: "Set up in Bali, Koh Phangan, Koh Tao, Boracay, and the hordes are bound to follow. There's no way you can keep it out of the *Lonely Planet*, and once that happens it's countdown to doomsday" (*Beach* 137).

Richard wants to find experience outside the textual authority of the guidebook, and in one crucial confession he itemizes his needs and in so doing identifies his particular brand of touristic consumerism: "I wanted to witness extreme poverty. [. . .] Being in a riot was something I pursued with truly obsessive zeal. [. . .] Another list item was having a brush with my own death" (*Beach* 162). The souvenirs he wants to bring home will be narcissistic accounts of danger and risk; he wants a script he can call his own. His ambition is to hear "gunshots fired in anger" and to find out what he would do and what he would feel, when faced with the ultimate threat (162). Richard still believes the world is sufficiently adaptable to accommodate his fantasies. This is all that is left, perhaps, of the exotic alternative that, according to Chris Bongie, Conrad had already declared a "posthumous project," certainly by the time of *Nostromo* (1904) (17–18). Conrad's Jim derived from his Conway reading a heroic alter ego who confronted "savages on tropical shores" and quelled "mutinies on the high seas," but his fantasies were always grounded in a sense of duty to his fellow sailors (*Lord* 6). Once in Patusan, he realizes a version of this dream for another community, even if he ultimately fails them and the dream, as he had failed his first test on the *Patna*. Richard's duty, from the beginning, is to himself and to his own sense of authority as one who can extend and embellish the traveler's, or backpacker's, tale. In that sense his motivation is echoed in Conrad's epigraph, from Novalis, to *Lord Jim*: "It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely, the moment another soul will believe in it." The trenchant irony of *The Beach*, however, is that we witness a storyteller fatally compromised by what Walter Benjamin calls the "atrophy of experience" ("On" 161).⁸

From the very beginning Richard's experience and identity are defined by simulacra. The opening prologue introduces the reader to an interior world dominated by images from the Vietnam War, as translated by Hollywood and the films that he has avidly watched, we later learn, time and time again. Scenes and dialogue from *Platoon*, *Apoca-*

lypse Now, and *Full Metal Jacket* recreate Vietnam, more war than country, more war movie than war. And this is, appropriately, Thailand, where Thai landscapes and Thai extras have stood in for Vietnam in countless Hollywood productions. Borrowing from an encounter recorded in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) and incorporated into the script for *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), which Herr co-wrote, Garland has Richard insert himself into a combat narrative and offer a disingenuous disclaimer at the same time. This is Herr, reading graffiti off a soldier's flak jacket: "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no Evil, because I'm the meanest motherfucker in the Valley" (*Dispatches* 87). This is Richard: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil, for my name is Richard, and I was born in 1974" (*Beach* 1). In whatever heroic and dangerous adventures he contemplates, he will "fear no evil" because the world he inhabits is a simulation. He was born too late to follow the nightly news, to experience the war even from that distance, and his nationality would have denied him participation anyway. He gives himself permission, then, to play according to his own rules.

Richard's *national* identity is already subsumed by an American war and a popular culture associated with it. Citing the racial and national mix of the officers, crew, and passengers onboard the *Patna*, Christopher GoGwilt notes that Conrad was well aware of the "loosening of national coherence" in a world of constant mobility and permeable borders (95). Garland, almost a hundred years after *Lord Jim*, identifies not simply the "American century" and the dilution of Anglo-European cultural hegemony, but also a broader array of influences: the guidebooks are Australian, the creator of Tintin was a Belgian, and the technology behind the video games Richard and his generation love to play is Japanese. The novel's protagonist registers not only a loss of self-understanding rooted in nation, but also a loosening of identity encouraged by a culture that deflects experience by offering ever more elaborate forms of mediation and simulation. Richard is already in "Vietnam," to his own satisfaction, but he cannot dwell there alone; ideally it is a place that must be shared, and shared secretly.

This parallel universe is a necessary counterpoint to the ad hoc companionship of the mainstream backpacker culture he seeks to transcend, and Richard discovers his "secret sharer" on his first night in Bangkok. In establishing links between Conrad and this contemporary novel, the second echo we can identify is in the nature of that relationship and the way in which it further defines the protagonist. Daffy, an

older Scottish veteran of the backpacker trail, is a living companion only for that one night, and then barely coherent in his talk of “cancer in the corals” and a “beach”; by morning he is dead by his own hand, his wrists slit, a fitting companion for an adventure project that is already “posthumous” (*Beach* 8; Bongie 17–18). In “The Secret Sharer” Conrad describes the Captain’s first encounter with Leggatt as if it were a meeting between the living and the dead. In the darkness, over the ship’s rail he sees only a “cadaverous glow” and first assumes he has spotted a “headless corpse,” while Leggatt’s material presence on the ship seems decidedly elusive, appearing and disappearing at will (*Twixt* 97).

Daffy leaves behind a carefully drawn map of a remote island in the Gulf of Thailand’s Samui archipelago, pinned to Richard’s door. The map reminds Richard of “geography homework and tracing paper” and a teacher “handing out exercise books and sarcastic quips” (*Beach* 15). His relationship with the dead man will be in part that between student and teacher or protégé and mentor, but Daffy will also prove to be his most intimate companion. Conversations with this ghost are more meaningful than those he conducts with Etienne and Francoise, the two French travelers he shares the map with and takes with him on his journey south, or any of the assorted beach dwellers he will meet and in whose community he will dwell. Daffy may be a virtual presence, but he is always incontrovertibly there. He is more real than the Thailand Richard travels through, an external environment rendered almost invisible and far less relevant to Richard’s experience than his interior life, which is at once an emotional vacancy and a vivid theater of dream and fantasy. Marlow’s sonorous, reflective, “We live as we dream, alone,” becomes, “The fact is, I’ve never grown out of playing pretend” (*Youth* 82; *Beach* 33).

Daffy’s first reappearance is in a dream. In the same guesthouse room where he took his life, as a mosquito’s wings “pulse like a helicopter,” he nonchalantly rolls a joint in his bloodied fingers, extolling the virtues of smoking marijuana through a rifle barrel, and reinforcing the world of the Vietnam War movie Richard wishes to inhabit (*Beach* 34). In his study of Vietnam War literature, Tobey Herzog identifies *Heart of Darkness* as “a significant thematic context for discussing Vietnam”; and Garland builds on this continuity in a novel that acknowledges the filtering of that history through the cultural productions of a globally dominant entertainment industry (25). As the narrative progresses and these encounters with a dead man accumulate, Gar-

land blurs less obliquely than *his* implied mentor the line between Marlow the seeker and Kurtz the sought, between one who follows a trail and one who has paved the way, and he also conflates and elaborates upon the more general trope of the secret sharer variously utilized in Conrad's fiction. Conrad's Kurtz is a voice and a reputation until the very end, and is only briefly embodied before his death, something his skeletal frame seems to have been rehearsing for some time. Daffy is briefly embodied at the beginning, and it is his shade that haunts the narrative throughout. Richard at first appears as an anemic, post-modern Marlow, incurious about his surroundings and immune to the "moral shock" that consistently paralyzes Conrad's river captain (*Youth* 141). The Kurtz who lures him, both an internal and an external figure, is playfully loquacious and encouraging at the beginning—in his own way, an "eloquent phantom"—but the relationship and what it signifies can shift and turn, and there will be times when Daffy appears to be at Richard's heels, rather than the other way round (*Youth* 160). The key to Richard's narrative, the engine that drives it, is his metaphorical exhumation of the dead Daffy. If Richard depends on the dead for the material of his tale, then so does Marlow, as Con Coroneos reminds us: "Marlow has buried Kurtz; now he will disinter him" (118).

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's sea and river journey constitutes a narrative in motion that is constantly registering change and discovery, while Richard's travel experience is defined more by stasis. His journey from England to Thailand is meaningless; he neither leaves one world nor enters another, in real geographical or cultural terms. The other has collapsed into the same; difference and diversity do not even challenge or threaten. During his train journey south and his ferry ride to Koh Samui, nothing touches him except his own dreams and imaginings. In Martin Bock's discussion of Conrad, he isolates "the convention of the disorienting journey," where protagonists experience "sensual, cognitive, or psychological derangement," as they cross the "shadow-line" which "severs the voyager from the cultural episteme" (87). Jim, for example, crosses that line on the *Patna*, and is thereafter a self-declared outcast, but Richard's "cultural episteme," in the postmodern liminality in which he dwells, is attenuated to begin with (Bock 87). His sense of world and home is defined by a universal culture of image, simulacra, and commodity; and so he has in one sense already crossed a shadow line: disorientation has defined him from the beginning. His acquisition of Daffy as a guide, or Daffy's acquisition of him, only confirms and deepens a "derangement" that is as much cultural as psychological, as

he abandons the Thailand he is actually in—one barely noted—for a scripted Vietnam fantasy endgame (Bock 87). And as he shifts from map reader to map maker—by leaving a copy of Daffy's map with two American backpackers he has randomly befriended, or perhaps recruited, on Koh Samui—he becomes Daffy's agent, more Kurtz than Marlow, more Pied Piper than follower. In one final dream before the island and the beach are reached, he re-creates, with Daffy's help, the fall of Saigon and the escape from the embassy roof amid whirling helicopters and a "snowfall of shredded files" (*Beach* 60). It hardly matters that he was "born twenty years too late" (*Beach* 60). The authenticity he seeks is far removed from historical experience or memory. The "three-part" paradigm that Tobey Herzog identifies in the literature and memoir about the Vietnam War, and one inherited from the writers who lived through the Great War—a learning curve from innocence to experience to reflection—is missing from Richard's storytelling (14). His "memoir" reveals no original innocence and offers only experience that is atrophied and unexamined. His narrative reflects a cultural void at the end of the century, images without text, adventure as video game. Electronic games typically involve a series of obstacles that must be overcome before a task can be accomplished and a goal attained; and in Richard's case he benefits from a stock game figure in the person of Daffy, as a guide or coach. Daffy's pupil, after a boat ride, an epic swim, and the tricky negotiation of a marijuana plantation patrolled by armed guards, leads his two companions to the beach and its residents.

All Europe, and much of the Western world, has gone into the making of this community of thirty young people, its brief history rooted in the migratory patterns of the mobile and economically privileged world traveler. In flight from the world's "beaten tracks," they have collided with a significant component of the global economy, a collision that is fraught with potential danger (*Into* xxv). Their illusion of territorial possession is as vulnerable as the Pantai settlement in Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, where long established Arab traders, as well as Malay and Sulu neighbors, determine the fate of the solitary Dutch trader. Their illusion of separation and isolation is compromised by the comparative proximity of Koh Phangan, where they can replenish essential supplies and for the duration of a day trip feel superior to the backpackers who are still confined to guidebook itineraries. Daffy was one of the three community founders who have their names carved in the bark of a banyan tree, along with a date rendered only as "Year Zero," recalling Pol Pot's mad vision for Cambodia, a sinister reminder

of a late twentieth-century heart of darkness and its creator, which Margaret Drabble reinscribes for readers of Conrad in *The Gates of Ivory* (Beach 137).

This is already an alternative world, if a vulnerable one, but Richard's commitment to this new group companionship is compromised by his greater allegiance to his ghostly partner, the founder who had become disenchanted with the steady erosion of secrecy and a swelling membership fueled by the dissemination of traveler's tales, and had abandoned it to a fate he had anticipated and now wished to engineer. Richard is thus the agent of the commune's demise; a script is rewritten, the Vietnam War reinvented—or rather recast from existing reinventions of Hollywood—and a chronicle of escalating violence and collapse is set in motion. Richard, like Marlow, is "loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice" (*Youth* 141).

Richard's virtual Vietnam is rehearsed in part with the aid of the community's prized possession, a Nintendo Game Boy, whose batteries are almost as important a staple as the rice the community lives on. This hand-held world of combat is Vietnam writ small, from the first button push of *Street Fighter 2* or *Alien 3* to the final "Game Over" (Beach 110, 112, 431). Richard's passion for the small screen's scores and body counts is palpable, and this electronic microcosm is all he needs to prepare for and understand the world in which he actually lives. Richard's entire experience represents the triumph of the virtual, or in Baudrillard's terms, the "murder of the real" (61). This triumph is unnervingly evident during a supply run to Koh Phangan, where Richard and a companion find themselves in a bar watching a video of *Schindler's List*. Unmoved by the historical narrative, they are concerned only with the technique employed, in a black-and-white film, to colorize the coat worn by the young ghetto victim; their discussion begins and ends in the context of an entertainment culture. Richard eventually turns away in boredom to an old arcade game. However distant from "the world" he may think he is, or wishes to be, the East provides him with the cultural anchors he needs or takes for granted; the West is already here (Beach 142). Unlike Marlow, whose discovery of *Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* in a ruined hut puts him in touch with a world he has left behind, Richard is constantly in touch with a world he has *never* left behind. To him the Game Boy is as "unmistakably real" as the old book is to Marlow but, unlike Marlow's response, Richard's is devoid of wonder or surprise (*Youth* 99).

Richard's perceptions of the world around him are altered to accom-

modate his participation in Southeast Asian conflicts he was never able to witness. The event that he is waiting for, and has scripted, the arrival of the two American backpackers lured by the map he had left with them, will enable him to participate fully in a much more deadly game of pretend. As Leggatt is to the captain-narrator of "The Secret Sharer," this *truly* imaginary friend helps him transform his identity, as he offers him a path to self-realization and action. But once again this opportunity has no bearing on the courage and responsibility of leadership. With Leggatt swimming for his freedom and his life, the Captain is finally alone with his ship and his crew, embracing the "perfect communion of a seaman with his first command" (*Twixt* 143). Richard is alone with a ghost, his own narcissism, and a tale guaranteed to enhance any backpacker's reputation.

Daffy makes his first appearance in daylight when Richard is put in sole charge of the lookout, and after the presence of Sammy and Zeph and two additional companions on the neighboring island has been confirmed. This is now the "best case scenario": "I wanted them to come" (*Beach* 251). He will witness the inevitable confrontation between the innocent newcomers and the plantation guards. He is suffering from an overheated form of what Tim Page has called "Namstalgia" (64); and it increasingly governs everything he sees and imagines, as he plays a private game with imagined snipers, buried claymores, and radio contact with headquarters: "in deference to video games I gave myself three lives" (*Beach* 254). Daffy is now dressed for the part in combat fatigues and carrying an M16. This is the Vietnam he had promised Richard and the Vietnam Richard had wanted. The "uninvited guests" that Richard had invited meet their fate; they are challenged, beaten, shots are fired, and their bodies are dragged away (*Beach* 354).

Conrad's Marlow periodically admits, and demonstrates, his loyalty to Kurtz. Garland's Richard and Daffy are loyal to each other, in "a kind of partnership" that is perversely depthless and performative (*Youth* 119). The Marlow-Kurtz, Kurtz-Marlow axis is revived, redeployed, and manipulated to match a new world of hollow men. In Daffy's penultimate appearance he responds to Richard's imperative, "Tell me why you're here," with Kurtz's gnomic, "The horror," which he repeats four times, refusing to answer Richard's repeatedly exasperated question: "what horror" (*Beach* 416–7)? It is not simply that Richard fails to understand Daffy's allusion to Conrad, or even fails to remember Marlon Brando's line in *Apocalypse Now*; it is that he cannot see, or see beyond, "horror" at all, he cannot annotate it; he cannot begin to judge its pos-

sible meanings for Daffy or himself. There is no "glimpsed truth," however obscure, merely an irritating interruption of the spectacle that he is enjoying (*Youth* 151). This single direct allusion to Conrad's canonical novella is, I suggest, the moment in Garland's text where Conrad himself appears, secretly, like an agent, or a time traveler, and as quickly, disappears: "He sighed, and with a quick movement, twisted out of my grip. 'The horror,' he said a final time, and ducked through the doorway, and was gone" (*Beach* 417). But in the world in which Richard lives, and that has defined him, Conrad's citing of his own text, as it were, and his reminder of its urgent and permanent significance, can only register as a remote and ghostly communication. Conrad can only manifest himself in terms of the character's ignorance of him.⁹ Finally Richard remains the unreliable narrator not because he tells an untrue story but because he has no understanding of what his story means. The exchange with Daffy represents a kind of epiphany, but for the reader, not for Richard. In Richard's world Conrad becomes a revenant as the moral weight and resonance of his fiction fades. He becomes almost invisible, unnamed, reduced to a quote of a quote, a tag line whose source is unknown and whose meaning is opaque. And whether or not one feels that Conrad (or any figure of high modernist culture) has effectively vanished from post-modern culture, one recognizes the accuracy of his representation in the mass culture that Garland depicts.

Richard's eventual escape from the island, along with four companions, and their return to Bangkok, constitutes no more than an epilogue. Soon he is back in London, in front of his word processor, putting the finishing touches to a narrative that has been frequently interrupted by metafictional asides. The novel ends with a gesture that sustains his self-identification as a veteran, not of the Vietnam War itself, but cinematic representations of it: "I play video games, I smoke a little dope, I got my thousand-yard stare. I carry a lot of scars. I like the way that sounds. I carry a *lot* of scars" (*Beach* 436). These scars are a figure for the history and culture which actually makes up Richard's virtuality, but which he remains ignorant of, as he is ignorant of Daffy's textual reference to Conrad. It is only important to him that he has become the hero of his own traveler's tale, his own war memoir, and this separates him from all the others on the pilgrim's route, clutching their *Lonely Planet* guidebooks.

In his memoir of Vietnam and the fraternity of journalists who covered the war, Michael Herr recognized the difficulty of "reporting meaningfully about death" and the difficulty of resisting the "glamour"

of war in a world that had surrendered to the power of the image (215, 248). They had all seen too many movies and had “spent too long in television city” (209). Before Baudrillard articulated it, Herr understood the impossibility of discovering even “the corp(se) of the Real” in a culture so determined by the hyperreal (Baudrillard 61). Garland recognizes this too and refuses to grant Richard any more authenticity than he and his culture merit (61). He has returned to “the world” and acquired a sufficiently convincing, but not too taxing, version of post-traumatic stress disorder (*Beach* 354). He wanted the whole mythology intact, and in his view he got it right.

Thirteen months separate the completion of Richard's story from the events themselves; twenty years separate Marlow's storytelling in “Youth” from the last voyage of the *Judea*, and his audience is not an inanimate computer screen but a group of companions, all with years of service in the merchant navy. Towards the close of his tale, Marlow summons one last panoptic gaze that takes in the sea, the sky, the palms, and the native houses: “This was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and somber, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise” (*Youth* 41). Marlow's portal to another world is sealed off in the first narrator's final sentence where “youth,” “strength,” and “the romance of illusions” are all obliterated by time and the burden of experience (*Youth* 42). At one point Marlow reminds his listeners, “Remember, I was twenty” (*Youth* 15). Richard does not need to remind us that he still belongs to that age group, and that his illusions are fabricated not by literary romance but by the fabrications of a media culture. Conrad's “Youth” sustains and celebrates romance—as it also celebrates the living power of the storyteller—and it imposes the lessons of maturity and the vulnerability of Western presumption. Garland's equally seductive, yet curiously severe, novel identifies the only realm of adventure possible in an age in which Conrad's “geography triumphant” has dissolved into long-haul air routes and exhaustive guidebook entries, and where the East can only be imagined, and enjoyed, in terms of a West exported virtually intact (*Last* 13). Garland's novel is certainly a critique of backpacker culture—hence its severity—but it is also a page-turning adventure that has seduced a vast readership and, with its film adaptation, has encouraged young travelers to seek out the beach used for location filming as well as other imagined secrets found only off some beaten track.¹⁰ The contexts are not identical, of course, but there is a sense in which, as Conrad has been accused of being colonialism's “accomplice” as well as its

"enemy," so Garland might be charged with validating a form of neo-colonial tourism as much as questioning its motives and lamenting its consequences (Coroneos 108).

Marlow's Orient may have been something he "read about," but this prior construction in no way diminishes the experience, it enhances it (*Youth* 12). Garland's traveler inherits an exhausted narrative, and it is one he hasn't even read. His head, full of movie dialogue, television scripts, comic book heroes, and video games, is adrift in a world where travel is just one more virtual experience. A lament now for any "magic" or "blessed" name, such as Bangkok, would be pointless, and in Richard's *fin de siècle* quest for adventure, there is no Captain Beard, with his "rare internal gift of simplicity of heart and rectitude of soul" to inspire and mentor; there is only a grotesque *doppelgänger* programmed to deliver the right level of fantasy (*Youth* 15, 2). To acknowledge, and extend, Patrick Brantlinger's terminology, the *fin de siècle* "imperial gothic" has become postcolonial gothic (227).¹¹ All that remains of travel in a postmodern age is a ghost road, and the one phantom that Richard cannot identify haunts his journey in ways he will never comprehend.

NOTES

1. Reviewers variously identified *Treasure Island*, *Heart of Darkness*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Huxley's *Island*, and John Fowles's *The Magus*, but most preferred to single out William Golding. Giles Fodden's judgment that "*The Beach* is very much an hallucinatory *Lord of the Flies* for twenty-somethings" is representative (24). James Annesley briefly mentions Golding, as well as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude" and "At the Bay," Ken Nunn's "surf noir" novels, and the "patterns and ideals of romanticism" that are attached to "beach culture," this "site of rebellion and escape" (560, 552). However, Annesley is less interested in literary models and prefers instead to focus on globalization and the "relationship between culture, tourism, and the market," subjects that he illuminates expertly in the context of Garland's travelers (561). Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, a fusion of history, autobiography, and fiction, is set in Shanghai before and during the Japanese occupation, and its protagonist, Jim, who ages from 11 to 13 during the course of his story, is, like Richard, steeped in the popular culture of his time, and has the same tendency to filter his experiences through Hollywood films and comic book heroes. War's destruction becomes spectacle, and war's victims, merely extras.

2. Aside from Gene Moore's essay, the broad field of Conrad's legacy is addressed by various hands in *Conradiana* 22 (1991) and by Jeffrey Meyers (186–206). Margaret Drabble's debt to Conrad is addressed by Dwight Purdy (259–66), Roger Bowen (278–98), and David Leon Higdon (31–42). Most recently

the contributors to Kaplan, Mallios, and White's *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives* further identify his prescience and relevance. To cite a definition in the title of Benita Parry's essay in this volume, on *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's "After-Life" seems especially pertinent in this context (39). And in her introduction to *Almayer's Folly*, Nadine Gordimer praises Conrad for "understanding the concept of progress and its perilous gains, the moral market of human action and feeling that we now posit as globalization" (x).

3. Jason Burke, in an article on the microculture of Khao San Road, qualifies Richard's assessment in this way: "The transition that takes place there is not from one culture to another, it is from one Western identity to another Western identity" (5). In his commentary on this same backpacker sanctuary, Seth Mydens goes further: "It is the black hole at the center of a shrinking world where The Age of Discovery has ended" (4).

4. *Lonely Planet* guidebooks, an Australian enterprise, were launched in 1973 with *Across Asia on the Cheap*, followed by *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring* in 1975. Today the Lonely Planet "empire" covers the globe, from Albania to Zanzibar.

5. The publication history of "Geography and Some Explorers" is usefully outlined by Ray Stevens, and Felix Driver situates Conrad's essay in the context of cultural geography and imperial history (197–202; 3–8).

6. David Crouch's focus on travel and the quest for "authenticity" is indebted to Dean MacCannell: "Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it in the simplicity, poverty, chastity, or purity of others" (*Tourist* 41).

7. Eric J. Leed explores the "structure of the journey"—departure ("reaching for abroad"), passage ("the seductions of passage"), arrival ("the stranger at the gate")—in his consideration of the "mind of the traveler" (25–108).

8. This telling phrase is taken from Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire, but in "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," he also asserts that in the telling of stories "experience has fallen in value," as any "glance at a newspaper" will confirm. See also Mark Conroy's use of Benjamin in his discussion of Conrad's revival and eventual abandonment of the "artisanal mode" of storytelling (89).

9. The reader will recognize what David Leon Higdon identifies as the "intellectual game played between the author and the reader at the character's expense" (31).

10. The film version of *The Beach* (2000), directed by Danny Boyle and made on location in Thailand, is marred by a muddled screenplay that abandons the book's distinctive point of view and so fails to present Richard as an unreliable narrator. As played by Leonardo DiCaprio, he becomes an American; and romance, absent in the novel, is inevitably foregrounded. Garland's political and cultural ironies are lost, and the violent disintegration of the commune is side-stepped. In a sense the film sanitizes the story for the very culture and age group Garland's novel is at pains to critique.

11. Brantlinger elaborates on this useful coinage in his chapter entitled, "Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880–1914" (227–53). The occult element in Garland's novel, the ghost only Richard sees and converses with, in conjunction with the phantom echoes of

Heart of Darkness, bring to mind Henry James's *fin de siècle* gothic mystery, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a tale Conrad admired and one to which he may well have owed a debt in the composition of his African tale. See Roger Ramsey (137–45).

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