A CONTINUATION OF MYTH:  
THE CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF MYTHIC AMERICAN INNOCENCE  
IN BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI’S LAST TANGO IN PARIS AND THE DREAMERS

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ABSTRACT

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The following thesis aims to track the evolution and application of certain fundamental American cultural mythologies across international borders. While the bulk of my discussion will focus on the cycle of mythic American innocence, I will pay fair attention to the sub-myths which likewise play vital roles in composing the broad myth of American innocence in relation to understanding American identities – specifically, the myth of the Virgin West (or America-as-Eden), the yeoman farmer and individualism. When discussing the foundation of cultural American mythologies, I draw specifically from the traditional myth-symbol writers in American Studies. Those works which I reference are: Henry Nash Smith’s, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Leo Marx’s, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* and R.W.B. Lewis’s, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*.

I focus much of my discussion on the applicability of the myth of innocence, rather than the validity of the actual myth throughout history. In this sense, I follow the myth as a cycle of innocence lost and regained in American culture – as an ideal which can never truly reach its conclusion for as long as America is invested in two broad definitions of innocence: the American Adam and the Noble Savage. By considering “innocence” as both naïve and pure (in the sense of Adam) and violent and primitive (in the sense of the Noble Savage), I propose that the myth of American innocence finds its timelessness in its cultural malleability. That is, as long as the myth continues to evolve with cultural and societal advances, its relevance will be omnipresent. However, in order
to widen the field of myth-symbol scholarship in American Studies, I have opted to filter the myth of innocence through an international lens of Italian cinema.

After establishing an understanding of mythology in American culture, I dedicate the bulk of my thesis to tracing the myth of innocence through Bernardo Bertolucci’s films from 1972 – 2003, paying specific attention to Last Tango in Paris and The Dreamers. While discussing the initial impression of American identity in post-World War II Italy, I conclude that it was through traditional American literature and cinema that Italians formed a sense of Americanism not wholly different from national American identities. However, by exploring Bertolucci’s depiction of Americanism through his films, I ultimately conclude that the application of American innocence, while certainly colored by an international perspective, nonetheless does reflect a cycle of the American Adam and the Noble Savage in much the same way that American culture reinforces the same mythic cycle. I conclude that this international mythological approach to America as either Adam or Noble Savage is contingent upon America’s political, social and economic positioning in the world community.
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INTRODUCTION

Bernardo Bertolucci, the Italian-born filmmaker, made his first English language and American studio funded film with 1972’s *Last Tango in Paris*. The plot of his film was quite simple: a recently widowed, middle-aged American finds himself searching for passion, love, escape and purpose in Paris. However, thirty years later, Bertolucci would find himself revisiting – and reworking – the identical themes in *Last Tango in Paris*, in 2003’s *The Dreamers*. Like *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Dreamers* focuses its plot around another American – this time a young college student – who relocates to Paris to study cinema. The two films, while thematically similar, work in conflict with each other primarily in their depiction of American character, behavior and identity. However, the divergence of the films’ two characters, I propose, correlates closely with the cyclical nature of the myth of American innocence (and the subsequent, loss of innocence) and in this sense, the two films are more alike in their representations of Americans than they are different. Thus, I intend to study in this thesis, the evolution of an inherent American myth and to discuss how myths can be translated and interpreted by European cultures. Through *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Dreamers*, I hope to illustrate the cultural and societal motivations behind the evolution and construction involved in the perpetuation of the myth of American innocence.

Before discussing the films, or even Bertolucci, I intend to devote my first chapter to the methodologies pioneered by American Studies myth-symbol scholars. This section will focus largely on the birth of myth scholarship through the works of Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* and R.W.B. Lewis’ *The
American Adam. While these works all deal with separate myths, I will introduce the idea that American innocence is a type of umbrella myth, encompassing other sub-myths in American Studies, namely: the virginal west, the American Adam, agrarian sufficiency and New World idealism. I will also address the many critiques of myth-symbol scholarship; that is, I will both recognize the flaws in this type of scholarship, but I will also argue why it is necessary to work within such a methodology for this thesis. Specifically, I will honor the recent scholarship in American Studies which denounces myth-symbol thought as being representative of only a selective privileged class. Yet, I will also contend that the sheer visibility of such myths in contemporary society (in this case, Bertolucci’s films) calls for a reexamination of the relevance of myth-symbol scholarship in American Studies. I will diverge from the methodologies of Smith, Marx and Lewis, who relied on traditional American literature for their myth applications (which also led to the root of their criticisms). Instead, I will construct a myth analysis neither through an American nor a novelist, but rather through a cultural outsider. In this sense, I hope to both broaden the field of myth-symbol thought in American Studies, while also distancing myself from the almost universal criticisms of myth-symbol scholarship. Most importantly, in this section, I will not make explicit claims regarding the validity of the myth of American innocence – or the academic genre of American mythology, in general – but I will merely use mythology to trace a European’s perception of American character and identity.

After establishing a foundation on which to analyze the myth of innocence, I will briefly discuss the cycle of the myth; that is, how the myth of innocence relies both on an understanding of innocence and on an expectation of a loss of innocence. In the past,
scholars have attempted to track the point at which America lost its innocence; I am not particularly interested in trying to answer such a seemingly rhetorical question. Rather, I will suggest that one such specific moment has not definitively occurred. Historians have traced the end of American innocence from everything ranging from Pocahontas’s death, King Philip’s War, The Civil War, the end of World War I, the end of World War II, the late 1960-early 1970s (Vietnam and social revolution) to, most recently, September 11, 2001. Yet, in every one of those deaths of innocence, America must have somehow regained her innocence in order for her to lose it once again. This begs the questions: why does the myth continue to reinstate itself and why do Americans continue to reinvest in a myth that technically died before the country even began? Here, I will introduce my theory on the application of American innocence. I will present that there are two ways that American innocence is lost: the first involves what I would call a “preemptive loss.” This could be applied to a situation in which America actively engages in an action or activity that shatters the perceptions of our own myth. In the framework of dealing with two Vietnam-era films in this thesis, I will limit my application of this theory to the Vietnam War (though it could very well be applied to any number of events preceding it).

The second way in which a loss of innocence can occur, I will propose, is through a “retroactive loss.” In these instances, innocence never seemed present until it was somehow taken “away.” “Retroactive loss” is also contingent upon a sub-myth – that of American New World idealism as compared to Europe’s Old World adulthood. In these cases, outsiders, who look towards America as young and naïve, generally put a loss of innocence upon America. Most recently, a “retroactive loss” could be evident in the attacks of September 11th and the subsequent perception of Americans as young,
ignorant, naïve, innocent, idealistic and arrogant in the preceding moments before 9/11. Again, in the interest of keeping these theories applicable to the scope of this thesis, I will use September 11th as my primary example, as its effects created a cultural context for the making of *The Dreamers*, though I openly acknowledge that other examples of this type of loss of innocence are plentiful in other moments of history.

Following this lengthy discussion of American mythologies, I will introduce a fairly short chapter on Bernardo Bertolucci. In this section, I hope to discuss Bertolucci’s background, how his childhood in fascist Italy influenced both his politics and his perception of America during World War II and most importantly, how American cinema in the 1950s played into Bertolucci’s view of America and Americans. Not to be overlooked, however, should be a discussion of the influence of French New Wave cinema on Bertolucci. Also included in this section will be a discussion of Bertolucci’s early, Italian films and how these films initially addressed themes that continue to resonate in Bertolucci’s later films. Additionally, this chapter will analyze those American Bertolucci films which overtly address a loss of innocence in his American characters, but to which I will not dedicate exclusive chapters. Specifically, these films include, *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty*. While fitting well within the scope of this thesis, I have opted not to include these films in depth for two necessary reasons: *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Dreamers*, while made thirty years apart, both deal with a common time and place. In dealing solely with these two films, I feel that a back-to-back analysis will compliment the thread of the thesis. Second, by consciously omitting *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty*, I am allowing myself a natural outlet for developing this thesis into a larger project, should I choose to continue with an academic career.
Still, I would be remiss to not make mention of the similarities of Bertolucci’s portrayal of American innocence – and loss of it – in all four of these films. Thus, I will use this chapter to address succinctly the significance of *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty*.

Following the Bertolucci chapter, I will introduce an analysis of *Last Tango in Paris* which will include production analysis, content analysis, cultural analysis and response analysis. Within my production analysis, I will focus on the production choices involved in the making and marketing of *Last Tango in Paris*. Specifically, I will discuss the casting of Marlon Brando (and Brando’s own mythic existence), the significance of this being Bertolucci’s first English language film as well as his first film starring an American, and his first work to premiere at an American film festival (New York Film Festival). That being the case, I will contend that Bertolucci was consciously reaching American audiences for the first time and I will hope to explore what it was that Bertolucci was trying to convey to this audience.

This will lead directly into a cinematic/content analysis of the film. Regarding the myth of innocence, the film lends itself very clearly to the destruction of innocence in the form of its main protagonist/antagonist American character – Marlon Brando’s “Paul.” Importantly, we learn early in the film that Paul was raised on a mid-western farm, yet it was the humiliation of a farming childhood that made him leave America. In this description, I will suggest that Bertolucci is setting the stage for the fallen mythic-American. Due in large part to Paul’s rejection of the pivotal agrarian myth, we can begin to construct Paul as a metaphor for America during Vietnam. Mythologically speaking, American identity had come to collapse in on itself (and in fact, this era was also when American Studies as a discipline began to reject its founding myth-symbol
school, calling it too idealistic). Paul has not only lost his innocence, but he has become a kind of poison to Jeanne, Brando’s “innocent” French counterpart.

I will conclude my discussion of *Last Tango in Paris* with a response analysis and will look at the similarities and differences between the American and European responses to the film. I will rely on contemporary reviews and scholarly analyses of the film; however, the bulk of academic writing on this film addresses only its perverse and political leanings, with little discussion of its cultural influence and impact. Thus, I hope to contribute to another level of interpretation of *Last Tango in Paris* in the context of cultural studies.

Like the *Last Tango in Paris* chapter, the *The Dreamers* chapter will also rely on subsections, though the subsections will be slightly different in nature. I will begin with a content analysis, but will include in this section, similarities and differences between the Americans in *Last Tango in Paris* (Paul) and *The Dreamers* (Matthew). However, this section will also briefly discuss films that Bertolucci references within *The Dreamers*, specifically, *Shock Corridor* (American, 1963) and *Breathless* (French, 1960). Naturally, I will look to the American films as a way of demonstrating Bertolucci’s ideas about America, while I will reference the French New Wave films as suggestive of the revolutionary mentality of the film’s three main characters: Isabelle, Theo and Matthew.

The cultural analysis of *The Dreamers* will largely include the years in which it was made – late 2001 and 2002 – but it will also focus, to an extent, on the years that it is meant to depict. Like *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Dreamers* takes place in Vietnam-era Paris, but it approaches the era and environment from drastically different points of view. Not surprisingly, then, where Brando’s character in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972)
portrayed as a middle-aged, beastly American devoid of innocence, Matthew is the opposite; he is a young, idealistic student from San Diego, taken – to the extent of threat – by French sophistication and revolution. I will suggest that acting within the cycle of mythic innocence, Matthew has now become a re-embodiment of American innocence in a post 9/11 society.

Most importantly, however, is a look at the reception of the film, which is how I will conclude my analysis of *The Dreamers*. There have been no scholarly articles written on this film, and the few popular/review articles that have been written on it deal almost exclusively with its NC-17 rating (as *Last Tango in Paris*’ often deal with its X rating), or its overarching plot similarities to *Last Tango in Paris*. However, no articles address the conflicts between the two films or the role which the differing cultures of 1970s America and Europe and twenty-first century America and Europe played in influencing Bertolucci’s need to revisit the same moment in time through two different lenses or how these cultural influences ultimately contributed to and perpetuated the cycle of a fundamental myth of American innocence.
Perhaps one of the most prevalent and continuous debates to plague the discipline of American Studies (I would suggest that Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land has been the most pivotal work in formally catalyzing such a debate) has been the ways in which history and mythology coexist in a paradoxically symbiotic conflict with each other – how American Studies scholars can appropriate history for the sake of perpetuating a cultural myth and, likewise, apply such cultural myths to explain the course of history. The general criticism, of course, in studying mythology to the extent that Smith, Leo Marx or R.W.B. Lewis did in Virgin Land, The Machine in the Garden and The American Adam respectively has been outlined quite extensively by Bruce Kuklick in his essay, Myth and Symbol in American Studies in which he critiques the assumption that myths speak “of ‘the anonymous popular mind,’ ‘the widespread desire of Americans,’ ‘the imagination of the American people,’ ‘the majority of the American people,’ ‘the popular conception of American life,’ ‘the American view of life,’ or ‘the average American.’”¹ The contention, therefore, is that such a “universal American character” has neither existed, nor can ever exist, and the use of mythology is a broad façade, used to amalgamate a country which could not otherwise be amalgamated.

With the movements towards multiculturalism and postmodernism in both society and academia, the role of reading mythology in understanding culture has become progressively rebutted, significantly due to its admittedly overarching themes of
collectivity and, at times, utopian reworking of history. However, I intend to propose in this thesis, that fundamental cultural myths, when not aimed to specifically define a particular cultural identity or historical moment, should not be overlooked in their transcendence. I am not particularly concerned with the validity of American myths in forming a collective identity; rather, I am interested in following the cycle and metamorphoses of a myth – how a myth can morph and conform in accordance to cultural and societal changes and how such a myth can thus, continue to represent the symbols and images of a culture long after the birth of such a myth has been forgotten.

Before isolating a specific myth, it is important to discuss the approach to analyzing mythology and the degree to which such myths hold cultural agency in shaping a sense of national memory and identity. Interestingly, as much as Kuklick critiques the traditional myth-symbol approach to American Studies, he takes issue not with the actual discussion of mythology, but with the cultural universality which can be concluded through such myths. For Kuklick, “symbols and myths at best reflect empirical fact, and so are never themselves factual. So if images are of the order of symbols and myths, and the latter are not factual but ‘mental constructs,’ then images are also mental constructs, states of mind, however accurately they may refer the factual.”\(^2\) That is, the danger of studying myths and symbols is problematic in the sense that personal subjectivity can neither speak of historical accuracy nor can it be used to construct a collective “American Mind” – as such a “mind” would be composed of only those social groups to which the myth directly applies. Nevertheless, Kuklick does acknowledge, “indeed, one of the primary purposes of the American Studies movement is to demonstrate the way in which these ‘collective’ images and symbols can be used to explain the behavior of the people
of the United States.” This prompts the question: to what extent can American Studies scholars rely on cultural mythology when analyzing recurrent themes in our historical memory, folklore and perhaps most important, in constructing and perpetuating a sense of identity in our popular culture? Further, how can one study a popular myth without subjecting himself to the general criticisms of the genre – that is, how can one justly circumvent the idea that mythology is merely representative of a dominant culture?

I will not propose any definitive answers to these questions, yet I will suggest that within the scope of this thesis, the answers to these questions are rooted in the malleability – not necessarily the validity – of the myth. If we see “the function of myth [as] largely utopian: [that] it provides a vision of the future without providing in and of itself an essential dynamic element which might produce means for bringing about any changes in the present order of things,” then cultural myths – in this sense – are not aimed to speak on behalf of the accuracy of a collective mind or even prove that there is a collective mind. Rather, they simply show that within a culture there exists a cycle of mythology – a cycle which serves merely to reflect, but not change, the perceptions of a cultural identity. To this point, should we focus on one of the broadest of all American myths – the myth of American innocence – we can shift our focus from questioning the accuracy of the myth – that is, claiming universal innocence in America – to questioning and understanding the origin, the reoccurrence, the evolutions and the necessity of the myth. The myth of innocence, however, being an umbrella myth, composed of various other subsequent myths, is uniquely defined as much by its origins as it is by its mutations – paradoxical mutations, which seem to have resulted from the very same ideals for which the myth stands.
John Steinbeck wrote in 1962, “Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths.”\(^5\) When applying this statement to the original basis of American innocence and the ways in which the myth has been contorted to apply to the evolution of American culture – from the closing of the frontier to industrialization to the development into a world superpower – the Steinbeckian paradox is highlighted simply in the ways in which the myth-makers mold a myth to serve a sense of cultural evolution. In other words, as much as Americans may have grown out of the myth of innocence, the myth nonetheless has conformed to America’s cultural maturation, resulting in a paradoxical dual myth of innocence: one which includes both “Adam” (in this sense, *The American Adam*, as R.W.B. Lewis has immortalized him in *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*) before the fall – pure and without sin, in the most traditional ways, as well as “Adam” after the fall – a Noble Savage whose innocence is defined less by his purity (it is common that he would have none), but more by his simplistic, almost, “troglodytory” approach to life. Ultimately, then, what once began as a fairly traditional myth of rebirth in a virgin land – that is, an unsettled America – has split to encompass both the “purely innocent” and the “innocents” who are pure in only their brutality and primitivism, thus causing an often overlooked paradox in American mythology.

Before examining the extent to which these two “Adams” coexist within American culture and the ways in which both national and international events perpetuate the cycle of “Adams,” we must first address the other myths from which innocence has sprung (or, which innocence springs). Perhaps the single most prevalent theme within
American mythology and identities is that of *la terra americana*: the connections with Americans and the land. The fascination with, or one could suggest, the codependence of Americans with the land is lionized within cultural mythology so much so that it has a vocal presence in nearly every other defining mythology: naturally, Thomas Jefferson’s mythic yeoman farmer flourishing in an agrarian society is perhaps the most obvious example. Yet consider the myth of the frontier, the American Dream (without the vastness of land, there would surely be no opportunity), the idea of rugged individualism – the cowboy who finds his destiny in the Western plains, or the mythic nomad – the wandering drifter who finds work (and often some sort of moral renewal) in his travels across the country, and of course, the myth most interconnected to innocence, the myth of the garden – or the myth of America as a virgin land.

While focusing mainly on the effects of technology on the frontier, Leo Marx dedicates a large portion of *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* to painting an image of what the frontier, or to use his words, “the garden,” was once considered (and perhaps still is, within our mythology). “To express America as a garden,” Marx writes, “is to express aspirations still considered utopian – aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence.” However, while Marx, like Smith and Lewis, takes much of his mythological reading from literary analyses of Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman and Faulkner, one should not overlook that Marx begins his discussion of the land with the initial European impression of America, prior to an established government, and importantly, prior to the settling of the land. In referencing “Elizabethan ideals of America [which] were invested in visual images of a virgin land,” Marx contends that
Elizabethan voyagers “were drawing upon utopian aspirations that Europeans always had cherished, and that had given rise, long before the discovery of America, to a whole series of idealized, imaginary worlds.” In this sense, it is not a particularly bold statement to suggest that the idea of American innocence was rooted in the displaced desire of European rebirth – a rebirth which would become tangible in Lewis’ “Adam.”

When discussing the birth of the American Adam, Lewis, like Marx, cites innocence as defined less by settlers (who would soon be defined as “Americans”), but by removed Europeans in response to the promise of rebirth that lay in a “pure” land: “the American was to be acknowledged in his complete emancipation from the history of mankind. He was to be recognized now for what he was – a new Adam, miraculously free of family and race, untouched by those dismal conditions which prior tragedies and entanglements monotonously prepared for the newborn European.” Thus, when viewing the still “pure” or unsettled land of America as virginal, the birth of an American Adam occurred simply in the renewal of identity in America – a renewal which was emancipated from the “history of mankind,” as Lewis might suggest. However, within this initial creation of an American Adam, we already encounter perhaps the most basic paradox of the myth of American innocence: American innocence was not actually conceived out of innocence. That is, if the European settlers saw in America a mythic garden in which to resurrect paradise, they were only just doing that – rediscovering innocence. In other words, Adam had already “fallen” before his American birth; what America provided for the construction of innocence was not purity in its virginal form, but a second chance for innocence. In this sense, the myth of American innocence does not necessarily lend itself to the purity of character, but to the belief in rebirth, second
chances and, most importantly, a cycle of renewal – a cycle which has allowed for Americans to lose and regain innocence continuously throughout history, without necessarily recognizing a falsity in myth. Thus, despite the inevitable contradictions that exist within the American myth of innocence, the myth continues to thrive because, in its most primitive form, it never promised a virginal Adam – it just promised Adam an opportunity to regain innocence. Therefore, if Marx asserts that America was seen as a “paradise to be regained”\textsuperscript{10} – importantly, not a paradise to be discovered, then the American Adam – or the myth of innocence – was born in America out of a conscious effort to erase sin, or in this case, history, and to construct a premeditated renewal of youth. What was, therefore established was a mythic country and a mythic people liberated from an identifiable history of “burden of doubt and guilt [that] had been disposed of when the whole range of European experience had been repudiated.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus, if we see the birth of an American Adam, and likewise the birth of a cultural myth, as indicative of both the motivations from which the myth was created, yet also indicative of the paradoxes which it represents, it is possible to further discuss the two conflicting versions of American innocence and the cycle of innocence which continues to perpetuate the initial desires of European renewal in American land within contemporary American culture.

By again making reference to the land as a catalyst in the formation of the myth of innocence, we can trace the seemingly incongruous versions of innocence as being continuations of the two opposing perceptions of the “American Garden.” That is, “in a sense, America was both Eden and a howling desert; the actual conditions of life in the New World did lend plausibility to both images.”\textsuperscript{12} While this conglomerate of Eden
composed of images of infinite resources, “the savages, the limitless spaces, and the violent climate of the new country did threaten to engulf the new civilization.” In following directly within this dichotomy of American land, the two versions of American innocence were born: the American Adam “before the fall” – pure and virginal in his sheer youth and naïveté and Adam “after the fall” – the Noble Savage whose brutality and violence refutes the very essence of purity, but exemplifies a type American innocence conceived out of natural primitivism.

In assuming that American innocence is more representative of a cyclical renewal of innocence, rather than “Edenic” innocence, it appears that Adam “before the fall” could be more properly classified as Adam before the “American fall.” If Europeans successfully renewed a sense of innocence in America (which the myth certainly supports as valid), then it is conclusive to suggest that while the American Adam may not have been conceived out of pure innocence, but out of European rebirth, the result was still a fairly Edenic version of Adam. Perhaps, then, the proper definition of the American Adam is as Lewis identifies him: “Adam before the fall…His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay before him.” Further, Lewis extends his image of an American Adam to include that of an American-Adamic hero, suggesting ultimately that in a pre-fall Adam, heroism is representative in Adam’s vulnerability and his peripheral positioning to contemporary society. Almost painting the American Adam as a type of martyr in the preservation of innocence, Lewis foils the interconnection of innocence and heroism through Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, suggesting that the heroism of the American Adam is in his “radically affecting the world and [being] radically affected by
it; [being] defeated, perhaps even destroyed – beaten…betrayed, abandoned – but leaving his mark upon the world and a sign in which conquest may later become possible for the survivors.”15 In this sense, Adam’s youthful vulnerability characterizes his heroism. In the same way that innocence lends itself to selflessness, the heroism of Lewis’ Adam is defined by the purity of Adam’s intentions: he is not a hero to the extent that he consciously changes the world. Rather, his heroism is defined by his allowance to be influenced by the world as much as he influences the world. Likewise, his heroism extends beyond defeat or destruction. Ultimately, Lewis suggests that Adam may lose his innocence, but it is in this loss that Adam becomes the hero; as he is “hanged, beaten, shot, betrayed, abandoned,”16 others are left with signs for survival.

The second identifiable quality of Adamic heroism that Lewis presents is the simple separation of Adam and the world around him. “The Adamic hero is an ‘outsider,’” Lewis writes, “but he is ‘outside’ in a curiously staunch and artistically demanding manner. He is to be distinguished from the kind of outsider – the dispossessed, the superfluous, the alienated, the exiled – who began to enter European fiction in the twentieth century.”17 This “distinction” of outsiders, however, involves the specificity of physical space. The hero to which Lewis refers, in twentieth century European fiction is the philosophical hero – the outsider in a metaphysical way: he has not really left any place other than his own self. On the other hand, Lewis’ categorization of Adamic heroism is in the actual relocation and the subsequent “comic, disastrous, or triumphant consequences,”18 that emerge from his entering into a new reality which signify Adam’s heroism. Thus, Lewis has outlined a sense of the American Adam as a kind of second coming of the European Adam. He is both a being, and a construction of
the quest for European renewal of innocence, and while he has once fallen, he has again been reborn in the virginity of the mythic American garden – and though perhaps not capable of original purity, his heroism is defined both by his unknowing youth and his paradoxical search for maturity outside of the garden.

However, if the pre-fall American Adam is born out of the promise of Eden, one must ask, what happens to Adam when the garden is, instead, an untamed wilderness? Within this second reading of America-as-Eden (or in this case, as the opposite of Eden), we can see the emergence of Adam after the “American fall.” While attempting to bridge the theoretical distance between the two Adams in *The American Myth: Paradise (to be) Regained*, Frederic Carpenter categorizes the second Adam as an extension of Rousseau’s mythic Noble Savage. “Living happily in a state of noble primitivism,” Carpenter writes, the American “lived, free and innocent and uncultured, in the isolated wilderness of the new world.”

Thus, while nearly all “valued logic has assumed that the doctrine of progress to be achieved by means of a return to primitive nature is patently absurd,” Americans define “the ‘primitive’ paradise, which the idea of primitivism celebrates, is (classically) not the ‘primeval’ wilderness of pre-history, but rather the ‘primal’ ideal of mankind.” Consequently, the innocence represented by Noble Savagery is liberated from the actual physical state of the “garden” and is, instead, defined by its primitive human characteristics. As a result, then, it would have been logical for “most American novelists, like the original narrators of the Adamic myth, [to have described] their primitive Eden in terms of past history, and the supposedly ‘noble’ savagery of deerslayers and Indians.” Ultimately, Carpenter contrasts the “pastoral innocence” of Lewis’ American Adam with the brutality (brutal in both the description of the landscape
as well as the primitivism of this “new” Adam) as characteristic of “Noble Savagery” innocence. Moreover, Carpenter suggests that the myth of innocence proposes both Adams’ need to renew innocence, albeit in drastically different ways. Lewis’s Adam, as we have discussed, attempts his renewal through the traditional imagery of innocence, while “the fallen Adam seek[s] to regain…innocence (or ‘simplicity’) in a new, industrial America,” and thus, primitivism, much like the initial European quest for renewal, is merely a byproduct of the physical and psychological retreat to simplicity in the face of an expanding – or maturing – America.

In direct correlation with Lewis’ description of a heroic Adam, Carpenter, too, proposes two characteristics of heroism dependent on the type of innocence enacted. However, Carpenter’s ideas of heroism deal less with individual heroism and more with heroism as defined by confronting evil. In seeing Adam “before the fall” as fundamentally innocent, Carpenter suggests, “genuinely naïve ‘Adamic’ heroes…are unable to understand or cope with worldly evil.” In this sense, Carpenter’s assertion is fairly in accordance with Lewis’ construction of heroism. While Lewis’ Adam is heroic in his inevitable destruction and in his vulnerability, he is nonetheless unable to conquer evil – at least not in the most traditional way; rather, he must wait to see his accomplishments realized by those who come after him. On the other hand, Carpenter contends, “most heroic American innocents have been confused by conflicting standards, and have sometimes rejected the idea of evil altogether…or have defiantly embraced ‘evil’…or have learned to adopt an innocently amoral opportunism.” If we see these characteristics as embodying the heroism of both the American Adam and the Noble Savage, then the concept of American heroism, in this sense, is expanded well beyond the
confines of fundamentally “innocent heroism.” Thus, in this context, the Adamic heroism of a figure such as, Steinbeck’s quietly selfless Rose of Sharon in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, and a heroically savage literary figure, like Huck Finn or Leatherstocking, (both of whose heroism is defined as much by their flirtations with evil as by their ability to resist it) are equally representative of coexisting forms of heroism – heroism which can be used to either signify or perpetuate the qualities of an American Adam or a Noble Savage.

Having fully discussed the dual versions of American innocence and the conflicting garden myths from which the two Adams have emerged, it is necessary to focus on the cycle in which both forms of innocence exist. Scholars have long attempted to pinpoint a date and location for the metaphorical “loss of American innocence.” Significantly, perhaps the strongest movement towards defining this “loss of innocence” was by American Studies scholars all born between 1915 and 1925 and all of whom were reaching their own maturity during World War II. Yet despite the initial commonalities of age and research interests, such works lack a cohesive theme of when and where innocence was lost; the “death” can be as broad as the dawn of the twentieth century as Henry May suggests in *The End of American Innocence* to as specific as the conclusion of the Alger Hiss trial as Leslie Fiedler proposes in, *An End to Innocence.* However,

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given the breadth of such a myth it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that such a death of innocence has ever never fully occurred. Certainly, to the extent that the myth keeps renewing itself, it seems unlikely that a definitive “loss” ever can occur. Instead, it is more probable that the two Adams – the two forms of innocence – exist within a broader cycle of cultural innocence. In other words, the span of the myth has already dismissed the paradoxes of the myth: not only are fundamental innocent qualities recognized as defined by Adam before the fall, but innocence is equally defined by the brutality and savagery of the American in his most primitive state. In essence, then, such a myth can never fully reach its death; with the demise of one innocence, the other form will simply take its place. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss what prompts the shift of innocence from one form to another and to explore what elements continue to perpetuate this cycle.

Primarily, it is important to note the basic forward thinking mentality that can at times haunt American culture. Lewis writes bluntly, “America, since the age of Emerson, has been persistently a one-generation culture” and “the temper which despised memory not unnaturally fostered a habit of forgetfulness. We regularly return, decade after decade and with the same pain and amazement, to all the old conflicts, programs, and discoveries.”27 Interestingly, while Carpenter does recognize the cycle of innocence (he states, “there can never be ‘an end’ to our innocence, because it is not linear or individual, but circular or cyclical”),28 he does differ from Lewis on how he sees this cycle affecting America. Rather than referencing the cycle as a continuous format of recycled pain and mistakes, Carpenter sees the rebirth of innocence as representative of “a mature ideal to be renewed by each generation.”29 Thus, the cycle of innocence does not necessarily signify an absence of memory – or a denial of history – but a necessary
step of maturation in the generational rebirths of American Adams. Still, the questions remain: what causes the cycle and more importantly, what causes the death of the “innocent” American Adam (or what causes this Adam to fall), the birth of Noble Savagery and then, again, the renewal of the American Adam?

To answer these questions, it is perhaps best to reference the original motivations behind the construction of “Adam” as Marx has outlined him for us. In introducing the idea of a virgin land, Marx cites Robert Beverley’s *History and Present State of Virginia*, as “the first full scale treatment of the subject [of innocence].” Writing in London in 1705, seventy-one years before the formal declaration of United States’ solidarity, Beverley states of the natives, “the excess of Life and Fire which they never fail to have, makes them frolicsome, but without any real imputation to their Innocence.” Further, Marx elaborates on Beverley’s work suggesting that, in fact, Beverley had:

Seen this innocence and happy people with his own eyes. And, given [Beverley’s] assumptions about the inescapable influence of the natural environment upon the character and fortune of men, we are led to expect that the Europeans, as a result of their removal to this virgin land, quickly will be redeemed. The logic of Beverley’s ruling metaphor, the new garden of the world, should result in a *History* that rises, in the end, to an inspired vision of America as paradise regained.

Thus, if we view the original concept of mythic American innocence as a displacement of Arcadian European ideals placed upon the as-yet unsettled United States, then we can understand how the sub-myth of innocence – that of Adam before the fall – was not only formed out of European projections, but has, perhaps been perpetuated by an international influence on America more so than by an American influence on itself.

The extent to which Europeans initially perceived America’s Eden speaks directly to the sheer youth of America as a nation – that America existed as a “paradise regained” in contrast to the wealth of Europe’s history, conflicts, and long standing
traditions. In outlining his dimensions of the myth of innocence, Richard Hughes contends in *Myths America Lives By* that the idea of innocence is sustained by the subsequent myths of “Nature’s Nation” (an equivalent to the idea of America as Eden) and the “Millennial Nation,” which Hughes proposes is the projection of America “characterized by perfection…[standing] outside the boundaries of human history.”

Again, the absence of history to which Hughes is referring, evokes Lewis’ and Carpenter’s contentions that without harboring a past, Americans exist within either a cycle of repetitive disaster or generational dependent maturation, respectively. Thus, whether the effects of the cycle of innocence represent careless memory lapses, as Lewis may suggest, or a necessary step in national evolution, as Carpenter would argue, the cycle still allows for Adam to remain untainted by history. “Other nations were mired in the bog of human history,” Hughes writes. “Other nations had inherited the taint of human history, but not the United States. In this way, America emerged, as it were, as an innocent child among nations of the world, without spot or wrinkle, unmarred and unblemished by the finite dimensions of human history.”

However, as much as this historical void perpetuates a generational rebirth of innocence, it also identifies the platform on which the American Adam loses his innocence; that is, the American Adam falls at the moment when the inevitability of history finds him.

If Europeans conceived of an American Adam based in part on his historical virginity, then it is conclusive to suggest that it is precisely the evolution of history which will also lead to Adam’s fall – particularly when such history is directly related to America’s internationally perceived “innocence.” For example, in describing the cultural phenomena of America’s bicentennial in 1976, a moment when, interestingly, a sense of
history was successfully fused with a more powerful sense of nostalgia, C. Vann Woodward suggests, like Hughes, that such nostalgic history was supported both in America’s perception of itself and in Europe’s perception of America simply because of America’s cohesive past in comparison to the Byzantine antiquity of Europe’s historical past. Woodward succinctly outlines the very essence of American innocence inasmuch as it is liberated from the depths of a coexisting world history:

To put the mythic American experience in broader than domestic perspective it would be necessary to extend comparisons much wider than possible. We can only suggest the possibilities by thinking in the course of world history during the two centuries the conclusion of which we have just celebrated [1976]. When one thinks of the horror and anguish, the humiliation and tragedy that those two hundred years have inflicted upon the great peoples of the world – the Chinese, the Russians, the Japanese…even the nations of Western Europe, all of which have fallen under the heel of foreign military occupation…only then does one begin to appreciate the historical context of what has been called ‘American innocence.’ In all that long period, though America learned to contribute to these foreign horrors, never once save in what was really an extension of our domestic quarrel with England, have foreign invaders set foot on American soil. No military occupation (save that by South Americans), no devastated cities (with the same exception), no mass deportation, mass rapes, mass executions, no class liquidations, no crematory ovens.35

This passage, however, prompts the question: what happens to that foreign perception of American innocence – a myth of innocence created out of a need for a sort of utopian rebirth, a country not bound by a past – after America no longer exists in a state of historical virginity? While I openly acknowledge (and thus perhaps differ from Hughes) that there have been other moments in history when the American Adam has fallen as a result of a historical national disaster, to keep this analysis within the scope of this thesis – that is, between the years of 1972 and 2003 – it is imperative to cite the
attacks of September 11, 2001 as the most recent “loss of innocence” as defined by the
death of the American Adam.²

In describing the attacks of September 11, 2001, Mark Slouka writes in Harper’s
*Magazine* that the attacks were particularly harrowing because it challenged the very
essence of the myth of innocence. “Consider it,” Slouka begins, “Here in the New
Canaan, in the land of perpetual beginnings and second chances, where…history was
someone else’s problem, death had never been welcome. Death was a foreigner…we
wanted no part of him. This was not just a terrorist attack. This was an act of
metaphysical trespass.”³⁶ However, while Adam’s fall has been clearly marked by the
attacks of September 11, 2001, what has not been explored with equal attention is the
extent to which Adam was thriving prior to the attacks. In other words, one could suggest
that the existence of the American Adam was really only identified after he had fallen,
and therefore, after the “American homeland is scratched for the first time,”³⁷ Adam’s
youth had again been exposed in the realm of world history. In this sense, not simply the
birth, but also the death, of the American Adam has been identified by European
perceptions of American innocence.

Thus, if Adam “before the fall” is created by a European projection of New World
innocence or idealism, the emergence of Noble Savagery can be seen as a wholly
“American” response to internally reinstate innocence after Adam’s fall. That is, if
Adam were the original American innocent – the innocent created by Europeans to
represent an idyllic removal from history and, essentially, memory, the Noble Savage can

² Not surprisingly, the cycle of innocence has continued in the wake of the 9/11 attacks; after the
latest death of Adamic innocence in 2001, we have seen the emergence of a type of Noble
Savagery with the continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.
be seen as the American answer to rebuilding an ideologically separate but essential Adamic being. Naturally, then, in this sense, the Noble Savage could never be as pure as the American Adam was through European eyes. Still, functioning in direct accordance with the myth of the West and of the frontier, the fallen Adam identifies both his heroism and innocence by retreating back to the land and renewing a sense of simplicity, necessary to emancipate himself from his post-Edenic surroundings. Thus, where the renewal of the American Adam can be seen as a retroactive rebirth of innocence – a type of innocence that existed less when it actually existed, but identified only after it had been “destroyed,” the emergence of the Noble Savage operates in direct contrast with this retroactivity, instead, renewing itself as a conscious American response to its own loss of innocence.

Initially, one can trace the desire to return to a state of primitive innocence to the closing of the American frontier – after the traditional garden of America had been fully domesticated. If the American frontier, or rather the myth of the American frontier, serves as the platform for Adam’s Eden (not to mention for countless other cultural myths which are, likewise, birthed from the idea of a mythic West), with the closing of the frontier, Adam was not only left without a paradise, but he was left without a paradise by his own doing. Consequently, because Adam has lost this type of physical innocence, he must create a type of mental innocence. As a result, he yearns for a state of primitivism – he becomes “a fallen Adam seeking to regain…‘simplicity’ in a new industrial America.”38 In this “simplicity” the Noble Savage finds a sense of primitive innocence amid an otherwise maturing – one could say, vicious, world (of industrialization, as in the original creation of the Noble Savage). In this sense, the (d)evolution of the American
Adam from purity into primitivism indicates a “responsive” loss of innocence – a loss marked by a conscious, internal closing of the physical or metaphorical states of America’s Eden.

However, in understanding the birth of savage innocence as a result of a “responsive” loss of innocence – that is, when Americans actively seek to regain a sense of basic functionality after the destruction of “Eden,” the new Adam is built not out of the traditional European idea of American innocence (as he is in the rebirth of the American Adam), but out of a basic American idea of primitive innocence. In other words, not only is the Noble Savage Adam after the fall, but he is Adam struggling to regain a simple, isolated paradise amid the surrounding chaos or conflict which initially marked the destruction of his Eden. Thus, Noble Savagery emerges as a type of American defined innocence, where Adam before the fall can be seen as a more idyllic European projection of innocence.

Again, within the scope of this thesis – where the cycle of innocence will be filtered through two films (and two generations) from 1972 and 2003 – the role of the Vietnam War in the construction of 1970s primitive innocence is of significant importance. If the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, for example, revealed a destruction of Eden and a type of American character, young, predominantly, in his separation of history, then the Vietnam era (and its national and international repercussions) presents an American character existing in states of national, economic and political crises as well as within an international quagmire. However, working directly within the cycle of innocence, America in the early 1970s was simply transitioning from a state of mythic Adamic innocence left over from the 1950s into a
state of primitivism perpetuated in large part by the Vietnam War. In effect, just as the image of Eden had initially been shattered with the closing of the frontier and the birth of industrialization, the emergence of Vietnam-era American innocence, is a near perfect reflection of the cycle of innocence by the death of one Adam for the rebirth of his ideologically opposite, but theoretically similar alter-ego.

Therefore, when looking at the cultural myth of American innocence both within the motivations behind its creation and within the context of its application, it is possible to understand the ways in which such a myth has sustained its longevity far beyond the time that actual American innocence had existed. That is, the myth of innocence has effectively found sustainability in its malleability. It has successfully rooted itself in the myth of Henry Nash Smith’s “virgin West” and the reverie of American land as Edenic. Yet, the idea of this innocence evolved significantly beyond the idea of an innocent Adam functioning purely in a European regained paradise. Rather, as the American character matured, so did the myth, creating a type of “cultural loophole,” which could be used to identify another form of innocence, after both Adam and the metaphoric state of America’s garden had fallen. With Noble Savagery coexisting as a contrary – but necessary – idea of American innocence, the myth is sustained not only by a cyclical pattern, but also by a generational sense of rebirth, renewal and maturation. In this sense, most American Studies scholars, notably Leo Marx, R.W.B. Lewis and Frederic Carpenter, while differing on their theories of innocence, can agree on the idea that American innocence will likely remain lasting in its cultural agency and in its effectiveness in shaping a sense of identity (or identities) among Americans. However, what becomes more interesting – yet less studied – is when one filters a cultural myth not
through American eyes, but through a foreigner’s perspective and determines the degree
to which the myth translates across international and intercultural identities.
CHAPTER II.
BECOMING BERTOLUCCI:
John Wayne Cowboys, Indians and Poetry

Too often our myths are destroyed when they encounter reality.
Bernardo Bertolucci, 1965

Certainly, while the idea of mythic American innocence is perpetuated by the already discussed co-dependent myths (predominantly, the symbiotic relationship between the myth of innocence and the myth of American land as representative of both opportunity, but also Edenic promises of renewal), the influences of such a myth must not be limited solely to the nation in which it holds its most powerful cultural agency. That is, if the idea of mythic American innocence were birthed, at least in some part, through European motivations, it is a natural assumption that Europeans have continued to interpret and modify such a myth either in their acceptance or rejection of the myth’s cultural validity. Further still, perhaps the greater question is not to determine solely how European cultures have perceived the myth, but how they have either consciously or unconsciously adopted its guidance in shaping a form of American identity. In this sense, it is imperative to filter the myth of innocence through a particular international lens and to trace the adaptation, manipulation, evolution and perhaps even, stagnancy, of the myth through European eyes. Through such an analysis, we can not only understand the breadth of influence that such a myth possesses, but we can further explore the significance that American myths hold in determining both a sense of national character, but that of international identity, as well.

In attempting to identify an international filter through which to breakdown the myth of innocence, I considered a film that I had seen ten years ago in Florence, Italy,
*Stealing Beauty* by Bernardo Bertolucci. The story was a simple one; sounding suspiciously like a Henry James novel, Lucy Harmon, a nineteen-year-old American virgin leaves the United States to spend the summer with her mother’s beatnik friends in Tuscany. Of course, as the film unfolds, Lucy is exposed to death, sex, drugs and war, all of which culminate with her finally choosing to lose her virginity within the last minutes of the film. The idea of innocence lost is not a particularly new theme in Bertolucci’s filmmaking, as we will see. However, what is particularly relevant to this thesis is his interconnection of two forms of innocence – the American Adam and the Noble Savage – when making English language films.

Before exploring the recurring theme of innocence in Bertolucci’s films and finally, discussing how such a theme coexists within America’s cycle of innocence, it is first necessary to understand the cultural context in which Bertolucci was raised in Italy, as well as the role that post-World War II American cinema played in defining Bertolucci’s perception of the United States. While attempting not to dedicate a large portion of this section strictly to Bertolucci’s biographical information, it is important to note his upbringing in Parma, Italy (a fairly rural region located in Italy’s northern Emilia Romagna region) and how his childhood in this Italian Edenic surrounding (not entirely different from the early descriptions of America), would eventually contribute to a recurring theme of innocence in both Bertolucci’s national (Italian) and international films.

To conceive of the cultural context in which Bertolucci formulated a perception of America and Americans, it is perhaps best to reference Leslie Fiedler’s essay *Italian Pilgrimage: The Discovery of America* from *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and*
Politics, written between 1948 and 1955 – as insight into the Italian construction of American identity in a post-War international community. While making accusations that a post-Mussolini Italy had become a “neo-realist” hell in the eyes of Americans, Fiedler focuses much of his attention on the effects that American popular culture played in influencing the Italians’ definition of American identity, while also recognizing the conflicting versions of America set forth by Emilio Cecchi’s America Amara (Bitter America) and subsequent Italian neo-realist writers Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese and Giaime Pintor.

Initially, Fiedler cites the literature of Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and Hemingway as inspiring the Italian neo-realist literary and cinematic movements. Commenting on America’s fascination with Italian neo-realism, Fiedler writes, “if America welcomes warmly the flood of new Italian fiction (and the closely related pseudo-documentary films), it is welcoming itself, a deliberate reflection of its own moods and stylistic devices.” However, while such “stylistic devices” assimilated deeply enough in Italian culture to incite the cross-genre movement of Italian neo-realism, as Fiedler suggests they did, consider, then, the degree to which the cultural themes embedded within American literature likewise influenced the Italian construction of American identity. Thus, if we rely on Lewis’s initial suggestion in The American Adam that “American neo-realists” like Whitman, Hawthorn or Melville, for example, were cornerstones in the construction of both Adam before the fall and the Noble Savage within the American subconscious, then it is logical to assume the extent to which these literary themes of American innocence translated into Italian culture along with the literary writing styles that Fiedler recognizes. The influence, then, of these cultural
myths can be seen in the fascination of American literature which Fiedler observed in the early 1950s: “Hundreds of American books have been turned into Italian…critically discussed, and most important of all, read with fantastic eagerness. The figures of Poe, Melville, and Whitman, Hawthorne, Hemingway, O. Henry and Faulkner have become real presences in the Italian imagination.” Therefore, the post-War exportation of American literature, while possibly helping to inspire the style of neo-realism – the cultural movement that would surely come to define Italy’s literature and cinema in its post-Mussolini era – cannot be limited solely to the “stylistic devices” of Whitman or Hawthorne, as Fiedler suggests. To the extent that this method of American writing was being “read [by the Italians] with fantastic eagerness,” one must also assume that the deeply embedded cultural themes of Moby Dick or The Last of the Mohicans, for example, played significant roles in both the construction and understanding of a broad sense of American cultural mythology and thus shaped American identity within an international audience.

Further complimenting the literary fueled myths was also the American cinema that reached Italy after the war. Fiedler notes, “for most Italians the voyage to America is a cinematic one” and that the cinematic journey represented two versions of America: “a Land of the Heart’s Desire (the old-fashioned notion of Golden America)” and “a threat to peace and prosperity.” Like the two versions of America represented in American literature (Melville’s, Billy Budd and Cooper’s Leatherstocking, for example), we can, again, notice the resurfacing of the “Golden” Adam and the “threatening” savage, in the subconscious of American art – a subconscious that would further help to influence an international sense of coexisting themes of mythic innocence in the American character.
Fiedler comments specifically on an Italian version Elmer Rice’s *Dream Girl* (or *Sogno ad occhi aperti*) which had been playing in Rome upon his arrival in the early 1950s, as an example of the contrasting Italian and American cultures which led to the formation of the American-innocent-as-savage in the Italian mind. “The general philistinism of Rice is taken as a special plea to Americans to give up the false pursuit of culture,” Fielder writes, “and to reveal themselves as what they truly are: lovable noble savages, who ‘dance the boogie, secretly read the comic strips and are in love with Clarke Gable.’”

Thus, the literary perpetuation of myth, coupled with the cinematic reinforcement of the same themes, undoubtedly shaped an Italian understanding – or at the very least – perception of American identities, not entirely different from the American impression of mythic innocence. However, where such cultural myths exist within American society as a type of national effort toward constructing identity, the myths’ validity can become challenged, and indeed, many times strengthened by their criticism and reapplication by international observers. In this sense, it is worth exploring how the works of Emilio Cecchi and neo-realist Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini and Giame Pintor work in conflict with each other’s reflections of American identity.  

Regarding the differences between Cecchi’s discovery of America in *America Amara* and the neo-realist, Fiedler comments that two perceptions of America emerged and the “differences between the two experiences [are] essentially contradictory, even inimical: the discovery of a barbaric culture and its literature…whose own style was

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3 It is worth mentioning notable examples which serve to illustrate the extent to which American literature influenced the group of Italian neo-realist authors: While at the University of Turin, Cesare Pavese wrote his thesis on the poetry of Walt Whitman and Elio Vittorini’s first U.S. edition of the anti-fascist, *Conversations in Sicily* (published in 1949), included an introduction by Ernest Hemingway.
never touched by the American example [of Hawthorne, Whitman, et.al]; and the rediscovery of [America] that was at once its particular self and a myth of deliverance.”

Primarily, the “Cecchian” version of America to which Fiedler refers was a mid-1930s, pre-New Deal, Depression-era America in which the “land was ravaged by senseless violence…presided over intellectually by professors who despise[ed] ideas and love[d] bridge; and in both there is a view of desperate materialism brought to despair.” By all accounts, the myth of innocence in Cecchi’s _America Amara_ had been destroyed by 1920s’ over-indulgence and what remained – at least to Cecchi’s foreign observer – was “‘the joy of the child about to collapse into tears.’” However, if Cecchi’s experience of America was, as Fiedler puts it, “a Descent into Hell,” then Cecchi’s neo-realist successors, while not necessarily embracing the entirety of Americanism, certainly contributed to the anti-fascist sentiment among the younger generation of Italian writers – those writing in opposition both thematically and stylistically to Cecchi. That is, “though the leaders of the Italian [fascist] state were never willing openly to oppose the interest in American culture, the young soon came to feel each act of criticism or translation, the simple reading of an American text, as symbolic revolutionary acts.” In this sense, then, Italian anti-fascist political radicalism was ironically rooted in an American literary tradition that built its identity around the mythic innocence of either a naïve Adam or a primitive savage – two beings who, by most accounts, had historically been devoid of radicalism. However, according to Pavese, “the new mania for American writers helped not a little to perpetuate and nourish the political opposition…for many people the encounter with Steinbeck, Caldwell, Saroyan, or even the old Lewis…aroused the first suspicion that not all the culture of the world ended with the fasces.” Thus, with the
Italian neo-realist appropriation of American literary themes, the works of traditional American writers became perhaps less significant in terms of innocence (as American scholars have consistently defined the works as they relate to a domestic reception), but more significant in the sole symbolic act of what accepting an aspect of American culture represented in a post-fascist Italy. In this sense, we can begin to see the first distortion of the myth of innocence as it crossed beyond national borders. Thus, the myth of innocence not only maintains its existing American components of Adam and the Noble Savage, but it also envelops the aspects of the young Italian anti-fascist movement. This extension will prove to be paramount in Bernardo Bertolucci’s adaptation of the myth and in his dual portrayal of Americans within his cinema.

Having explored the degree to which Italian culture interpreted American identity and American mythology through the spectrum of venues afforded by popular culture, it is possible now to explore the cultural context in which Bernardo Bertolucci was raised, by recognizing the influences of post-fascist Italy and the effects of conflicting perceptions of Americanism in the generation of post-war Italian youth – the generation of which Bertolucci, born in 1941, was certainly a part. Bertolucci has said of his childhood in Parma that he “grew up in an earthly paradise where poetic and natural realities were one.” While the balance between poetic beauty and natural reality to which Bertolucci is referring, likely relates to both the poetic environment created by his father, Attilio, an Italian poet, as well as the lushly agrarian Parma, it also indicates a coexisting approach to two forms of innocence that would later be realized particularly in Bertolucci’s contrasting visions of American men in 1972’s *Last Tango in Paris* and 2003’s *The Dreamers*. 
The first form of innocence is the “poetic beauty” where innocence existed as a metaphor represented as an intangible state rather than a physical reality. In this sense, Bertolucci refers to examples of his father explaining birth and death as “a kind of poetic expression before ever being real facts” and that, subsequently, his father “spoke to us about everything that happened – but avoided, of course – the things that might have traumatized us.” However, simultaneously defining childhood, for Bertolucci, was the primitivism of the countryside. In a 1973 interview, _E tu chi eri? Interviste sull’infanzia_, Bertolucci recalls the town’s annual pig slaughtering, recounting:

> It had been going on for years in exactly the same way and it was a very elaborate ritual that took place in a festive atmosphere. In the courtyard of our farm, they hoisted the pig up on a kind of scaffold. Then the ‘masèn’ arrived with a basket full of knives. He had about him an odor of blood you could smell ten meters away. When he came into the courtyard the pigs began squealing because they could smell the ‘masèn’ too. He would seize one of the pigs, immobilize it and would thrust the ‘corador’ – a kind of long needle with a ring on the end – into the heart of the animal. The animal died immediately without any pain. This was the dramatic part. Then the festivities began. The peasants dragged the pig outside the stable and hung it upside down like Mussolini on a horizontal piece of wood which served as a scaffold. The pigskin was raked with knife blades and then the ‘masèn’ took his knife and in a single stroke cut the carcass from the guzzle to the zatch. The moment he made this cut there was a great outburst of joy.

Further contributing to this lionization of naturalism were the American films that were just being released in a post-World War II Italy. Therefore, the cinematic image of America at the time was being shaped, at least in some part, by the Western genre (mythic, as well, in its own right) and the “young Bertolucci loved American action films with marines, cowboys and Indians.” By using film to construct a sense of American identity, particularly using Western films to construct such an identity, would serve as a buttress for Bertolucci’s own regard of the primitivism of Parma. “I saw _Stagecoach_,” Bertolucci later commented, “by John Ford and naturally gave myself the part of Ringo. Between the age of seven and the age of ten I identified with John Wayne. I was trying
to imitate him in the way of walking and smirking.\textsuperscript{54} In this regard, as the cinematically propelled myths of the American west and individualism were interwoven with the similar themes of nature or primitivism which shaped Bertolucci’s childhood in Italy, it is feasible to understand how Bertolucci would ultimately come, first, to romanticize childhood, and then to construct his American characters out of the type of innocence introduced and supported by the themes of traditional American literature filtering into Italy after the war along with the release of pre-war American cinema.

Thus, what began to mold Bertolucci’s identification of childhood – or innocence – was not merely a basic sense of poetic (or Adamic, in the sense that the poetry masked “that which might traumatize him”) and natural (or savage) innocence, but a combination of both forms, working in relation with each other. The result, then, surely speaks to the motivations behind Bertolucci’s recycling of this theme of innocence in his catalog of films. However, what also emerged from Parma was not only a perception of innocence not wholly different from the two forms of American innocence, but also an idea of innocence that has been birthed out of the myths of the land in defining the state of innocence. Further, by focusing on the “mythology” of Bertolucci’s childhood and less on the politically clouded influences of Italian communism on a young Bertolucci (which has been exhausted by various other scholars), it is possible to understand how Bertolucci has described carrying his “childhood with [him] as naturally as hunters carry on their boots the leaves and mud that has stuck to them during their hike.”\textsuperscript{55} The result of this sort of idealization of the innocence of youth can be seen in the broad theme of lingering childhood which has resonated in nearly each one of Bertolucci’s films.
One must consider Bertolucci’s first film to fully grasp the ways in which the idea of innocence regained – or the quest to regain it – has thematically influenced his cinema. After moving to Rome at age twelve, Bertolucci spent only his summers in Parma, finally making his first short film there, *La Teleferica*, when he was fifteen. Bertolucci made the film with a 16mm camera and used his cousins and brother Giuseppe as the actors. The ten-minute film follows the story of three children who go in search of a cable car which they had played with in past summers. The story shifts, however, because when they find the car, they are disappointed as it is buried in the earth and covered with grass and moss. Ultimately, Bertolucci would later reveal that the film signified a “strong sense of longing for childhood.” Indeed, Bertolucci would further comment on the film, “even though they are children, the protagonists search in the past. Years later I would understand that the story of this regression was influenced by the constant theme of many films.”

Briefly, and limiting myself to those films that Bertolucci has both written and directed, this “constant theme” of omnipresent childhood (either in the rejection of it or preservation of it) through adulthood has been evidenced in Fabrizio, the young student’s sexual and political confusion while on the brink of adulthood, in *Prima della Rivoluzione*; in how Marcello’s affluent youth during the first World War had positioned him as an obedient cog in Italy’s fascist machine in *Il Conformista*; in Paul’s revulsion of childhood in *Last Tango in Paris*; in Port and Kit Moresby’s carefree “adventures” in *The Sheltering Sky*; in the overall flashback-to-childhood narrative in *The Last Emperor*; in Keanu Reeves’ “shinning innocence,” as Bertolucci has commented on *Little Buddha*; in Lucy’s preoccupation with her virginity in *Stealing Beauty*; and finally, in Matthew’s pacifism in *The Dreamers.*
Before dedicating extensive analysis to two particular films – *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Dreamers* – which alone represent the cycle of the American Adam and the Noble Savage as it relates to America’s place within an international psyche, it is first necessary to recognize, in particular, two other English language films that Bertolucci made between these two aforementioned bookends of his American works. While, as already stated, various Bertolucci films spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s focus on innocence lost or regained (particularly *The Last Emperor* and *Little Buddha*), *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty* deal almost exclusively with innocence in the context of the American character abroad and thus, should not be overlooked in this thesis. To begin, *The Sheltering Sky* follows three Americans, Mr. Tunner, and Kit and Port Moresby – who leave their Gatsby-esque lives in New York (when asked for Tunner’s occupation at the start of film, Port answers, “he’s in the business of giving parties on Long Island”), on their trip outside of the comforts of upper-class New York and into the unknown “frontier” of Northern Africa. Like much of his work, Bertolucci again traces his American characters’ various stages of isolation in a foreign land to signify the transition between Adam’s innocence and the Noble Savage’s primitivism. For *The Sheltering Sky*, however, it is important to note not only the sense of Tunner, Kit and Port’s isolation in another land, but the motivation behind their leaving home in the first place.

Bertolucci has stated that he “imagined Port and Kit as the elegant children of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald – the beautiful and the damned” and that “the children of Scott and Zelda have discovered that all the glamour that fired the stories of Fitzgerald is gone – cancelled forever by the war. So [Kit and Port] turn their back on the United
States…on the mentality that is connected with all the values of ‘American Dream’ – to head off to another continent in search of something different.” However, while Bertolucci may have conceived of Kit and Port (and by association, Mr. Tunner) as disenchanted with that all-encompassing American myth, he nonetheless does show them as youthful ingénues, playfully “searching” for adventure while seemingly oblivious to their surroundings.

We first meet the film’s main Americans as they arrive in the Port of Tangier; against the backdrop of a depressed shipping port, Tunner, Kit and Port, all clothed in neatly pressed white attire, gaze in awe at this new land, while the local children carry the Americans’ gratuitous luggage onto shore. Though all three are clearly displaced in Morocco, we begin to understand the various degrees to which each character functions in his isolation. Standing on the docks, snapping photographs, Tunner states, “We’re probably the first tourists they’ve had since the war.” Kit answers, “Tunner, we’re not tourists. We’re travelers.” Confused, Tunner asks, “Oh. What’s the difference?” Port chimes in offering the definitive answer: “Tourists are someone who thinks about going home the moment that they arrive.” Kit follows, elaborating, “Whereas, a traveler might not come back at all.” Slightly defeated, Tunner sighs, “You mean, I’m a tourist.” Kit finishes the scene by concluding, “Yes, Tunner. And I’m half and half.” While certainly alluding to a sense of international discomfort, this discussion could also be viewed as outlining the characters’ three various points within the cycle of innocence for the audience.

Here, we can see Tunner as the “cultural Noble Savage,” uncomfortable in his surroundings, self-conscious both in his ability to assimilate and in his own desires not to
assimilate. Further asserting Tunner’s cultural primitivism, he does not speak French and is thus isolated as much by his lack of communication as he is by his mistrust of his surroundings (we see him, for example, cleaning all of his silverware before eating). Port, on the other hand, could be Adam at the peak of his wonderment. To the extent that Port is a “traveler” and not a “tourist,” he is at ease in Africa – unaware of (or perhaps even excited by) the possibility of harm or disease which surrounds him. The vastness of the desert seems to have captivated Port with its obvious “contra-Americanness.” Thus, if the Americans had left the United States after having been exposed to the less-than-promising reality left in the war’s wake, Port-as-Adam has found his new garden, and thus, a sense of renewal in his new “Eden” of North Africa. Kit, however, is just what she claimed to be: “half and half” – half the traveler and half the tourist; half the American Adam and half the Noble Savage. The importance of Kit, therefore, is her representation of both forms of innocence. In this way, Bertolucci will show the cycle of mythic American innocence in its entirety through the fall of Kit’s Adam and the birth of her primitivism. What, of course, we are left with by the film’s end is Kit reaching the exact physical spot at which she began the film, yet admitting to now being “lost” only after having finally been found by an American diplomat. In this sense, it is worth discussing, in some depth, Kit’s relationship with Port and how such a relationship represented more than that of a husband and his wife’s, but also the death of one form of innocence and the birth of another.

While Tunner, Kit and Porter share screen time together throughout the beginning of the film, we can eventually begin to understand the complexity of Kit and Port’s relationship when we see the two characters break away from Tunner as they wander
away from Boussif and into the desert. Significantly, Bertolucci marks their pinnacle of Adamic innocence (or, at the very least, he sets the strongest scene to identify the husband and wife as true Americans, despite how much they yearn to be world travelers) as they ride through the Sahara Desert on bicycles singing, “Ol’ Susannah, don’t you cry for me! I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee!” Upon finding a clearing which overlooks the desert, Kit and Port begin to make love, an act which is interrupted by their discussion of the differences between them.

“Here it’s so strange,” Port begins. “The sky is so solid, as if it were protecting us from what’s behind it.”

“I wish I could be like you,” Kit continues. “But I can’t.”

“Maybe we’re both afraid of the same thing,” Port answers.

“No, we’re not. You’re not afraid to be alone. You don’t need anything. Anyone. You could live without me.”

Of course, what begins to unfold here are the obvious marital conflicts between Kit and Port. However, in the context of two forms of American innocence coexisting (and perhaps even battling) between these two characters, we can see Port as the quintessential Adam – thriving in what he perceives to be a protected land – with a sheltering sky, where fear of the unknown or of isolation is genuinely missing from his psyche. Kit, however, while not totally the embodiment of the Noble Savage as Tunner is, cannot full commit to the (dis)comfort of her new surroundings; she fears what she might become without Port – without the hope and optimism that Adam represents. For, without that hope, without that balance, Kit surely suspects that she may ultimately capitulate to her own savagery. However, as Port begins to battle typhoid fever (and not
coincidentally, as he and Kit simultaneously travel further into the desert leaving civilization farther behind them), we can see how his Adam is weakening along with his health, and thus, how Kit’s savagery begins to grab a firmer hold of her.

Port, while still believing in his Adamic innocence develops typhoid fever and begins his final descent into what will eventually become his death. As Port feels worse, he notices that his passport has been stolen and though momentarily startled by the danger that this could present, he soon turns giddy with the freedom of having no identity, telling Kit, “It’s odd to be out here without any official proof [of who I am].” However, as soon as the hotel concierge tells Port that they have located his passport in a neighboring town, he decides to leave Bou Noura before his passport arrives the next day. When learning that the only bus to El Ga’a had been fully booked the week before, Port demands that the Arab clerk clear seats for him and Kit; he must not remain in Bou Noura. The clerk, explaining that he cannot remove anyone from the bus, infuriates Port and for the first time, Port begins to abandon Adam’s pacifism and wonderment towards Africa. After asking, “C’est possible?” several times to the clerk, Port grabs the man by the shoulders, throws francs at him and states “C’est possible!” The young clerk concedes, “C’est possible” and then asks, “American?” Port glares at the clerk and answers flatly, “Oui.” The subtext here seems obvious: the further away from civilization Port travels, the sicker he becomes and the sicker he becomes, the more his grip on Adam loosens.

While Port may be losing his sense of Adamic innocence, his impending death prevents him from every truly falling into savagery. Though Port receives antibiotics from the French legion in El Ga’a, he has traveled too far into the desert and, despite
Kit’s care, Port almost necessarily dies in isolation, naked and wrapped in a white sheet, surely signifying that despite his flirtations with savagery, he did, in fact, die as Adam. What becomes clear then, is that just as the myth of America’s Eden simply could not “protect” the American Adam from his inevitable fall, Port’s African garden likewise, could not shelter him from his own destruction, as he initially thought it could. Certainly acting in Adam’s innocence, Port’s Adamic naiveté was shown in his trust that he would truly be “sheltered” – that he could leave the comforts of America and travel swiftly and unscathed in the vastness of Africa. His great optimism was ultimately met with everything from which he was sure to be protected: theft, disease and isolation. However, importantly, Port’s death preserved his innocence. While certainly moving closer to the abandonment of Adam’s purity, Port died before Adam could fully fall. Thus, Adam’s hold on Kit died just as tragically as Port did. What Port’s death left in its wake was Kit facing her greatest fear: that of being alone and perhaps that realization in itself was enough to sever her connection with her own Adamic innocence. Once confronted with the need for independent survival in a primitive land, Kit finally releases her sense of Adam and fully embraces her Noble Savagery.

In the final thirty minutes of the film, Kit joins a camel caravan through the Sahara, eventually burying her white American clothes (which she has worn throughout the film) in the sand in exchange for traditional black Arab robes, which cover her entire face, showing only her green eyes as an indication of who she once was. Kit then becomes a sort of consensual sex-captive for Belqassin, one of the young merchants traveling in the caravan. Only after Belqassin has sufficiently used Kit, he releases her from her locked room and she wanders into the closest town, where she again becomes
victim to a group of village men who grab at her robes and pull her headscarves off. Unsure if Kit had been rescued or raped by the villagers, we finally see her catatonically sitting in a hospital bed. An American State Department official has come to bring her back to New York, but before they leave, Kit must stay again at the Grand Hotel in Tangier – the original hotel where Tunner, Kit and Port had spent their first night. Kit does not go to the hotel, however. No longer wearing white nor black, Kit now wears a light blue dress, which makes her presence just that much more subtle on the streets of Tangier. Eventually, Kit wanders into the small café, where the three Americans had spoken whimsically about the adventures that they would find in Africa. Upon entering, an elderly Paul Bowles, the American who wrote the novel, *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949 after he moved to North Africa with his own wife, asks a despondent Kit, “Are you lost?” To which Kit smiles and answers, “Yes.” Perhaps in a way to make sense of this perfect cycle of innocence – of youth gained and youth destroyed – and what is left after the cycle has completed itself, the terribly aged, wrinkled and gray-haired American offers the final narration of the film:

> Because we don’t know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet, everything happens only a certain number of times. And a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood – some afternoon that is so deeply a part of your being that you can’t conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty and yet, it all seems limitless.

*   *   *

*Stealing Beauty*, while similar to *The Sheltering Sky* in its focus on the uprooting of the American Adam to a foreign land and its illustration of the loss of Adam’s
innocence as a result of this international displacement, is a bit more complex in its definitions of innocence, as Bertolucci has essentially attempted to create an Italian Eden in Tuscany. Having not made a film in or about Italy for fifteen years (the result of political disagreements between Bertolucci and the Italian government), Bertolucci has said of *Stealing Beauty* that he could not “immediately [make] a film about Italian reality which I could be wrong about. So I said let’s first go back with a kind of foreigner position. You think of Italy’s beauty, especially the beauty of the landscape…and maybe that’s why I decided to do a movie about a young girl who is looking for herself; maybe I wanted really to start again, to start from the beginning.” In an attempt to create this new beginning, Bertolucci uses *Stealing Beauty* to revisit themes of innocence, but through the eyes of a nineteen-year-old American virgin, Lucy Harmon (Liv Tyler), who travels to Italy to spend the summer at an artist colony. Having left the United States shortly after her poet-mother Sarah’s suicide, Lucy is “searching for something, with those long hands she can barely control, [with], curiosity” and fear in Italy. And, the film is essentially just that: Lucy’s search for identity. However, as the film unfolds, Lucy’s journey for self-exploration is clouded by the influences of international writers, Italian socialites, death, sex and American inhibitions. Thus, *Stealing Beauty*’s significance rests in the confrontation of two forms of innocence: Lucy’s American Adam and the reconstructed “foreign” Tuscan paradise – both of which are constructed from a voice which is neither “Italian” (in the sense that Bertolucci had admittedly returned to Italy as a foreigner) nor American. By revisiting Italy in this way, Bertolucci introduces the audience not only to the American innocent emerging from the American Eden, but also to the idea of innocence as it relates to (and certainly, as it is perceived by)
Italians. The result of this collision of worlds, therefore, is not merely an illustration of the Henry James-esque epic of Lucy Harmon’s European self-transformation, but also the reverse: the transformation of Italy’s mythic garden by the virginal American. To convey these transformations, Bertolucci uses both the myth of Tuscany-as-paradise and the reality of Tuscany to illustrate the fabrication of innocence and the highly paradoxical “return to innocence,” which comes at the film’s end.

Before discussing the influences and effects of Lucy’s presence on the other characters around her, it is first necessary to address the role that the Italian landscape plays in the definition of innocence in Stealing Beauty. Bertolucci has commented on the autobiographical fulfillment of creating a film set in Tuscany, stating that the film’s atmosphere of English ex-patriots is reminiscent of “my personal memory of vacations spent in the Chianti region, at the home of some English friends.” Also worth noting are the parallels between this mythic garden and the garden of America as described by the early American settlers. Interestingly, in Stealing Beauty, the house (and, one could say property, as the house sits on the sprawling hills outside of Siena) is owned by British ex-pats who had relocated in the 1970s to find a sense of artistic liberation. Not entirely different from the motivations of early English settlers in America (insert artistic exploration for religious exploration), the British ex-patriots bring with them Irish, French, Italian and American elements into their Tuscan settlement, thereby creating a self-sustaining commune quite similar, at least metaphorically, to the America as described by its early settlers. However, as America’s garden would eventually prove to be innocent in myth only, Bertolucci’s construction of a Tuscan Eden, likewise, unravels and demonstrates a type of superficial innocence, which cannot coexist with the
impending threats of the political and social realities which continue to encroach upon it. Thus, the idea of innocence – both American and Italian – in *Stealing Beauty* is unveiled through Lucy, and therefore, through what Lucy represents in Bertolucci’s Eden: the displaced American Adam who has left one Eden for another, but who inevitably must fall with the realization that Eden cannot exist in modern society.

At the film’s beginning, the audience learns that Lucy’s primary reasons for returning to Italy (she had previously visited only for a week four years prior), are to have her portrait sculpted by Ian, an artist friend of her mother’s, unearth the identity of her birthfather, and to rekindle a love affair with Niccolò Donati, the Italian boy she had met when she was fifteen. However, it is only after Lucy meets another friend of her mother’s, Alex Parish, a British poet dying of AIDS (with whom she shares a room), that we learn that Lucy, in fact, has left America only after her mother’s suicide – perhaps as a way to re-open herself to the idea of love. Suggesting, for the first time in the film, the deeper psychological motivations behind Lucy’s Italian pilgrimage, her initial conversation with Alex Parish begins with Parish asking:

> You’re not one of those moralistic young people, are you?
> And continues with Lucy:
> What do you mean?
> I mean sex. Do you disapprove of it?
> No…I wouldn’t really know. I haven’t really had it…sex
> Why? Why have you never wanted to sleep with anyone?
> It’s not that I haven’t wanted to sleep with anyone. There was this one guy that I really liked. And we met in the summer, when I was fifteen. He was the first person I really kissed and we wrote each other for a while…but then, after a while we just stopped.

> And then your mom died and everything stopped.
It’s not because of my mother. Her death has nothing to do with it. It’s easier to stay alone.

Lucy, Lucy, Lucy… You can’t have decided that at your age.
I haven’t decided.
You’re in need of a ravisher!
I’m waiting.
Lucy, Lucy, Lucy…
Would you stop saying that!
You’re scared. What is it you’re afraid of?

In effect, Lucy’s move to Italy may be representative less of her desire to move beyond innocence, but rather, of her desire to preserve it. In viewing Lucy as the American Adam, one could suggest that after the suicide of her mother, the Eden of America ceased to exist (certainly, tragedy had been introduced); thus, what Lucy-as-Adam sought in Italy was possibly another Eden. However, like the original American Adam, who came to America not necessarily “pure,” but rather in an attempt to regain innocence, Lucy, likewise, finds herself in need of a “ravisher,” – someone who can both, paradoxically take her virginity, yet ultimately, also lead her to regain a sense of trust and rebirth of vulnerability.

However, while Lucy does find this type of Eden, at least in the physical sense, the Italian Eden, like the garden of America, has evolved beyond the aesthetic paradise of communal living. Instead, the Italian Eden represents the underbelly of once innocent ideals. In nearly every way, reality has found its way into Eden’s walls. Alex Parish, the free-love poet of the 1970s, remains housebound and is dying of AIDS (interestingly, some of his only scenes in the actual countryside take place as he speaks to Lucy about reaccepting love after her mother’s death). Additionally, there is Carlo Lisca, the one-
time journalist, who has turned into a successful war correspondent. Lisca, who only appears fleetingly throughout the film, references his parasitic need for war after Lucy has asked him when he returned to Italy after covering the fall of Saigon and he answers whimsically, “I don’t think I ever came back.” Further still, the photographic views from the house have been marred by a number of television antennae being erected in the distance (a scene which merits M. Guillaume, a demented French art-dealer to aim a hose – in the form of a gun – at the television workers and declare: “Poor Mr. Bruno. They forced him to sell his field! You vultures! You blood suckers! Testa di cazzo!”).

Eventually, military jets fly sporadically over-head, prostitutes pick up costumers on the main road and, ultimately, a young soldier’s car breaks down, forcing him onto the secluded land to use the telephone.

Thus, it is only in the context of Lucy that the artists again recognize innocence (at least in its virginal form). However, they quickly move to find suitors to initiate Lucy’s fall. For example, they create, without Lucy’s knowledge, an online profile which reads, “Hi, I’m Lucy. I’m nineteen. I’m a virgin.” In an instant, they try to locate a “ravisher” for Lucy over an otherwise casual breakfast. As the group meets in the morning, Diana, the British matriarch, begins: “We’re going to have to find Lucy some friends so that she doesn’t get bored with us old people.” The conversation quickly turns sexual, with a guest offering, “What about Filippo Castolini as Lucy’s boyfriend?” Another adds, “What about Harry Fennimore James?” To which, someone counters, “No, too perverse for an American girl!” Finally, Lucy interrupts, stating, “I feel like a classified ad.” This type of perverse obsession surrounding Lucy’s sexuality can be seen as mirroring a generalized European perception of American innocence (as the Europeans
in the house angle for Lucy’s “fall”). However, what is also imperative to discuss is the equally complex and equally perverse relationship between Lucy and Richard, the only other American in the film.

Richard, the American entertainment lawyer who has come to Tuscany as the boyfriend of Miranda, a young British jewelry designer, exists as Lucy’s necessary counterpart within the film and, equally, within the cycle of American innocence. That is, Richard represents everything that Lucy is not and, thus, he could be considered a significant portrayal of the Noble Savage in a foreign land. At nearly every point of their interaction, Richard is either voyeuristically infatuated with Lucy’s virginal sexuality or initiating a childish game which quickly turns sexual. At one point, for instance, he pushes off having sex with own his girlfriend merely to watch Lucy lead a drunken man into her room. Only after Lucy closes her door, can Richard return to Miranda and have, what can best be described as borderline rape-sex. In a later scene, Richard playfully wrestles Lucy onto the ground, until Lucy fights him off screaming: “Stop it!” Miranda ends what may be not so thinly veiled foreplay, as she throws a plate on the ground to distract Richard. Perhaps the most significant demonstration of this sort of combativeness of innocence occurs when Richard nearly lures Lucy into primitivism as he asks Lucy join him on all fours to reenact the Lee Stroudsburg method acting technique in front of a mirror. After inviting himself into Lucy’s bedroom, Richard notices a notebook and comments: “You do write. What do you write about? Your fantasies? I mean, you do have fantasies, right?” After Lucy grabs her notebook away, Richard fully embodies this form of counter-Lucy Americanism as he assumes the role of an animal on the ground, turns to Lucy and demands: “Get on your knees. Now, on all
fours. Now, go to the mirror, slowly. Open your mouth. Tongue out and lick. Good.
And lick. Good, kitty. Now, touch your tongue to mine for the ultimate connection.”
Again, Miranda interrupts the moment and arrests any real connection between Richard’s
savagery and Lucy’s Adamism. However, as Miranda drags Richard from Lucy’s
bedroom, her words expose what Richard already represents in the context of Lucy.
Miranda comments: “For Christ’s Sake, you’re in there sniffing around her like a dog,”
making clear reference to Richard’s almost animalistic desires to tempt Lucy out of one
form of innocence and into the other.

   It is only at the film’s end when Richard has gone back to America, that
Bertolucci fully connects the dueling perceptions of Lucy’s American innocence and the
Italian Eden that have coexisted throughout the film. Having preserved her virginity
throughout the summer – though not for lack of trying to lose it to an Italian and Brit –
Lucy meets with Osvaldo Donati, a young Italian who plans to move to America. As
Lucy and Osvaldo walk alone through the golden Tuscan hills at sunset (surely
reminiscent of a pre-fall Eden), Lucy asks: “So, you want to come to America?” To
which, Osvaldo responds: “I can’t stand it here anymore.” Lucy, surprised, offers: “But
it’s beautiful here.” The camera, then quickly cuts to a line of prostitutes standing on the
road, just off of the hills, as they pick up a motorcycle passerby. Meanwhile, as Lucy and
Osvaldo continue to discuss his move to the United States, Bertolucci inserts a scene
between Diana and Ian, the British owners – or founders – of the Tuscan paradise.
Perhaps inspired by the assumed death of Alex Parish, Diana begins:

   I want to leave. Here. I want to go home.

   Ian sits in front of Diana and continues with the following dialog:
This is home.

Not really. I don’t want to die here. I want to die where I belong. I’m getting tired of taking care of people. I want to go back. Again, where it’s gray and damp and the milk goes off. I feel I’m not [pause] this anymore.

Ian finishes the conversation, by staring into Diana’s eyes and bluntly stating:

We can’t go back, Diana.

As though realizing the futile creation of the artists’ innocence, Diana finally asks, “where’s Lucy?” after which, the audience finally witnesses, in the last minutes of the film, Lucy’s loss of virginity. In the final lines of the film, Bertolucci fully constructs his paradoxical perception of innocence – a perception that significantly, fits perfectly within the paradox of American innocence as previously outlined through Woodward’s work. As Lucy and Osvaldo walk down from the hill where they had just spent the night, Osvaldo smiles and initiates the film’s final dialog:

I want to come with you.
Lucy responds, Now?
No. To America.
Then do.

As the film’s credit music begins, Osvaldo starts to run into the countryside, but not before shouting back to Lucy, “It was my first time too” – the last line of the film.

With this ending, Bertolucci has not only commented on the impossibility of innocence beyond its mythic form, but he has also reinforced the idea of America possessing a type of transient innocence that is not limited to the idea of an either pre or post Adam existence. In this sense, it is possible to suggest that even after Lucy’s Adam has fallen (as well as Osvaldo’s), they return to America, in a paradoxical sense, more innocent than before. That is, in fulfilling Alex Parish’s hopes for Lucy, Lucy has again
found vulnerability and the ability to love in Italy, while Osvaldo, despite losing his virginity as well, is looking toward America as a rebirth away from the military and prostitution that have corrupted his Italian Eden. With Osvaldo’s entrance into American society, he may in fact represent the very essence of the American Adam: a “fallen” European (in the sense that he is neither no longer virginal nor content with his own paradise) looking for rebirth in the mythic garden of America. Consequently, if Lucy represented this myth of innocence to Osvaldo, it is possible to understand how the myth of the American Adam not only held credence in *Stealing Beauty*, but also how Bertolucci used it to exemplify various other forms of innocence. In his effort to revisit Italy through a consciously foreign lens, Bertolucci ultimately allowed for mythic representations of two cultural constructions of innocence and maturity, since he neither committed nor blinded himself entirely to either of the cultural myths contained in the Italian or American cultures.

Therefore, while *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty* follow the complicated journeys of Americans in the mid-cycle of innocence (as in the case of *The Sheltering Sky*) or the fall of the American Adam and the rebirth of another Adam to take her place (as in *Stealing Beauty*), Bertolucci would also create two separate films with almost near identical plots of Americanism, and American innocence. However, both films would show two contrasting points of the cycle of innocence. One works directly in accordance with Noble Savagery, in which the American embodies both a beastly innocence, yet animalistic instincts of violence, while the other introduces a world of political and social chaos, in which the American exists only with a dreamer’s pacifist mentality. In discussing *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Dreamers*, we will see how the films – both set in
Paris between the years of 1968 and 1972 – come to fully exemplify the cycle of mythic American innocence in the context of domestic and international political and cultural influences.
CHAPTER III.
“I’M NATURE BOY”:
Noble Savagery in Last Tango in Paris

*I’m better off with a grunt or a groan for a name.*
Marlon Brando as Paul, *Last Tango in Paris*

In viewing Richard from *Stealing Beauty* as an incarnation of the Noble Savage, whose “civility” is maintained by his British partner who repeatedly preserves Lucy’s Adamic innocence from being the prey of Richard’s impulses, then we can understand how in *Last Tango in Paris*, Marlon Brando’s Paul comes to represent the very essence of American innocence as defined by Noble Savagery. Without the balance of foreign (specifically, British) stability or the preoccupation of renewing by destroying, Adamic innocence, Brando’s Paul follows the idea of savage innocence, eventually reaching the pinnacle at which the savage must be destroyed and the rebirth of Adam occurs. Unlike *The Sheltering Sky* and *Stealing Beauty*, for example, which provide mid-cycle snapshots into the process of innocent renewal, *Last Tango in Paris* reenacts the birth of savagery until it finally concludes with the savage’s death and, what one can only assume, would be the rebirth of Adam – a rebirth which audiences would see cinematically represented thirty years later in Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers*.

This section, then, will explore the ways in which Brando’s character not only represents this form of innocence, but how he has come to represent this idea and, perhaps most importantly, how the international cultural and political influences of the early 1970s led Bertolucci to construct the image of Americanism in the way that he did. Initially, we will discuss the Parisian apartment as another artificially constructed European garden in which the American searches for renewal. Following this concept of
Eden, we will explore Paul as the Noble Savage, and by extension, the metaphorical America of his time. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the international cultural contextual elements which may have contributed to shaping the birth of Noble Savagery in 1972’s *Last Tango in Paris*.

In discussing the plot of *Last Tango*, it is important to acknowledge the film’s initial departures from Bertolucci’s previous films. While the Italian, Alberto Grimaldi, produced *Last Tango*, the film was Bertolucci’s first English language film (using both English and French as the primary languages) as well as his first with an English title and the first in which Bertolucci cast an American in the central role. Further, the film made its American premiere on the last night of the New York Film Festival in 1972, thus securing a reception (either positive or negative) from the major American film critics, film journals and American studio distributors. Given the extent that *Last Tango* became more of a Hollywood film than his previous works, in the mere sense that it would not be considered a foreign language film with foreign actors, it is feasible to suggest that *Last Tango* was Bertolucci’s first “American” film and as such, he was either consciously or unconsciously aware of his portrayal of an American lead character in relation to an American audience. The sense of Americanism, therefore, rests predominantly in Marlon Brando’s representation of Paul, and Jeanne’s (played by French actress Maria Schneider) interaction with and perception of him.

*Last Tango* begins with the forty-five year old Paul, screaming, “Fucking God!” as a train passes overhead. However, it is in the following scene, where the middle-aged Paul meets twenty-year old Jeanne in an abandoned Parisian apartment (both were answering a vacancy advertisement) that the essence of the film begins to unfold. The
story, as with most Bertolucci films, is a simple one: Paul, struggling to understand his French wife’s suicide, meets Jeanne and the two begin an anonymous sexual relationship, which exists solely in the confines of the vacant apartment. They know nothing of each other or each other’s past, but meet over three days to explore each other, while trying to, as Paul states: “Forget everything that we knew. All the people, all that we do…we’re going to forget that. Forget everything.” However, over the course of the film, we learn of Paul’s broken past, his wife’s infidelities, of Jeanne’s engagement to a young French filmmaker and eventually, of the evolving feelings that inevitably surface between Jeanne and Paul. As the film nears its end, Jeanne and Paul dance a ludicrous tango (their first scene together outside of the apartment) after which Paul reveals his true identity to Jeanne, who, by this point has already declared her love for Paul. After trying to end whatever it was that began in the apartment – that which clearly cannot continue in the outside world – Jeanne breaks away from Paul, by eventually shooting him in her childhood home, with her father’s World War II military pistol. Of course, the ambiguity in plot surely lends Last Tango to conflicting interpretations of its meaning and of its character representations. Still, the two most common interpretations are: Bertolucci’s communist commentary on the European bourgeois or the idea of masculine sexual primitivism in isolation. While critics have discussed every psychological, spiritual, existential and post-modern facet of Last Tango, it is perhaps more interesting to discuss the cultural influences that seemed to drive and divide these fields of criticism.

In viewing Last Tango as political, Bertolucci (who, at the time was a member of the Italian Communist Party), has stated, “In our society even adultery becomes a bourgeois institution.” This idea of universally interconnected themes of communism
would lead theorist Joan Mellon to later comment in her 1973 essay, *Sexual Politics in Last Tango in Paris*, that it “is an indictment of the bourgeois…which dominates culture and society, suppresses feeling and ‘civilizes’ the ‘savage’ in all of us by repressing bodily needs. Unexperienced and unacknowledged, these feelings emerge in a distorted form, either through political savagery…or in sexual relationships.”67 In this context, Mellon is endorsing Bertolucci’s assertion that “civilized” is equated with “bourgeois” and that to be radical or revolutionary signifies the predisposition of “savagery.”

As such, the idea of sexual and political interconnection resulted in Bertolucci’s commenting in 1973 that, “the encounter of these two [Paul and Jeanne] ends up being an encounter of forces pulling in different directions; the kind of encounter of forces which exists at the base of all political clashes.” Therefore, Paul, according to Bertolucci, “believes that he must seek absolute authenticity in a relationship, and this…gives the encounter a political sense.”68 What Bertolucci is effectively doing through these comments, is constructing a political lens through which viewers and critics alike can interpret an otherwise purely erotic film. Not surprisingly, of course, the political prism through which Bertolucci is guiding his audience (and academic film theorists like Mellon and Bachmann) is the very same leftist political structure to which Bertolucci, himself, had subscribed. However, when we contrast the readings of Bertolucci’s interpretations with those of non-scholarly American film critics, one begins to see primary differences between not only the early 1970s European and American art communities, but also in the overall principal differences between the European and American readings of eroticism.
Perhaps the most influential, and subsequently, best known, review of *Last Tango in Paris* is Pauline Kael’s epic six page *New Yorker* review, in which she determined that October 14, 1972, the New York Film Festival premiere of *Last Tango*, “should become a landmark in movie history, comparable to May 29, 1913 – the night ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’ was first preformed – in music history,” and that, “this must be the most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it may turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made.”

What is striking (in fact, refreshingly striking) about Kael’s review of *Last Tango* is her vastly different reading of the film from Bertolucci as well as from those academics who relied significantly on Bertolucci’s influence in their criticism. At the very least – a contradiction of thoughts, Kael cites the sexual liberation of the film as the opposite of a political institution, suggesting instead that “we are drawn to Paul’s view of society and yet we can’t help seeing him as a self-dramatizing, self-pitying clown…[who] believes that his animal noises are more honest than words.”

As a reviewer for the *New Yorker* (perhaps the closest thing to being an academic without actually having to be an academic), it is fair to use Kael’s review as more indicative of a general American reading of *Last Tango* since her interpretations of the film have little to do with theoretic scholarly jargon and more to do with an audience-driven reading of the film.

Adding to this theme of criticism, other American critics continued to support and reinforce Kael’s initial remarks. Richard Skorman, for example, commented, “As a portrait of two people tortured by their twisted sexual desires, *Last Tango* ranks with Nagisa Oshima’s *In the Realm of the Senses* as one of the most disturbingly and compelling visions of eroticism ever filmed.” Additionally, in *Cinema Book*, E. Ann
Kaplan further contended that the film is a compromise of “tough male dominance and anguish – and chic and ‘modern’ irresponsibility and permissiveness.” In comparing the differences in these readings with Italian critics, one begins to sense the fundamental cultural differences which existed among the varying interpretations of Last Tango’s political, social or cultural significance that would contribute greatly to the multiple readings of Paul’s American identity. “Curiously,” Clareta Tonelli writes in her book, Bernardo Bertolucci, “while in the United States the ‘erotic value’ of Last Tango was frequently celebrated, in Italy the same eroticism was criticized for its…‘commercialism.’” Citing Aldo Tassone’s Italian review of the film, Tonelli represents the Italian reception of Last Tango as a film that “on the whole, can be only a clever and skillful commercial product.”

Thus, the schism that emerges between the American reading of Last Tango and the Italian reading is a seemingly political and social one: Americans, while drawn to and mesmerized by the film’s eroticism had no interest in either recognizing or placing meaning on a bourgeois subplot of savage or radical repression. In contrast, the Italians were underwhelmed by what they may have considered fabricated eroticism for the sake of commercialism. In between, of course, was Bertolucci – an Italian making an international film – who proclaimed, “I quickly realized, shooting, that when you show the depths, when you drown yourself, as it were, in that feeling of solitude and death that attaches to a relationship in our Western, bourgeois society, and when you begin to identify the reasons for this feeling of death, you inevitably make a political statement.” In assuming Bertolucci’s role of straddling his political motivations behind the film, while still allowing enough room for the Pauline Kael inspired erotic reading of Last
Tango in Paris, what becomes evident in these two schools of criticism is simply that if Europeans read eroticism as political, Americans read it as primal and animalistic. Such an interpretation thus lends itself to cultural influences and significantly, will identify the ways in which Paul was not merely a savage in his counter-bourgeois characteristics, but likewise in his cultural primitivism. In this sense, it may have been the underlying primitivism in America and among the American audience that contributed to a greater fascination with Paul’s eroticism and less with a preoccupation by the French bourgeois culture.

In order for Brando’s Paul to develop and thrive as the Noble Savage, Bertolucci again constructs an unorthodox “Eden.” In referring back to Stealing Beauty, we can certainly see how the concept of American innocence between Last Tango in Paris and Stealing Beauty surely operates in opposition with one and other, yet the idea of the American searching for – or rather – finding a constructed Eden far removed from the American Eden is fairly consistent. With Last Tango in Paris, Bertolucci unveils the same “sin,” which initiates an Edenic construction, much in a similar way as he would do again with Stealing Beauty. Suicide, in both films, inaugurates the Americans’ search for their Eden and thus, the search for a “renewal” of innocence, albeit, two drastically contrasting ideas of innocence. Moreover, it is important to note that both Eden’s are physical constructions of “paradise,” existing to serve the needs of those within their boundaries. As such, as we saw in Stealing Beauty and will discuss in Last Tango, the concept of Eden is just that – an idea of paradise, which is both subjective to the type of innocence it nurtures, while also paradoxical in its perpetuation of a myth of innocence sprung out of an artificial garden. One should not overlook, however, the parallels of this
type of Edenic construction with the early descriptions of Robert Beverley’s initial journey to America in *History and Present State of Virginia*. It was not Eden that Beverley had found (or described), but a land that could be *transformed* into Eden for fallen Europeans. Thus, the idea of Bertolucci’s Eden in *Last Tango* is not particularly unique in its construction and representation of a space for renewal, if not an actual physical dimension of purity.

We first learn of the isolation of *Last Tango*’s “Eden” during Paul and Jeanne’s second meeting in the empty apartment when Paul grabs Jeanne and declares: “You don’t have a name here and I don’t have a name here. No names here, not one name. Everything outside of this place is bullshit.” Effectively, what Paul comes to create in the apartment is an anonymous location in which to fulfill the acts of aggression that have remained in the wake of his wife’s suicide. As he speaks to his wife’s body, he begins yelling at her, calling her a “cheap, goddamn, godforsaken fucking whore” and a “goddamn pig fucker.” Quickly, however, Paul starts to sob as he continues, “Rose, oh God. I’m sorry. I don’t know why you did it. I’d do it too, if I knew how. I just don’t know how – I have to find a way.” Unable to fully release the idea of his wife, Paul transforms the vacant apartment into an isolated cave where “knowing” is not imperative to a relationship – where two people can embrace their anonymity and not be married within it. What emerges, instead, is a location of pure isolation, in which two forms of innocence – Paul as the savage and Jeanne as the youthful, naïve, Adam, embrace sexuality and eventually begin to converge character roles.

Just as this concept of Eden is a manmade construction of societal isolation for a sort of renewal (renewal, in the sense that through Jeanne, Paul ultimately comes to shed
the guilt of his wife’s suicide, as evidenced by the revealing of his true identity towards the film’s end), this Eden, again similar to the initial impressions of what America represented in the context of rebirth, allows not merely for the fall from grace, but likewise, for the return to grace. In *Sexual Politics and Last Tango in Paris*, Joan Mellon goes so far as to say “the apartment at which [Paul and Jeanne] come together…will be an enclosed cocoon, shut away from the harsh world, in which the soiled relations of the earth, the past, cannot enter.” Significantly adding, “Like a womb, it is a place where Paul and Jeanne can express their rages and needs as infants.” In viewing the apartment as this type of fabricated Eden, existing as much for a return to the womb as it does for sexual experimentation, we can begin to understand the role that this space plays in the understanding and development in the two forms of innocence: Paul’s savagery and Jeanne’s youth.

Both Paul’s and Jeanne’s roles are identified predominantly by their own perceptions of childhood. Making a clear reference to the apartment as Eden, Jeanne comments as she lays naked on the bed: “It’s funny. It’s like playing grown-ups when you’re little. I feel like a child again here.” Paul responds by asking if she had a good childhood, to which Jeanne replies, “It was the most beautiful thing.” Paul, then, as though unable to accept the idea of childhood, or Jeanne’s idea of childhood, asks if it was “beautiful [to be] made into a tattletale or forced to admire authority or sell yourself for a piece of candy?” By contrasting these two impressions of childhood, Bertolucci begins to formulate the primitive essence of Paul, which becomes immediately evident in his first encounter with Jeanne. Mellon, furthering her assertion of the apartment-as-womb, refers to the apartment as “a place where inhibition must vanish, in which the
raison d’etre of their [Paul and Jeanne’s] being together is to peel off what is external to their deepest selves,” and describes Paul’s interaction with Jeanne as “stripping away [a] façade, a return to the primal.” Following this tone-setting scene, Bertolucci takes almost every opportunity to remind the audience of Paul’s savagery – lest we forget it amid the acts of erotic brutality, of which anal rape is only one.

To identify Paul’s purely physical primitivism, we can begin by looking at Paul and Jeanne’s second encounter in which Paul reduces himself to a beast, rather than confining himself to the limitations of a person. When Jeanne tells Paul that she “shall have to invent a name for [him],” Paul, frustrated, responds: “A name? Oh, Jesus. Christ. Oh, God, I’ve been called by a million names all my life. I don’t want a name. I’m better off with a grunt or a groan for a name.” Giving in, Paul offers, “Do you want to hear my name” after which he bellows a hybrid monkey-pig animal sound. Laughing, Jeanne finally answers with the appropriate, “So masculine.” Throughout the film, Paul continues to reinforce his nameless grunts and groans as Jeanne declares that she is Red Riding Hood and Paul is the wolf. After professing what strong arms, long nails, hairy body and long tongue Paul has, Paul fittingly answers Jeanne’s fairytale with a growl as he grabs her under the covers. Later in the film, we hear Jeanne greet Paul with, “Hi, Monster,” and finally, Paul extends his savagery outside of his relationship with Jeanne when he bites his mother-in-law’s hand as she tries to console him offering, “You are not alone.” If these references add to the physical understanding of Paul as the savage, one can explore his psychological complexity in order to understand him as not merely the “savage,” but as the Noble Savage who embraces a form of primitive innocence in retaliation against his perceived loss of Adamic purity.
As he brutally engages in her anal rape, Paul rejects Jeanne’s view of childhood as “the most beautiful thing.” Simultaneously, Paul forces Jeanne to recite that family is a “holy institution to breed virtue in savages” and that “children are tortured until they tell their lie.” What the viewer learns, as Bertolucci traces the evolution of Paul’s primitivism beyond his wife’s suicide, is that what initially forces Paul to savagery is the very corruption of childhood as it is defined by Edenic innocence. It is here where we can explore the strictly “American-ness” of Brando’s Paul and the subsequent cultural myths which corroborate Paul’s identity. To understand how deeply Paul feels betrayed by this myth of innocence and how this sense of loss has propelled him into primitivism, it is imperative to discuss, in its entirety, Paul’s response to Jeanne after she asked him why he does not return to America. At first, Paul only answers, “Bad memories, I guess.” However, he soon begins a five minute long recitation of his American memories, which, while speaking to the role of family, could just as easily be applied to the disenchantment with America-as-Eden. Paul begins:

My father was a drunk. Tough whore-fucker, bar fighter, super masculine and he was tough. My mother was very, very poetic and also a drunk. All my memories when I was a kid were of her being arrested nude. We lived in this small town. Farming community. We lived on a farm. And I’d come home after school, and she’d be gone or in jail or something. And then, I used to have to milk a cow. Every morning and every night. I liked that. But, I remember, one time I was all dressed up to go out and my father said, ‘You have to milk the cow.’ I asked him, ‘Would you please milk it for me?’ He said, ‘No, get your ass out there.’ So, I went out and I was in a hurry. Didn’t have time to change my shoes and I had cowshit all over my shoes. On the way to the basketball game, it smelled in the car. And, I don’t know, I can’t remember very many good things.

Jeanne: Not one?

Paul: Yeah, some. There was a farmer. Very nice guy, old guy, very poor, worked real hard. I used to work in the ditch, draining land for farming. And he wore overalls and he smoked a clay pipe. Half the time he wouldn’t even put tobacco in it. And I hated the work. It was hot and dirty and it broke my back. All day long I’d watch his spit, which would run down the pipe’s stem and hang on the bowl of the pipe. I used to make bets with myself on when it was gonna fall off. And I always lost. I never saw it fall once.
I’d just look around and it’d be gone and a new one would be there. My mother taught me to love nature. And, I guess that was the most she could do. In front of our house, we had this big field, meadow. It was a mustard field in the summer. And we had a big black dog, named Dutchy and she used to hunt for rabbits in the field. But she couldn’t see them. So, she’d have to leap up in this mustard field and look around very quickly to see where the rabbits were. And it was very beautiful. She never caught the rabbits.

What Paul ultimately comes to reveal in his memories of America is not merely the hardships of abusive parents but also the “de-mytholization” of numerous cultural American mythologies. While the former contributed to Paul’s rejection of childhood on a personal level, the latter revealed Paul as the metaphoric “Fallen Adam”: the savage who learned that the mythic construction of Eden (and the sub-myths that create American innocence) can exist only in an intangible, idealized and non-existent paradise. Interestingly, Marlon Brando improvised this dialog, but Bertolucci kept it in the film. The importance of this scene, then, is its authenticity. As Pauline Kael wrote of this dialog, “at the simplistic level, Brando, by his inflection and rhythms, the right American obscenities, and…an improvised monologue, makes the dialog his own and makes Paul an authentic American abroad, in a way that an Italian writer-director simply couldn’t do without the actor’s help.” Therefore, what the American and international audiences are seeing is an American embody both the traditional mythology of America, as remembered through the monologue, while immediately followed by an image of shattered American mythology.

If we look at Paul’s first reference to childhood (that is, a time when Paul was still Adam), we can see the introduction of the myth of Eden. Of his youth, Paul states that he “lived in a small town…[a] farming community.” Evoking clear references to the yeoman farmer in the virgin land, Paul further validates the myth when he comments that he liked to milk the cows. That is, he was part of the idealized agrarian myth. Yet, what
once seemed romantic takes on the deitrus of reality when he discovers cow shit on his good shoes. If Paul only dabbled in the yeoman myth, however, he recites a more drastic example of fallen mythology when he describes the actual farmer – the person who never left as Paul did. In nearly describing Grant Wood’s 1930 immortalized farmer from “American Gothic,” Paul illustrates his farmer in the most traditional way: a hard working, old, overall-wearing, pipe-smoking yeoman. Again, Paul juxtaposes his “good” memory with the tarnished reality that existed after the agrarian myth had been exposed. What was once perceived as the nobility of working the land was replaced by the monotony of drooling saliva. The saddest part, it would seem for Paul, however, is that the farmer never even had a concept of the monotony.

Finally, in grasping for one truly good memory, Paul cites two triumphant images, which, nonetheless, will also prove disappointing. First, what he learned from his mother – to love nature – will ultimately become the very root of his savagery. In referencing Marx’s and Carpenter’s work on Adam’s transition to the Noble Savage, we can see how “before the closing of the frontier and the disappearance of agrarian America, Adam lived free and innocent and uncultured, in the isolation of the New World. But, after experiencing the evils of industrialization [and the falsity of myth]…Adam fell from grace, learning the sad wisdom of disillusion.” Therefore, at the conclusion of Paul’s monolog, when he finally describes the beauty of his dog chasing rabbits, there still exists the disillusionment and disappointment that his dog never caught any. Here, if we were to consider the influence of American neo-realist writers, of whom John Steinbeck could be viewed as paramount, on the Italian neo-realists of Bertolucci’s youth, one cannot help but to note the importance of Paul’s description of the elusive “rabbit hunt” as similar
both symbolically and thematically to Steinbeck’s tragic portrait of George and Lennie’s doomed search for rebirth in *Of Mice and Men*. In both cases, the hope for renewal appeared to exist, but simply could never be attained.

Having discussed the extent to which Paul has emerged from a once mythic land, only to be betrayed by the myths – or at the very least, exposed to the reality behind the myths – we can now elaborate on what it means for Paul to be the metaphoric American primitive in a foreign land. In viewing the idea of Noble Savagery as a concept which was first established as a way to understand the “untamed” natives and then later, applied to the Americans who sought to regain a sense of simplicity and nature after the closing of the frontier, there exists a constant underlying theme in both realms of savagery. That is, in either case, the land ceased to represent what it was originally thought to; in the first instance, America was quite the opposite of the fertile golden garden, instead composed mainly of natural wilderness. In the second, the frontier – the metaphoric space of opportunity – had closed and industrialization had taken the place of agrarian idealism. Therefore, in re-examining Paul’s monologue in which he rejects the various cultural myths of his childhood, all of which were rooted in the promises of American land, the rejection of his youth not only marks his departure from Adamic innocence, but it is also introduces Paul as the Noble Savage.

Bertolucci, however, does not present an image of Paul as a static savage; rather, he traces through Paul the very essence of the cycle of American innocence. We first meet Paul at the pinnacle of savagery. He rarely functions outside of the apartment – outside of Eden – and the few times that we do see him outside of the apartment, he is either biting his mother-in-law or cursing and screaming at his dead wife as she lay in her
coffin. He remains anonymous, attractive to Jeanne only through his sheer physicality and crudeness. As much as Jeanne continues to be tortured and disgusted by him, Paul represents everything that the French bourgeois is not and, perhaps in Bertolucci’s contention of Last Tango’s communist undertones, Jeanne cannot deprive herself of Paul’s “radical” primitivism. Only after Paul picks up a dead rat and threatens to make Jeanne a sandwich of “a rat’s asshole in mayonnaise,” does Jeanne finally leave the apartment. However, the intrigue of Paul’s savagery, and of Jeanne’s fascination with it, is that the two are mutually dependent on each other. Paul’s eventual death is representative of both Paul’s civilization (or of his departure from savagery) as well as the end of Jeanne’s romanticism of Paul’s primitivism. In this sense, Bertolucci guides Paul through the cycle of innocence, which begins with his savagery and ends with his return to childhood. “At the beginning of the film,” Bertolucci has commented in attempting to isolate the film’s central theme, “Paul is a brutal and aggressive character, who slowly subjects himself to a process of devirilization culminating with his sodomization done by the girl.” The end result of this slow subjugation towards “devirlization,” is the eventual fall of Paul’s beastly “virulization” and the reemergence of Paul as a child, which finally occurs in the film’s last scene when we see Paul laying dead in a fetal position.

Therefore, if Jeanne is initially perceived as the non-traditional Adam to Paul’s Noble Savage (certainly Jeanne is more sexual than the virginal Adam, though her codependence on Paul’s animalism could surely identify her as the other half of innocence), then we can also identify her eventual dissatisfaction with Paul as indicative of Paul’s transition back to youth or civilization. At the beginning of the film, as we have
already discussed, Paul is marked as the savage in nearly every aspect, ranging from his own self-identification (his declaration of anonymity, for example) to the ways that Jeanne identifies and interacts with him. However, one must also focus on the degree to which Paul gradually sheds his primitivism throughout the film and retreats back to childhood, albeit a childhood still defined more by savagery than by the traditional ideals of Adamic innocence. To the extent that Bertolucci has commented on the cycle of Paul’s (d)evolution towards infancy, we can pinpoint, almost precisely, the shift from Noble Savagery to childhood when Paul finally meets Jeanne outside of the apartment. As Paul gets Jeanne’s attention, he says, as though making a formal recognition of the cycle in which he exists, “It’s me again.” Jeanne’s response is the indignant: “It’s over.” For Paul, however, what has ended is merely one phase of their relationship and one phase of himself. He continues: “That’s right. It’s over and then it begins again…we left the apartment and now we begin again with love and all the rest of it.” Paul then proceeds to reveal his true identity and, thus, shed the physical savagery of his primitivism, if not his cultural primitivism. “I’m forty-five. I’m a widower,” Paul confesses. However, as each new truth is revealed, Paul becomes less savage and more civilized, therefore not only signifying his return to childhood, but also continuing Jeanne’s rejection of his mediocrity.

Further suggesting Paul’s retreat to childhood is his last tango with Jeanne in the dance hall. Prior to dancing, Paul again confesses his emotional desires for Jeanne as Jeanne proposes a toast “To life in the hotel.” Paul, now fully wanting to move beyond the fabricated world of the vacant hotel room, says, “No, fuck all that. Let’s drink a toast to our life in the country.” To which Jeanne questions, “You’re a nature lover?” Paul
then states, smiling, “I’m nature boy.” Clearly making a reference to the Noble Savage’s beginnings, Paul reapply a certain truth and desire to return not only to childhood, but to a mythic childhood in which he has now become reinvested. If the idea of childhood had once been interconnected with false myths of the land and was devastated by the boredom of monotony, Paul’s desire to leave his constructed Eden of the hotel and return to nature is particularly symbolic of the shedding of his noble “savagery” and, instead, embracing more noble “primitivism.” In this sense, the perception of Paul’s innocence then, has transitioned from a type of beastly animalism, into more of a child’s urges to go home – to return to a state of comfort and simplicity. However, as the European bourgeois, Jeanne is less interested in Paul’s return to innocence, as his transition not only represents a counter-exotic rebirth of Paul, but it shows more importantly, that he has become, in fact, nothing at all. The very core of Paul’s Americanism – the savagery of his grunts, groans, anonymity, exoticism and mystery, existed in conflict with the propriety of Jeanne’s bourgeois world. Effectively, when Paul regained his natural childhood, Jeanne recognized that Paul had become “a bourgeois…one of those who ‘civilize the savage’ rather than allow primitive unconscious impulses to surface and express themselves.” Therefore, Jeanne killed the child, perhaps in order to preserve whatever was left of the savage or perhaps to reinitiate the cycle of innocence reborn.

In following Paul’s movement towards renewal, we must also focus on the coexisting shift in dynamic between Jeanne and Paul, which could be the result of a change in conceptual primitivism. In discussing the varied perceptions of savagery, first we must recognize the ways in which the myth of savagery romanticizes primitivism, inasmuch as primitivism seems savage-like. When primitivism exists beyond its borders,
it fails to be romantic (or romanticized), and instead it morphs into an unattractive, pitiful simplicity, ill at ease within an otherwise sophisticated world. Therefore, while Paul is perceived as the savage if only by his behavior, it is necessary to likewise understand the cultural displacement also associated with Noble Savagery. That is, if the idea of Noble Savagery as American mythology has appropriated it, romanticizes the primitivism of those existing beyond the realms of societal norms, it simultaneously counter-romanticizes such primitivism outside of American culture. In *Last Tango in Paris*, therefore, Paul fulfills both roles: the exotic, or as Pauline Kael might suggest, the erotic, American existing in a self-made Eden and the simplistic primitive, unable to cope with his foreign surroundings.

Revisiting Frederic Carpenter’s scholarship on the myth of innocence, we can fundamentally understand that the Noble Savage first “lived, free and innocent and uncultured in the isolated wilderness [of] the new world.” However, in *Last Tango*, Paul finds his “new world,” not in the newness of America, but in the traditions of France, particularly in the bourgeois culture embodied predominantly by Jeanne. In this sense, Bertolucci has commented that Paul represents “the uprooted American of the lost generation, whose solitude is self-destructive” and is identified as such by his “profane humor and self-loathing, self-centeredness and street ‘wisdom.’” Effectively, Paul’s Noble Savagery, therefore, is not solely identified by his actual actions (his grunts or his otherwise violent tendencies, for example), but by his cultural displacement – a displacement which, as Bertolucci contends, leads to isolation. However, it is important to note that this isolation perpetuates Noble Savagery as much by its emotional and psychological implications as it does by its physical connotations.
While we have already explored the ways in which Paul physically embodies the savage and the ways in which Jeanne must identify Paul as a type of uber-sexual, beyond-man animal, it is also important to discuss the cultural displacement of the American abroad which further highlights the extent to which Paul represents a type of naïve cultural innocence amid an otherwise “civilized” (or, at least, “old-world”) French culture. Specifically, Bertolucci again uses Jeanne to reinforce Paul’s primitivism, this time, however, by contrasting Paul’s uncultured identity against Jeanne’s traditional French bourgeois identity. What develops, then, is a type of American innocence almost identical in origin and characteristic to the kind that Henry James had explored nearly one hundred years earlier in 1877’s *The American*.

In *The American*, Christopher Newman is the self-made American who relocates to Paris in his business retirement as a way to appreciate his unlikely financial success. Following in the standard Henry James tradition, Newman falls in love with Claire, a French aristocrat, whose family he must repeatedly try to impress. Despite his financial success, Newman lacks the culture and sophistication of Old World traditions that will give him entrée into Claire’s world. As a result, Newman, like Paul, will become the isolated American, self-conscious of his primitivism and lost in what could only be described as the newness of the Old World. Just as Newman comments to Tom Tristram, his American friend as they stand in the Louvre, “I must confess…that here I don’t feel at all smart. My remarkable talents seem of no use. I feel as simple as a little child, and a little child might take me by the hand and lead me about,”85 Paul would later admit to Jeanne that he is “no prize.” Paul’s simplicity is shown by the film’s end when he becomes an average aging man who is not nearly as mysterious as both he and Jeanne
had once hoped. Further contributing to an impression of savagery, Newman is referred to at a dinner party as “the great Western Barbarian, stepping forth in his innocence and might, gazing a while at this poor effete Old World, and then swooping down on it.”

Importantly, for both Paul and Newman, their “barbarianism” is interconnected with the perception of them as children or “new men.” Just as Paul becomes the child during his last tango, Newman too is merely a child in among his French counterparts. Ultimately, Newman does not, nor never can, possess the sophisticated qualities needed to marry into Claire’s aristocratic French culture while Paul, when moving beyond the Eden of the apartment, transforms into nothing more than an aged businessman to Jeanne.

What develops, therefore, is a conflicting translation of the myth of Noble Savagery. While the myth may be identified in American culture as a regal return to traditional simplicity amid an otherwise evolving society, it may instead be translated in terms of European sophistication as simple “noble savages, who ‘dance the boogie, secretly read the comic strips and are in love with Clarke Gable,’” as Leslie Fiedler had witnessed in the 1950s. In this sense, Paul, maintains his romantic savagery for Jeanne only for as long as he can exist within his construct of Eden – the vacant apartment. However, when Paul is taken out of the context of his Eden, he exposes himself as the cultural, rather than the physical savage. At this point, Jeanne sees Paul for what he really is: “as a washed-up middle-aged man – a man who runs a flophouse” and who “is as out of date as the tango dancers with their artificial heads locked in a distorted position, emphasizing again that he is of another era.”

As Paul is simultaneously transitioning back into childhood, he confesses to Jeanne as they walk to the tango hall: “I’ve got a little hotel, but you know, I’m no prize.
I picked up a nail when I was in Cuba in 1948. Now, I got a prostate like an Idaho potato.” In essence, Paul has not only become a child in his desires to leave the city and return back to nature, but he has become “a real man beset by the identity of a flawed, inadequate human being…[and Jeanne] no longer wanted him. Jeanne could be won only by brutality, by savagery.” Consequently, for the myth of the Noble Savage to resonate with international sensibilities, the savage must be authentically yet, at the same time, romantically savage. To exist, the savage must be in stark contrast to the Old World sophistication of European culture. For as soon as the American savage falls to civility, he is effectively pathetic and disposable. As such, Jeanne kills Paul to renew the cycle of innocence – to ensure the rebirth of Adam, who again will become the Noble Savage and will ultimately remerge in film, literature or art, just as Paul, somewhat unoriginally reappeared a century after Christopher Newman, as a way for Europe to both understand and even appreciate the primitivism of Americanism. Thus, this European cycle of seduction and rejection of American primitivism appears to be little more than a generational element of a broader mythic innocence.

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To fully understand the representation of Paul as the Noble Savage, we must explore the cultural context in which Bertolucci made *Last Tango in Paris* and identify the factors which contributed to Bertolucci’s reading of America in this context. We should also make note of Bertolucci’s own motivations which may have also been associated with attaching the concept Noble Savage innocence to a 1970s America.
Therefore, we must first examine the role that cultural myths played in the development of the Vietnam War and discuss how these myths relate to the American idea of innocence as well as Bertolucci’s idea of innocence. Further, we will explore how various popular literature and 1970s cinema presented a “loss of innocence” as viewed through Vietnam experiences. Finally, we will be able to, therefore, see Paul as the metaphorical American who developed as a result of a major national and international upheaval and, in turn, becomes the Noble Savage through a “responsive” construction of innocence – an innocence defined less by European projections of Adam, but more by an American response to renew simplicity amid the instability and chaos of the Vietnam War.

In order to understand the initial idealistic motivations behind America’s involvement in Vietnam and the subsequent reversal of these same motivations, Tobey Herzog discusses in his book, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, the grasp that cultural myths, perpetuated by popular film, television and President Kennedy’s idealistic calls to action, held on young American soldiers coming to age during in the late 1950s/early 1960s. Interestingly, both Herzog and John Hellmann (in his article, *Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film*) refer to the literary influences of those traditional American writers, Hawthorne, Cooper, Faulkner and Twain, as prefiguring the Vietnam impulses in their “mythology surrounding the settlement of the American West.”91 Despite the literary tradition, however, Herzog concludes that predominantly through the World War II cinema from their youth and “President Kennedy’s mythic frontier values and symbolic call to action embodied in his ‘New Frontier,’” the American youth, specifically, young males, had romanticized the idea of war to the extent that they would
later show their initial support of Vietnam as a way to not only continue the legacy of American bravery, but perhaps even carve out a spot in popular culture for their own battles. Citing World War II cinema as fostering a sense of duty and romanticism towards Vietnam – or war in general – Herzog quotes A Rumor of War author, Philip Caputo as saying, for example, “Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in Sands of Iwo Jima, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medal on my chest.” Ultimately, Herzog comes to conclude, by paying specific attention to the films of John Wayne, that such cinema would later result in “John Wayne Syndrome” among the “ideal soldiers” and would significantly alter the definitions of innocence for Americans.

After speculating: “If…innocence, idealism, and unrealistic expectations are customary baggage for young soldiers going off to war…[then] who or what are the sources for these illusions and myths,” Herzog answers his own question by exploring the interconnection of John Wayne cinema in relation to furthering myths of the frontier and myths of idealistic innocence amid an otherwise defined complicated society.

Therefore, the “John Wayne Syndrome,” as Herzog defines it: “Wayne’s widespread role in shaping the romantic illusions about Vietnam embraced by the young American combat soldiers entering the conflict.” Evoking, of course, the myths of the West and the frontier, and combining them with the clearly set guidelines between right and wrong, or good and evil, the ideas presented in John Wayne cinema come to represent a type of noble innocence that is expressed as much by its Adamic idealism as it is by its primitivism. That is, in further blurring the lines between Adam and Savage, as much as John Wayne represented the self-sustaining cowboy living beyond society in the frontier,
his moral idealism suggested a sense of Adamic innocence. The combination of these conflicting concepts of innocence would later be seen in his films, but would more importantly result in a form of mythic innocence both violent and idealistic to its Vietnam era American audience. The result of this crisis of mythic identity, however, would occur only when the idealist American soldiers experienced war without the Hollywood and culturally generated myths and therefore, became stripped of their “Adamic” innocence and were left only with primitivism – the sort of primitivism which has subsequently come to predominantly define Americanism in literature and cinema during the Vietnam War.

As a result of abandoned idealism in response to the reality of war, the soldiers – now in Vietnam – must rely on the second half of mythic innocence for survival, and therefore, initiate the cycle of primitivism. This shattered sense of Adamic innocence in Vietnam literature (Ron Kovak’s *Born of the Fourth of July*, Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, W.D. Ehrhart’s *Vietnam-Perkasie* to name only a selected few) results in, what Hertzog categorizes as “moral explorations of individuals, stripped of civilization’s restraints, confronting evil, primal emotions, chaos, and savagery – the literal and metaphysical darkness of the jungle.”97 Thus, having been exposed to the innocence expressed by John Wayne idealism as solely a myth, the soldiers are forced to rely on primitivism for physical and emotional preservation in the wake of the myth’s reality. Cinematically, speaking then, what would come to replace Wayne’s war films

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4 Further contributing to the idea of Adam’s fall in popular literature, Peter Rollins comprehensively discusses Vietnam literature and cinema in his 1984 *American Quarterly* article, “The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television.” Speaking about Ehrhart’s *Vietnam-Perkasie*, Rollins writes that the book, “emphasizes a contrast between the Eden of rural Pennsylvania and the Asian battlefield that transforms an all-American boy into a crazed killer” (424).
(The Green Berets being particularly apropos) is the genre of Vietnam War cinema centered on the “characters’ inner conflicts between savage and civilized behavior occasioned by the suddenness in which normal individuals slip into primitive brutality.” However, in order to conclude the extent to which Paul mirrors (and perhaps even initiates the image of) the fallen Adam in later Vietnam War films, we must first address certain characteristics inherent in such films by identifying the journeys of innocence lost and gained in two keystone Vietnam films: Michael Cimino’s 1978 The Deer Hunter and Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 Apocalypse Now.

The Deer Hunter begins with the Pennsylvania steel workers’ post-work festivities as they playfully prepare for three pivotal shifts in their rural life: Steven’s wedding, Michael, Nick and Steven’s celebratory send-off to Vietnam and the final deer hunt before entering war. The film’s central character, Michael Vronsky (Robert De Niro), exists at the film’s start as very much the John Wayne innocent; as much as he is a somewhat isolated primitive in rural Pennsylvania, he still has regard for the idealism of the hunt which he has been anticipating since the film’s start. Cimino, therefore, constructs the prototypal Vietnam hero who lives “on the edge between civilization and nature” and “is part of the community, and yet is clearly separated from it by his alienation from its corruption and by his strict adherence to a personal code closely associated with the uncorrupted wilderness and its original inhabitants.” For Michael, nature still presents the promise and opportunity of pure Noble Savagery – simplicity in primitivism. However, like the eventual realization of violence behind the John Wayne myth of ideal battle, Michael also must come to face the reality of savagery.
Working between the myth as reality and the myth as fantasy, Cimino introduces Michael into Vietnam by a simple film edit. Following a deer hunt in the mountains, Michael sits with his friends and listens to music in a bar; in the next scene Michael is surrounded by dead soldiers in Vietnam. “The effect of the cut,” John Hellmann comments in *Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film*, “is to have Michael wake up from his dream of the deer hunt to a nightmare inversion of the landscape and its relation to the hero and community.”\(^{100}\) Likewise, Michael may not only be waking up to the inversion of his “jungle,” but the inversion of his innocence, as well. What could once be considered savagery “controlled,” as Michael was drawn towards the mountains outside of his rural town, he still had civilization surrounding him, serving to perpetuate that balance between “civilization and wilderness.” The wilderness of Vietnam gives Michael the reality of his raw primitivism, not the romantic mythic natural unknown of Cooper or Twain’s wilderness. Thus, when Michael enters the jungle, he is “revealed in his element, for his influence and impulses have been unleashed in this frontier landscape.”\(^{101}\) Michael’s Adamic innocence, therefore, can be defined as his idealistic belief that the protected nature of rural Pennsylvania existed in accordance with Vietnam’s wilderness. He, thus, truly becomes the Noble Savage only when he leaves the United States and must function without the romanticism of the myth – without the safety of civilization and without the fiction of Leatherstocking or Huck Finn to validate his actions. Ultimately, Michael becomes the “savage” in the most mythically traditional sense, eventually beginning to dress the role of the “Indian,” trading in his Polish hunting cap for a headband and war paint, presumably used as much for camouflage as it is to mask Adam. Only upon Michael’s return home to America can he return to the garden.
He can sing not the stirring, war-like, patriotic national anthem, but the hopeful, “God Bless America.” He can return to the forest as a deer hunter, but at the end of his hunt, he cannot bring himself to kill the deer. He, like America, had lost his Adamic innocence, confronted his primitivism and fought to again regain some degree of redemption.

Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, while similar to *The Deer Hunter* in context and theme, focuses instead on constructing primitive innocence *within* Vietnam as a response to the failed myth of the American Adam in America during the war. While certainly presenting various stages of innocence (the young California surfer Colby being the Adam, Willard being a mid-cycle Adam/Savage, and of course, Kurtz signifying savagery at its pinnacle), *Apocalypse Now* demonstrates more of the journey from Noble Primitivism to Noble Savagery. Whereas *The Deer Hunter* exposes the extent to which Vietnam transformed a romantic myth of savagery into an inescapable reality of tragedy and loss, *Apocalypse Now* can be seen as a more desperate response to the idea of American innocence amid Vietnam. While it is possible for Michael, though a fallen Adam, to again return home in *The Deer Hunter*, Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, after submitting a classified report to President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs on the failure of American operatives in Vietnam, rejected the concept of home, or America as Eden, and instead constructed his own counter-Eden in Cambodia – far beyond the borders of America and far beyond the hope of regaining Adamic innocence.

Kurtz’s construction of Eden is particularly important since it works in contrast with America-as-Eden and thus, further supports the idea of Kurtz as not only the primitive savage, but the ironically “pure” Noble Savage functioning within his own construct of idealism. Kurtz, perhaps once the John Wayne soldier, has effectively
forsaken civilization and in the process has “turned from noble instincts to savage impulses.” By doing so, Kurtz builds an Eden in the shadow of his savage impulses and “free of social restraint, Colonel Kurtz has…set himself up as a god among primitive tribesmen, becoming a ghastly figure of evil.” Therefore, if America-as-Eden were birthed out of the desire for a renewed sense of Adamic innocence in a mythic garden, then Kurtz’s Eden is the opposite in nearly every way: an island of destruction existing to perpetuate not the idealism of Adam, but rather the idealism of the unfettered savage.

Paradoxically, one could suggest that if Kurtz created this Eden out of his disillusion with the American-Eden, then his island is equally as idealistic as the concept of America-as-Eden (and by association, Kurtz, therefore, is equally as idealistic in his savagery as Adam had been in his purity). For this reason, as Willard, who is battling his own fall into savagery, moves closer to Kurtz’s compound, he realizes his own frightening consciousness revealing, “Kurtz was turning from a target into a goal.” Through Willard’s journey on the river, he moved “away from a corrupt, inefficient society toward an idealistic, efficient outlaw,” who mythologically speaking, embodied the romantic power of a rebel, the ethics of a cowboy and the innocence of a Noble Savage. Therefore, one could suggest that Willard’s need to kill Kurtz is contradictorily twofold. He kills him to preserve Kurtz’s idyllic counter-Eden and he kills him to destroy the savage and allow for Adam’s return. In this sense, “Coppola presents Vietnam as a nightmare extension of American society where only a marginal individual may preserve the American ideal.” However, it is up to the viewer to decide whether that “marginal individual” preserving the American ideal is Kurtz with his construction of the anti-Eden or Willard in his destruction of Kurtz’s anti-Eden.
Given the extent to which the myth of John Wayne influenced the initial fall of Adam and the resurrection of savagery in the jungles of Vietnam, it is of particular importance to reference the role which John Wayne cinema also played in Bernardo Bertolucci’s perceptions of America, as well as Wayne’s personal appeal to a young Bertolucci growing up in rural Italy. Having already discussed Bertolucci’s connection to John Wayne heroism, it is feasible to suggest that Bertolucci, while not an American soldier in Vietnam, experienced a similar John Wayne syndrome. That is, through the international consequences of Vietnam, Bertolucci would come to embrace a drastically different America (and sense of American heroism) as he once viewed in the Western films of his childhood. Thus, if the romanticized World War II films had proven disillusionary to American youth, one must question, how did such false idealism affect the same generation’s international impressions of American innocence?

In this context it is possible to view Last Tango’s Paul as the metaphoric fallen American during Vietnam, as much as he is simply the Noble Savage existing in a vacuum of the cycle of innocence. In many ways, what Brando begins with Paul in 1972, he will finish with Colonel Kurtz in 1979, after the war has ended. Both characters have voluntary left an America which had failed according to mythic standards, and both sought to create an opposing garden in accordance to their Adamic rebellion into savagery. Interestingly, however, Bertolucci, while cinematically presenting this idea of Americanism well ahead of his American counterparts, does differ slightly from standard Vietnam War films in his construction of American heroism. One could suggest that the American hero in The Deer Hunter or Apocalypse Now was the American who either (d)evolved into savagery and made his way home again or created an alter-America,
rooted in a drastically reversed sense of idealism, but idealism nonetheless. Implied, certainly, is that the hero was never defined by the previous World War II genre sense of John Wayne heroism. While Michael and Kurtz’s primitivism ultimately lead to a type of heroism, it surely was not quixotic in the sense that Wayne’s “frontier-ism” was presented as an idyllic and romantic version of American heroism. In this sense, the American filmmakers, and presumably American culture, were constructing a type of “responsive” loss of innocence. If “Vietnam is viewed as the self-projected historical nightmare through which America can awaken from its dream of innocence into a mature consciousness,” then such a self-projected historical nightmare does not necessarily apply to Bertolucci who, instead, lived far beyond the national burden of this Adamic fall. Therefore, as American directors were presenting a type of savagery in response to their own culture’s “self-projected” conflict, Bertolucci had more liberty to develop a sense of Americanism not quite as self-critically.

When looking at Paul, particularly in context that Bertolucci has defined him – as being appealing only for as long as he is not part of the bourgeois – it is precisely Paul’s John Wayne primitivism which makes him both heroic in Jeanne’s eyes as well as heroic in Bertolucci’s pro-communist leanings. Thus, what defines Paul as American, ugly though it may be, particularly in the context of Vietnam, equally identifies him as the opposition to the elitist and classist old-Europe against which the thirty-three year old Bertolucci was rebelling. Perhaps Bertolucci was simply far enough removed in Europe from the corruption of the myths so that he was able to identify a sense of his childhood impressions of Americanism with his portrayal of them thirty years later – a distance not afforded to the American filmmakers of the same time. Either way, it would seem that
the Bertolucci construction of American identity in *Last Tango in Paris*, while certainly channeling the myth of innocence through Noble Savagery, was, in fact, not as critical of American society as Americans were of themselves. To some degree, the idea of America’s continued possibility of renewal as opposed to the traditions of Europe lingered enough in *Last Tango* to inspire Paul’s murder – a murder which would ultimately usher in yet another new generation of Adamic innocence.
CHAPTER IV.
CALIFORNIA DREAMIN’:
The Rebirth of the American Adam in The Dreamers

I’d like to dream my troubles all away,
on a bed of California stars.
Jump up from my star bed and make another day,
underneath my California stars.
Woody Guthrie

Working in the tradition of the continuing cycle of mythic American innocence, Philip Caputo wrote of the Vietnam War in his 1979 novel A Rumor of War, that the war “produced in American life the same fundamental change of mood that the first World War produced in Europe. The young Americans of today are closer in spirit to the Europeans than to the Americans of thirty years ago. The age of innocence is now over for all of us.” However, while it seems more likely to suggest that Caputo was merely reflecting on the loss of Adamic innocence in contrast to Noble Savagery, it is nonetheless important to address the reasons for and perceptions of an eventual renewed sense of American innocence in the years following the Vietnam War. In other words, why, then, twenty years after Caputo lamented on this final destruction of American innocence, had America come to once again embody a sense of Adamic innocence both in its own self-reflection and in its international image? In relation to Bertolucci’s filmmaking, specifically, how did the international American character transition from Marlon Brando’s barbaric Paul in Last Tango in Paris (1972) to Michael Pitt’s virginal Adam in 2003’s The Dreamers?

The Dreamers, while similar in plot and location to Last Tango in Paris, ultimately acts as Last Tango’s cinematic opposite. Everything that is erotic about Last Tango is gratuitous in The Dreamers; everything that is violent in Last Tango is juvenile
in *The Dreamers*. Everything that is politically radical in *Last Tango* is politically idealistic in *The Dreamers*. That being said, however, one must recognize the nearly identical nature of these two films, if only in their broad thematic and physical ramifications. Taking place during Paris’s May, 1968 riots, *The Dreamers* tells the story of Matthew (Michael Pitt), a twenty-year old American who has gone to Paris to study French. Mesmerized by the traditional Hollywood films and French New Wave cinema at the state sanctioned Cinémathèque Française, Matthew abandons his language program, becoming instead a true cinephile who confesses within the first minutes of the film that it was at the Cinémathèque that “I got my real education.”

The film’s real action, however, begins when the French government fires Cinémathèque Française founder, Henri Langlois. In the midst of a crowded protest of cinephiles, Matthew meets the captivating French twins, Isabelle and Theo, who invite him to their house for dinner. After impressing the twins’ father, a seemingly well-known French poet (their mother is English) by using a lighter trick to explain existential philosophy, Matthew moves into the apartment as the parents leave for a month at the seaside. Effectively, in the context of the empty apartment, Bertolucci, true to his auteurism, creates a world functioning in its usual state of isolation from the outside reality. Of course, such a state of alienation will ultimately come to signify individual consequences in Bertolucci’s characters’ quest to conjoin politics and eroticism.

The connection of innocence in *The Dreamers* with its three protagonists is fairly unmistakable. The title, alone, suggests the extent to which the three young adults are naïve in their wonderment, causing critic Stanley Kaufmann to comment in *The New Republic*, “the title is too oblique: it might better have been called The Fantasists.”

In
addition, British film critic, Gilbert Adair, wrote the screenplay, having adapted it from his novel, *The Holy Innocents* and further emphasizing the characters’ naiveté, the film was released in France under the title, *Les Innocents*. Cinematically, Bertolucci relies on the intertextuality of various other film clips to demonstrate the ways in which his characters live outside of society – both physically in their apartment and emotionally in a state of cinema. To show the exaggerated sense of the three characters’ cinematic world, Bertolucci not only references those directors who came before him, but has his characters act out scenes from *Queen Christina* or *Scarface* for example, as easily as they would engage in otherwise ordinary conversation. However, it is through Bertolucci’s use of borrowed film clips that he more consciously reveals *The Dreamers*’ subtext, rather than simply identifying the film’s characters’ dependence on the conveniently intangible world of cinema into which they continuously escape. The importance, therefore, of Bertolucci’s insertion of Samuel Fuller’s *Shock Corridor* and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* in this context should not be overlooked.

The first time we see Matthew in the Cinémathèque (only minutes after the film’s opening credits), he is watching Fuller’s, *Shock Corridor*, a film known perhaps more for its B status, than as an entrée into the collective mind of the young cinephile community.\(^5\) However, Bertolucci’s use of this film is significant, if not to express the social youth movement in the Cinémathèque (as the New Wave clips would), but to construct an American cultural context in which Matthew had grown up. If Matthew is twenty years

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\(^5\) In the film’s original review from the *Film Quarterly*, Robert Dickson wrote of *Shock Corridor*, that only a select few “emerge from this sorry, sorry mess with any degree of distinction [and that] the film is, in fact, a cheap, nasty, lurid melodrama with artistic pretensions…and forced reminders of social responsibilities” (62).
old in 1968, one can assume that his formative years were influenced significantly by the
events of the American 1960s. Thus, not coincidentally, Bertolucci shows, through
1963’s *Shock Corridor*, the national and cultural conflicts which had begun in the early
1960s and would have, inevitably, affected Matthew’s youth. One can view, therefore,
the three main murder witnesses in *Shock Corridor’s* mental institution, as metaphors for
the social conflicts in the United States in the early 1960s.

Each murder witness in *Shock Corridor* has been driven to extremes as a result of
a political dilemma, which, in turn, would come to represent a budding cultural
movement toward the radicalism in the later years of the same decade. The analogies are
clear: there is the young soldier who had previously renounced his Southern roots, only
to embrace Confederate pride upon his return from the Korean War. The northern black
student whose mental breakdown occurred during the Civil Rights movement and who,
had since, rejected equal rights and became the black supporter to the Confederate’s
racism. And finally, there is the engineer of the atomic bomb who could not function as
an adult after Hiroshima and has instead, regressed back to childhood, able to function
only as a six year old. Of course, all three characters reference a broader theme of
innocence lost – in any society: war, racism and destruction. However, in the context of
Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* and the myth of American innocence, it is particularly telling
that Bertolucci chooses *Shock Corridor* as the primary cinematic intertextualization: none
of the three *Shock Corridor* characters are able to digest tragedy in a way that allows
them to keep living in an outside reality (they are instead, relegated to the social
microcosm of the psychiatric institution, not wholly unfamiliar to the protected alter-
societies in which Bertolucci characters continuously find themselves). Further, *Shock*
Corridor successfully sets forth the same cycle of myth that Bertolucci will come to emulate in The Dreamers. The fall of the atomic physicist into childhood, for example, is not merely indicative of a mental break, but is likewise, representative of the continuous cycle of innocence lost and renewed in the context of national and international influences. Bertolucci, therefore, may take what is alluded to in Shock Corridor and attempt to answer how the actions of the changing America in the early 1960s had come to influence Matthew as the American Adam, once he has been uprooted into vastly different ramifications of “Eden” and radicalism.

In respect to the New Wave cinema clips that Bertolucci references, it is possible to view the scene of Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless perhaps as a way to pay homage to the New Wave cinema of Bertolucci’s youth or perhaps to further insinuate the emotional state of his three youthful protagonists. The idea, then, is that in watching the cinema which resonated with Matthew, Isabelle and Theo, the audience can understand the ways in which a shift from “old” cinema to the French New Wave led to an overall social shift in the mentality of the youth movement in France during the late 1960s. Seeing the New Wave movement as a cinematic vehicle to illuminate the youth as a force of societal freedom and liberation against the stoicism of outdated traditions, Bertolucci references this movement not just for its purely aesthetic influences in filmmaking, but also for its effectiveness as a call to action for the youth. Take, for instance, the primary reference of New Wave influence on the three characters towards the start of The Dreamers. As Isabelle reenacts Jean Seberg’s famous “New York Herald Tribune” scene from Breathless, Bertolucci simultaneously inserts original clips of the same scene. The effect here is twofold. While recognizing the commitment of the cinephiles to their cause and
the familiarity with which the characters move between cinema and reality, the scene also evokes a larger contextual significance as it inevitably draws attention to the French New Wave movement. By referencing a film which, Arlene Croce wrote in the *Film Quarterly*’s initial 1961 review, “shows, with power, irony, and precision, what great cultural convulsions have taken place in our time,“ Bertolucci also evokes a larger significance behind the French New Wave movement, as a movement which “saw society’s youth as the promise of freedom from outdated cultural traditions.” The clips, therefore, show more than Matthew, Isabelle, Theo, (or Bertolucci’s) admiration for the New Wave cinema that was birthed by the Cinémathèque Française and the traditional Hollywood films that inspired it; they are likewise used to create the tone of Paris in 1968. In essence, the cinephiles in *The Dreamers* who desperately tried to transfer cinema into reality through playful acting, were perhaps also anticipating, ultimately with great naiveté, the same transfer in politics and society as they had found in the transition from the old cinema to youthful New Wave.

However, as much as the young characters reference these movies to indicate a social and cultural shift towards youth movement, one must also consider that the characters are nevertheless still secluded in an apartment while the actual movement toward renewal is simultaneously taking place on the streets outside – streets from which they spend much of the film totally removed. In this sense, we can understand how Bertolucci uses Theo and Isabelle’s apartment as another fabricated Eden surrounded externally by a reality of violence and chaos. *The Dreamers*, while again building its Eden in a Parisian apartment as *Last Tango in Paris* had, nonetheless continues to act in contrast with the previous film in the actual structure of its “Eden.” To the extent that
David Denby describes in his *New Yorker* review of the film, the apartment has become “both a garden of the intellect and an erotic labyrinth.” Thus, the apartment, or Eden, in this sense, effectively becomes exactly what it served to destroy in *Last Tango in Paris*. That is, what was once, in *Last Tango*, an empty flat in which knowledge of the outside world was prohibited, the apartment in *The Dreamers* has become a cluttered maze of knowledge from the outside world, where books, newspaper clippings and paintings practically consume those inside of it. In consuming those within it, the idea of Eden in *The Dreamers* serves to preserve innocence to the extent that it nonetheless does isolate (or perhaps, conveniently distracts) the three would-be-radicals from the developing protests on the streets below. What happens therefore is that “while the youngsters are in inside quite realistically acting out their fantasies, real life (and death) is running riot in the streets.” Thus, the idea is that for as long as the characters are “inside,” they could remain preserved.

However, Matthew, Isabelle and Theo do find idealistic purpose in their secluded and fabricated sense of activism; they, therefore, create an Eden in which they can “argue politics, cinema, war, and music [when they are] too afraid to confront the outside world.” In this sense, they remain innocent in that their paradise provides them with a social microcosm of the revolution outside. In other words, for as long as the three characters can protest society within their Eden, they can feel purpose in their idealism, yet they are never actually subjected to the dangers that their idealism evokes in the context of the outside society. Therefore, the hopeful ideals – the dreams, as Bertolucci might suggest – of these characters can remain untainted in their Eden. However, when their hopes are introduced into the outside world, the lines between the maintenance of
the idealistic and the destruction of idealism begin to break down. We can better understand the ways in which the apartment, while certainly not Edenic in the traditional definition, nonetheless fostered a sense of childhood (that is, virginal in contrast to savage) innocence among its inhabitants.

Before discussing the specificity of Matthew as the American Adam, it is first important to recognize Bertolucci’s allusion of innocence between Theo and Isabelle, as well (albeit, such innocence is later held in contrast to Matthew’s representation of innocence). While most critics have casually labeled the relationship between Theo and Isabelle as quasi-incestuous, it is more probable, given the context of their interactions within the apartment, that the relationship could, instead, be representative of a type of pre-eaten forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve relationship. The first night that Matthew spends at the apartment, for example, he accidentally stumbles into Theo’s room and witnesses a naked Theo and Isabelle sleeping intertwined in bed. We later find out, however, that this intimacy has never been consummated and therefore, we are left to question if perhaps Isabelle and Theo are acting less out of incest and more as innocents who are unaware of their nudity and the implications that such nudity suggests.

Similarly, as the film continues, we see all three characters sharing a bath together and finally, in perhaps the most poignant act of childhood, sleeping – again naked – in a mock-tent set up in the living room.

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6 See David Denby’s “They Like to Watch” in the *New Yorker*, Natasha Grant’s “Bertolucci’s Wet Dream” in *New York Amsterdam News*, Richard Schickel’s “No Joy but Lots of Sex” in *Time*, Stanley Kauffmann’s “Trio in a Flat” in *The New Republic* and Brain Johnson’s “In the Country of Love” in *Maclean’s*. 
Only when Isabelle realizes that their parents have come home and have seen them sleeping in the tent does she see her relationship with Theo (and now Matthew) as something other than virginal – a realization which leads her to attempt suicide. Perhaps motivated by shame, in much the same way that Adam and Eve recognized their nudity for the first time after having eaten the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Isabelle’s suicide attempt (and murder attempt of her brother and Matthew) not only shows Isabelle’s new knowledge of self-awareness, but it also signifies her last attempt to preserve the innocence in the apartment. Their mass death would not only preserve them as eternally youthful, but it would also spare them from the outside reality which had now begun to creep into the apartment with their parents. However, just as Adam and Eve were cognizant of the loss of their innocence and clothed themselves after eating the fruit, Isabelle, Theo and Matthew, likewise, cannot escape the inevitability of reality. What had begun to infiltrate their Eden, only subtly, when the twins’ parents came home, soon comes crashing through their world, destroying any hope of eternal innocence. As the carbon monoxide gas filters into their tent, a protestor hurls a brick through the apartment window, shattering the glass, and thus freeing the children both from death and from their protective garden which they had only temporarily turned into a youthful playground of idealistic philosophical, political and erotic refuge. After the brick has formally destroyed Eden, Bertolucci can make his final distinction between the French innocents and the American innocent. Though the film had been suggesting it all along, the final scene confirms it: Isabelle and Theo join the riots and Matthew walks away from the crowds; he never fights.
To understand the development of Matthew as the pre-fallen Adam in the context of this film, we should first begin by again referencing Matthew in contrast to Last Tango’s, Paul. The film opens by suggesting that despite a similar time and place, The Dreamers will give the audience very little of the American who we saw in Last Tango. To make the initial tonal distinction, Bertolucci contrasts the first scene of The Dreamers almost identically with that of Last Tango. Where we first met Paul screaming, “Fucking God!” under a Paris subway line, The Dreamers also opens with a series of shots taken of Paris subway structures. Except this time, when the camera finally reaches the face of the American, he is instead a blond haired, blue eyed, twenty-year old, “androgynous Adonis who looks like…a very young Marlon Brando.” Matthew’s eyes are darting around his surroundings in wonderment and he grins slightly before running off to the Cinémathèque. We soon learn that Matthew is from San Diego, an identification which reaches beyond the general theme of the American abroad, in the Henry James sense, but further couples such an idea with the even more dreamlike quality mythically associated with Californians. Thus, if Paul had been trapped in landlocked Nebraska, haunted by the monotony of a farmer’s recurring drool, Matthew, instead, comes from California where the motto alone indicates a certain level of domestic promise, optimism and renewal.

In The California Dream, Dennis Hale and Jonathan Eisen speak about California’s “youth cult” of which Matthew certainly could be a part, or at least, could represent in contrast to Bertolucci’s previous portrayals of Americans in Last Tango. “The ‘quest’ has always been the special province of the young,” Hale and Eisen begin. “But in California, it is also the moral duty of the citizen, enshrined…and implied by all of [the state’s] history; it is the reason for being, or at any rate, [the American’s] reason
for being in California. The command is therefore explicit: stay young.” One could suggest, as a result of this “youth cult,” that California is to America what America has historically represented to Europe. In many ways, California, therefore, could be the garden within the garden: the state where youth springs eternal, where gold was unearthed from the fertile land, where the Okies searched for rebirth during the Depression, where the counterculture gathered its foundation and where the latest generation of young Americans has been rewarded for dreaming virtual dreams in Silicon Valley. Therefore, it is perhaps precisely Matthew’s embodiment of this coastal youth and bewilderment in a rioting Paris which leads the half French-half British, Isabelle to comment during her first meeting with the young American: “You’re awfully clean.”

Bertolucci, constructing Matthew from this general “youth cult” of California, will ultimately use the ideas expressed by Matthew, as one type of dreamer, as a way to categorically distinguish Matthew’s innocence from that of his French counterparts. Interestingly, however, more than simply painting Matthew as the archetypal Adam, Bertolucci effectively composes Matthew’s innocence as the American Adam – innocent, perhaps only in his youth as compared to the French, but still not purely untainted. Considering the extent to which the original American Adam had already fallen before entering his land of rebirth, Matthew’s Adam is innocent inasmuch as he has become entranced by French sophistication. However, for Bertolucci, it is ultimately Matthew’s pragmatism which distinguishes a type of American Adamic innocence from that of Isabelle and Theo’s naïve innocence. In his presentation of American innocence in The Dreamers, then, Bertolucci fluctuates between portraying Matthew as a cultural outsider – much as Christopher Newman had been in The American (however, without the
primitivism of Brando’s savagery in *Last Tango,* – while also showing Matthew as a realist whose innocence leads perhaps *only* to idealism, but whose pragmatism saves him from naïveté.

As the film begins, we see Matthew seduced by Old World Europe, much as his literary and cinematic predecessors had before him. Upon meeting Isabelle and Theo for the first time, Matthew narrates: “I could hear my heart pounding and I couldn’t tell if it was because I had just been chased by the police or if it was because I was already in love with my new friends.” After leaving Theo and Isabelle that night, Matthew enthusiastically writes to his mother in San Diego, narrating again, “Dear Mom, I’ve got some real news this time. I’ve just made real French friends.” However, Matthew, continuing to fulfill the role of cultural outsider, soon turns self-conscious in his position among the French. When Theo asks Matthew if he had slept well after Matthew spent his first night with the twins, Matthew replies, “Yeah.” Yet, embarrassed, Matthew catches himself, clears his throat, rephrases and finally offers the more proper, “I mean, fine.” Later Matthew will admit to Isabelle: “When I first saw you at the Cinematheque – you and Theo – you looked so cool, so sophisticated, like movie stars.” It would seem as though Matthew’s Adam, likewise, suffered from the same cultural insecurity and dubious international displacement as his Noble Savage counterpart had. However, while Matthew may share self-conscious discomfort with the contrasting idea of primitive innocence, Bertolucci is sure to mark Matthew’s innocence as Adamic (and not savage) in Matthew’s consistent non-violent passivism throughout the film. Therefore, if Noble Savagery is defined as a type of John Wayne innocence, considered pure in its primal
barbarianism manifesting itself internationally by the cultural displacement of the American, then Matthew’s “Adam” is reinforced simply by his will not to fight.

Significantly, we see Matthew take his first formal stance against violence after he has just lost a cinema bet to Theo. The punishment for his failure to answer the esoteric film question correctly is to make love to Isabelle while Theo watches. When Matthew tries to leave the apartment, Theo finds him in the kitchen and pins him to the table. Squirming to get free, Theo holds Matthew harder, until finally Matthew confesses: “You’re hurting me! I’m not violent! I’m against violence. I’m not gonna resist.” As a result of his non-resistance, Matthew passes out momentarily, only to accept his challenge and lose his virginity to Isabelle on the kitchen floor minutes later. The result, of course, is that Matthew clearly loses one aspect of his innocence; however, Matthew does not change immediately into the Noble Savage (in fact, we never see him become that). Instead, Bertolucci shows Matthew’s maturity in his growing anger with Theo and Isabelle’s fabricated isolation and further in his dissatisfaction with what he considers to be the naïve and contradictory politics of the French twins.

Prior to discussing the political schisms that fully articulate the differences of innocent idealism between Matthew and Isabelle and Theo, Bertolucci first establishes Matthew’s nuanced type of innocence as compared to Isabelle and Theo’s. After the three characters emerge from bathing naked together in the family’s bathtub, signifying, of course, that they really are still children, Theo and Isabelle ask Matthew if he is ready to show them his proof of love. Matthew again professes his love for them (as he has done throughout the film) and agrees to show it in any way necessary. However, when Theo and Isabelle cover him with shaving cream, corner him against a sink and try to
shave his pubic hair, Matthew refuses, arguing that they are turning him into a “freak.”

Realizing that this is something which the twins have done to each other in the past, Matthew yells angrily: “You want to shave my pubic hair? You want me to be a little boy for you? A little pre-pubescent [boy]? Who you can play games with?” The twins stop, offering, “Relax, Matthew, we hear you.” However, Matthew continues, reinforcing what had already been suggested when we first saw Isabelle and Theo in bed together, by stating, “I really love you, both of you and I admire you and I look at you and I listen to you and I think, you’re never gonna grow like this.” What becomes clear is that Matthew may be innocent, but he is not a child; the twins may be sophisticated, but they have become trapped in their apartment and remain children, refusing to face the surrounding chaos around them. Therefore, we are left to believe, that at the very least, Matthew has grown simply because he has left his California Eden in the search for wisdom in another land – an act which will ultimately come to distinguish the forms of innocence between Les Innocents of the French twins and Matthew’s American Adam.

Bertolucci eventually turns to politics as a way to further reinforce the nascent differences between Matthew’s idealism and that of Isabelle and Theo’s. Theo’s room, fully equipped with a Mao lamp, serves as the backdrop for most of the film’s political debates. Despite minor discussions throughout the film on the events of the Vietnam War or by using the filter of cinema to represent political stances, Matthew and Theo share perhaps the most significant, and certainly in depth political discourse towards the film’s end as they fittingly share a bottle of Theo and Isabelle’s father’s vintage red wine. Theo begins the conversation in familiar territory, relating communism back to cinema, as he has done in nearly every discourse throughout the film:
Listen, Matthew. You’re a big movie buff, right? Then why don’t you think of Mao as a great director, making a great movie with a cast of millions? All those millions of red guards marching together into the future with a little red book in their hands. Books, not guns. Culture, not violence. Can’t you see what a beautiful epic movie that would make?

Matthew responds:

I guess, but it’s easy to say books, not guns. But it’s not true. It’s not books, it’s book – a book – just one book. The red guards that you admire, they all have the same book, they all sing the same songs, they all parrot the same slogans, so in this big epic movie, everybody is an extra. That’s scary to me. That gives me the creeps. I’m sorry to say it, but for me, there is a distinct contradiction, because if you really believed what you were saying, you’d be out there. Out there on the street. There’s something going on out there, something that feels like it could be really important. Something that feels like things could change. Even I get that. But you’re not out there. You’re inside with me, drinking expensive wine, talking about film, talking about Maoism. Why?

By combining Matthew’s outward disgust with Isabelle and Theo’s need to change him into a “little boy,” with his practical realism in relation to the “something” that is going on in the streets, Bertolucci may be showing Matthew as politically idealistic, however, certainly not politically blind. Interestingly, Matthew even alludes to himself as less than naïve when he states of the revolution, “even I get that [something important is happening],” as though he has aligned himself more with the politics of Theo’s moderate father than a the youth-generated protestors on the streets. In this sense, one could suggest that the same literary influences that helped to inspire Italian neo-realism in 1940s Italy, not only helped to shape an international sense of myth-generated American identity, but also helped to express a sense of American pragmatism, as represented here, fittingly through Bertolucci’s construction of Matthew’s American identity. That is, Matthew is innocent inasmuch as he is a child among the cultured French, but “adult” to the extent that his pragmatism prevents him from fully embracing Isabelle and Theo’s romanticism of a communist revolution.
By the film’s end, Bertolucci brings into focus the foundational questions of innocence preserved and innocence destroyed in *The Dreamers*, as he follows the actions of his three characters after the brick from the outside revolution finally invades the trio’s apartment-as-Eden. As the three characters wake up from sleeping – still naked – in their living room tent, they look out the window to see rioting through the streets. Now fully clothed, Matthew, Theo and Isabelle run into the street, with Isabelle and Theo pumping their fists yelling, “Hit the streets!” with the other protests. Conversely, Matthew has been separated from his friends and is lost in the crowd. By the time Matthew catches up to the twins, Theo is already nearly finished making a Molotov cocktail. Trying to stop him, Matthew yells:

> Theo this [holding the bomb] is wrong. This is wrong. This is violence! This is violence! This is fucking fascism in a bottle! This is what *they* do; this is not what we do. We use this [pointing to his brain]. We do this [kissing Isabelle and Theo on the lips].

However, Theo pushes Matthew off of him and as Matthew walks away, Theo throws the first bomb into a line of gendarmes, causing the onslaught of gunfire, smoke bombs and effectively puts an end to what had begun, in theory, as a peaceful protest. Acting perfectly within the definition of the Adamic hero, whose sacrifices and efforts are not realized by himself, but by those who come after him, the film’s last scene shows Matthew walking anonymously away from the violence, through the crowds and lines of police charging towards the protestors.\(^7\) What Bertolucci asks of the viewer, then, is this: has Matthew’s American Adam finally fully fallen into adulthood as he despondently walks away knowingly from what would ultimately become defined as politically naïve

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\(^7\) See pg. 18 for further comments on the characteristics of Adam’s heroism.
demands of communist revolution or was Matthew’s Adam instead, preserved as innocent – holding firmly to his idealistic beliefs of non-violence, pacifism and optimism while the other innocents fall into savagery?

What is perhaps the most culturally interesting aspect, however, of The Dreamers’ ending is not necessarily that the protest turned violent or even that Bertolucci comments on the paradoxes and contradictions of his own generation’s radicalism, but it is that the young American walks away in anti-violence when the French provoke the revolt. In this sense, one must question: what shifted in society (both the international and American societies) to cause Bertolucci, who had once identified America with Brando’s primitive savagery in Last Tango in Paris (in contrast to Jean-Pierre Leaud’s role in the film as Jeanne’s youthful French filmmaker fiancé, who dreamt of reinventing filmmaking), to revisit thirty years later the same subject, except telling this second story through the youthful eyes of a pacifist American Adam? The answer, I propose, can be found by studying this film not merely in the cultural context which it depicts, but more importantly by analyzing the cultural context in which it was made.

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Certainly, when discussing the context in which The Dreamers was made, one would be remiss to overlook the overarching autobiographical influences of Bertolucci’s history in the production of this film and how, in many ways, Bertolucci was commenting nostalgically as a sixty-year old man, on both his generation’s optimism concerning change as well as its youthful naïveté regarding their politics of change. Working well
within the quasi-cultural psychoanalysis of the once radical generation revisiting their youth through mature (and perhaps even, disproving eyes) in what historian, David Burner has termed “Making Peace with the 60s,” Bertolucci evokes a sense of romantically reexperiencing his own youthful radicalism through both the fictional characters of Matthew, Theo and Isabelle, as well as through genuine interjected news footage from the 1968 Paris riots.

Inasmuch as Bertolucci visually recreates the riots at the Cinémathèque with the utmost authenticity – even having (the now aged) Jean Pierre Leaud and Jeanne Pierre Kalfon reprise their roles as the then youthful faces of the French New Wave, performing the same speeches with the same outrage as they had in 1968, there nonetheless lies an almost evocative sense of wistfulness in Bertolucci’s scenes of radicalism. What becomes clear is that the best Bertolucci could hope for in reconstructing the mentality of 1968 revolution has become sprinkled with the likes of graying movie stars whose iconic youthful radicalism has now been replaced with a sort of disarming nostalgia of naïve innocence – nostalgic as much for the audience as for the actors. In other words, what seemed revolutionary to the young cinephiles in 1968 had become so outdated in 2003, that the only sense of validity could come in the form of intertextualizing authentic 1968 news footage in the film – which Bertolucci certainly does. However, such an act only leaves the audience with a more explicit schism between fiction and reality and between what once was and what now is. Such pronounced nostalgia, therefore, naturally leads to the feeling that The Dreamers is not trying to re-advocate a type of youthful radicalism, but merely to revisit it – and, as it turns out – redefine it.
While one could comment extensively on the various cultural and societal influences that led to ideological shifts in the 1960s generation, for the practical purpose of keeping this analysis relevant to the theme cyclical innocence in this thesis, I will concentrate predominantly the cultural context during which *The Dreamers* was made as the framework to discuss the changing light in which Bertolucci portrayed Americanism in 2003.\(^8\) Having already addressed the similarities in plot between 1972’s *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Dreamers*, it is necessary conversely to recognize the discrepancies of national (American) and international cultural contexts that likewise exist between the making of these two films. That is, if Marlon Brando’s embodiment of savage innocence was birthed out of the Vietnam culture of Americanism, one could suggest that the radical shift in Bertolucci’s construction of American identity – in particular, in American innocence – thirty years later, was rooted in the same interconnection of America’s place and perception in an international standing. However, if the American innocence of the 1970s were characterized predominantly by a return to primitivism as the result of a violent international quagmire, political corruption and a failing economy, then one could surely reference the attacks of September 11, 2001 as defining a cultural context in which Bertolucci would come to abandon his sense of primitivism in relation to American innocence and reinstate the American Adam in the process, thereby contributing to the cinematic perpetuation of the cycle of American innocence.

Speaking directly to the mythic cycle of innocence, Anne Taylor Fleming wrote in the *New York Times* on September 23, 2001, what had been said countless times before,

\(^8\) For the most in depth discussion on the aftermath of 1960s radicalism, see David Burner’s *Making Peace with the 60s*.
whether referencing the closing of the frontier or the wake of Civil War destruction, Depression Era poverty, or Vietnam cynicism: “America has lost its innocence. Politicians and pundits and the public – in grief-stricken, sometimes angry voices – have said the same. Americans, they say, have crossed some literal and psychic Rubicon into a darker, scarier world. And the nation mourns the loss of that innocence as it mourns its dead.” The insinuation here is clear: the cycle of innocence, despite what Phil Caputo said had previously been lost in Vietnam, continued inasmuch as innocence was still thriving enough for it to be “lost” again on 9/11. For Americans, as Fleming suggests, the national mentality of tragedy avoidance led to such a loss of innocence. “Without that sense of the tragic, America is indeed ‘innocent,’ facing each new test or crisis with a combination of abashed patriotism and that feisty spirit,” Fleming writes. “Without a sense of the tragic, its citizens are naked, unprotected, eternally childlike.” In this sense, Americans are subjected to only recognizing innocence after it has been “destroyed,” effectively, leading them to retroactively proclaim the existence of the American Adam only after he has “fallen” again.

However, one could propose that there are two conflicting versions of American innocence lost as a result of 9/11 – the American and the European. If we see Fleming as indicative of an American sense of innocence lost (that is, the fall of Adam), I would suggest that internationally the attacks of September 11, 2001 signified not necessarily the day on which America lost its innocence as defined by Americans, but contrastingly, the day on which the Noble Savage of Vietnam died and the day on which Adam was again reborn. It was the day on which America again seemed internationally young and renewed the virginal essence of “Americanism” (or, at least, the 21st Century version of
such an ideal), as had been first defined by European projections of American identity hundreds of years prior.

By referencing the international response to September 11, 2001, one can understand the extent to which America had again become a “child” in the realm of Old World Europe – both in its previous escapes from international tragedy (as has been explained by Woodward in Chapter I) or youthful in its disregard for the previously obvious threats that had been looming and indicting the eventuality of 9/11 (specifically, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi and the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen).

Interestingly, only with the sensitivity of hindsight have the national and international communities been reexamining America’s politics prior to September 11. At the time of the attacks, however, most newspapers and journals were predominantly focused on American “innocence” – both in the sense of blame and age. That is, aside from Fleming’s article, *Aftermath: Innocence Lost; A Tragedy for an Optimistic Land*, which was only one of many United States’ articles of the same theme, *The Observer* (from Britain) commented on economic destruction “beside the sense of loss of innocence that the attacks engendered, and the grim numbers of the dead.”¹²⁰ Further, in a September 27th article from *The Guardian*, Peregrine Worsthorne references a type of American innocence nearly identical to Woodward’s impression that America had remained innocent only in respect to the vastness of previous international history. Worsthorne identifies her European roots, while also acknowledging the place of America in world history by commenting:

Unquestionably this past fortnight has marked the end of their [American] safe world; has
proved a uniquely horrible shock for Americans...But because the World Trade Centre atrocity marks the end of the non-historical innocence for a particularly fortunate generation, that does not make it the beginning of a new dimension in horror for everybody else. For the end of American innocence must not be confused with the end of mankind, and just because the American homeland is scratched for the first time, this does not mean that the rest of the world - which has survived so many worse scratches, is going to bleed to death...so much that is new to America is very old hat to us.121

Further, an editorial from Italy’s La Stampa, written on September 13, 2001, likewise refers to America’s “eternal children,” stating, “New York ha sempre pensato di essere forte e invincibile, gli americani oggi hanno dovuti rompere gli schemi preconfezionati dalla loro società che li ha resi eterni bambinoni incapaci a volte di ragionare.”122 It would seem, therefore, that the cycle of American innocence lost and renewed had reached far beyond its national walls in the aftermath of September 11. Adam’s rebirth (or death in the American psyche) on September 11 not only came from an American motivated place of retroactive innocence – where Americans were only made aware of their idealism after such “idealism” had been broken – but also from Europe’s projection of America as once again a country of mythic youth and innocence in relation to the history of the international community. The European descriptions of America’s experiences on September 11 as “new,” in the context of European identity, only indicates a modern-day continuation of those Elizabethan voyagers who Marx cites as having first constructed America as a land of new beginnings and, of course, youth. What becomes clear, then, mythically – if not necessarily in reality – is that America had again become a type of renewed Eden; a land in which Adam would be reborn and a land from which the European Bertolucci could believably construct in perfect contrast to

9 Translation: New Yorkers have always viewed themselves as being strong and invincible, Americans today are compelled to breakaway from certain preconceived expectations dictated by a society that forces them into an eternal state of childhood which at times does not allow them to think.
Brando’s *Last Tango* Vietnam era-innocent savagery, a virginal American Adam, grasping onto the ideals of pacifism and innocence, while chaos and anarchy surrounded him.
V. AFTERWARD

When I first began to conceive of this thesis topic, I was met with a great deal of opposition within the contemporary field of American Studies, primarily because the idea of discussing the influence of cultural myths upon American identities has been “discredited,” so-to-speak, in recent years, having been replaced with a new school of postmodern thought – and with the works of endless social and cultural theorists, most of whose works I have always felt were indecipherable for any reader. More and more often, these “social frameworks” in which to analyze the American culture are emerging as paramount tools to deconstruct the massiveness and complexity of what it means to be American. These frameworks range in theory from multiculturalism to class, gender or ethnicity – to name only a few, and while I certainly recognize and support the great advances that these scholarly movements present to the applicability of American Studies as a discipline, I was saddened to see that some of the classic works by Henry Nash Smith or Leo Marx had fallen by the academic wayside, being considered, ironically, too idealistic or worse still, insulting and prejudice to the reading of American culture.

To study myths and symbols today, I was warned, was academic suicide, and my work would be considered irrelevant and passé. I was one of the few graduate students left, a professor told me, to even see a glimpse of importance in these old cultural myths. The more progressive students, it would seem, found a greater purpose in the aforementioned historically glossed over fields. I figured, if nothing else, these traditional myths and symbols would one day become relevant when the postmodern theorists had picked every bit of meat off of every other cultural category; my chance for
relevance, I accepted, would have to wait for some years, but I did and still do believe that one day it will come.

I had come to learn of American Studies through the keystone writers whose books and articles I have used as a foundation in this thesis. Initially, I had always been attracted to the sheer readability of Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. However, as I advanced further in academia, I learned to appreciate their invaluable inclination to let culture “move” – to let it evolve and to not attempt to label it through any static framework, other than, of course, the wonderfully subjective lens of literature. Surely, I felt, the malleability of cultural myths would prevent them from ever truly becoming taboo in understanding a culture. Still, I appreciated the critics: myths and symbols were created hundreds of years ago by a select few, whose privileged (and often pedigreed) background could hardly represent the minorities of that same culture – and who, more often than not, coexisted in a disadvantaged state of poverty, oppression or ridicule.

What the critics contend is accurate – the broad cultural myths of America do omit large pockets of Americans and those understudied groups have given American Studies students and professors a great deal to investigate today. However, as I was nearly backing down from this thesis topic, afraid that what I had been told would ultimately prove true – that this whole concept would be, in reality, completely irrelevant, I noticed a news item on Yahoo news.

The story reviewed a book on The 101 Most Influential People who never Lived. Paul Bunyan held the last slot at one hundred and one, and that mythic cowboy, the Marlboro Man, secured the victorious number one position. By the time I had finished reading the article, which described the Marlboro Man as “the great American cowboy”
and Paul Bunyan as a “mythical lumberjack” whose job it was to bring empowerment to beleaguered lumberjacks, I had become reinvested in the importance of revisiting cultural myths as a relevant – and credible – portal into American philosophies. There must be some cultural significance, I thought to myself, why the Marlboro man held a greater iconic power in the United States than Santa Claus and why Paul Bunyan resonated so deeply, not only with those discouraged lumberjacks of the early 19th Century, but also with the general American public today?

The answer, of course, was a very simple one: both were visible constructions of intangible cultural myths and with these images, Americans could hold onto the hope that perhaps somewhere in the vastness of the land, there really did still exist the possibility to live that immortal mythic existence which survived in the American literary cannon. Scholars may have long highlighted the troubles with assuming a collective American mind, but perhaps what myths serve to better exemplify today is not American collectivity, but a hope in understanding the conflicts among us. In exposing our differences and in reexamining cultural, social and historical blunders, is it not somewhat promising, I questioned, that these two cultural icons, both of whose identities are rooted in the myths of the frontier and of individualism, transcended our multicultural barriers?

What became quite clear through that article, therefore, was that we should not minimize the traditional myth and symbol schools of thought in American Studies in order to amplify the newer trends of the discipline. Rather, the two may be much stronger when working in accordance with each other – when we can broaden myth scholarship to embrace the “forgotten” fields. In doing so, we can build upon what has already been seen as an emerging trend in American Studies: the revisiting of mythology through the
narratives of those who had historically fallen outside of the social realms of the
dominant mythmakers, but whose identity was nevertheless affected by the power of the
myths. However, as this thesis argues, by expanding the study of myths beyond our own
history, we can unlock an entirely innovative subgenre of American Studies: the
international appropriation and application of American cultural mythology.

Such an international field of American Studies is littered with opportunities to
reexamine American identities through the physical outsider’s perspective, rather than the
metaphorical American outsider (he who was likely living in America, but “outside” of
the assumed definition of being “American”). What becomes clear, when breaking down
these international barriers, is that despite the manipulation and, even, misunderstanding
of American myths, certain ideals translate by the sheer visibility of them and with every
international perception of the myth, there arrives a mutation of the myth – something to
make it just that much more relevant to not only an American culture – but to an
international culture’s – time and place. The myth, therefore, strengthens, widens and
expands, effectively evolving and solidifying its importance in multiple cultures. What
begins to emerge, through these cross-cultural permutations, is an underlying
understanding of not only a nation’s history, but of its people and of its culture. For
every international addition to a myth, the myth’s effectiveness expands beyond its
founding origins and encompasses identities far removed from those early Elizabethan
voyagers. Ultimately, if we are lucky, we can embrace cultural mythology not for its
universality, but for the hope that it may provide in understanding cultural identities in an
increasingly combative world. Perhaps it is foolishly idealistic to invest in this sort of
cultural optimism, but I can only assume that I am perpetuating, in some small degree, the notion of the mythic cycle of American innocence.
NOTES

2 Kuklick, 72.
3 Kuklick, 73.
7 Marx, 36.
8 Marx, 39, 40.
10 Marx, 36.
11 Lewis, 40.
12 Marx, 43.
13 Marx, 46.
15 Lewis, 128.
16 Lewis, 128.
17 Lewis, 128.
18 Lewis, 129.
19 Carpenter, 601, 605.
20 Carpenter, 604.
21 Carpenter, 604.
22 Carpenter, 599.
23 Carpenter, 602.
24 Carpenter, 602.
25 Carpenter, 602.
27 Lewis, 9.
28 Carpenter, 602.
29 Carpenter, 602.
30 Marx, 75.
31 Marx, 80.
32 Marx, 81.
Hughes, 155.
36 Hughes/Sloutka
37 Peregrine Worsthorne, “On the brink of war: The end of American innocence must not be confused with the end of mankind - the world has survived far worse, and we will this time. Simply fasten your seatbelts for a bumpy ride,” The Guardian, 27 September, 2001, p. 7.
38 Carpenter, 602.
40 Fiedler, 101.
41 Fielder, 101.
42 Fiedler, 96.
43 Fiedler, 98.
44 Fielder, 101.
45 Fiedler, 100.
46 Fielder, 100.
47 Fiedler, 102.
48 Fiedler, 104.
49 Fiedler, 104.
51 Mariani, 81.
52 Mariani, 87.
54 Tonetti, 2.
55 Mariani, 89.
56 Tonetti, 3.
57 Tonetti, 3.
61 Gerard, 204.
62 Baldassarre, 28.
63 Stealing Beauty. Produced by Jeremy Thomas. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. X min. Fox Searchlight Pictures, Inc, 1996. DVD. All quotes taken from Stealing Beauty are indicated as such.


The Dreamers. Produced by Jeremy Thomas. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. 115 min. Fox Searchlight Pictures, Inc, 2003. DVD. All quotes taken from The Dreamers are indicated as such.

119 Fleming, 4.
120 “WAR ON TERRORISM: SPECIAL EDITION: COMMENT: We must respond - wisely: The United States and her allies have a duty to prosecute a war against terrorism, but we should be prepared for the consequences,” The Observer, 23 September, 2001, p. 20.
121 Worsthorne, 7.
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