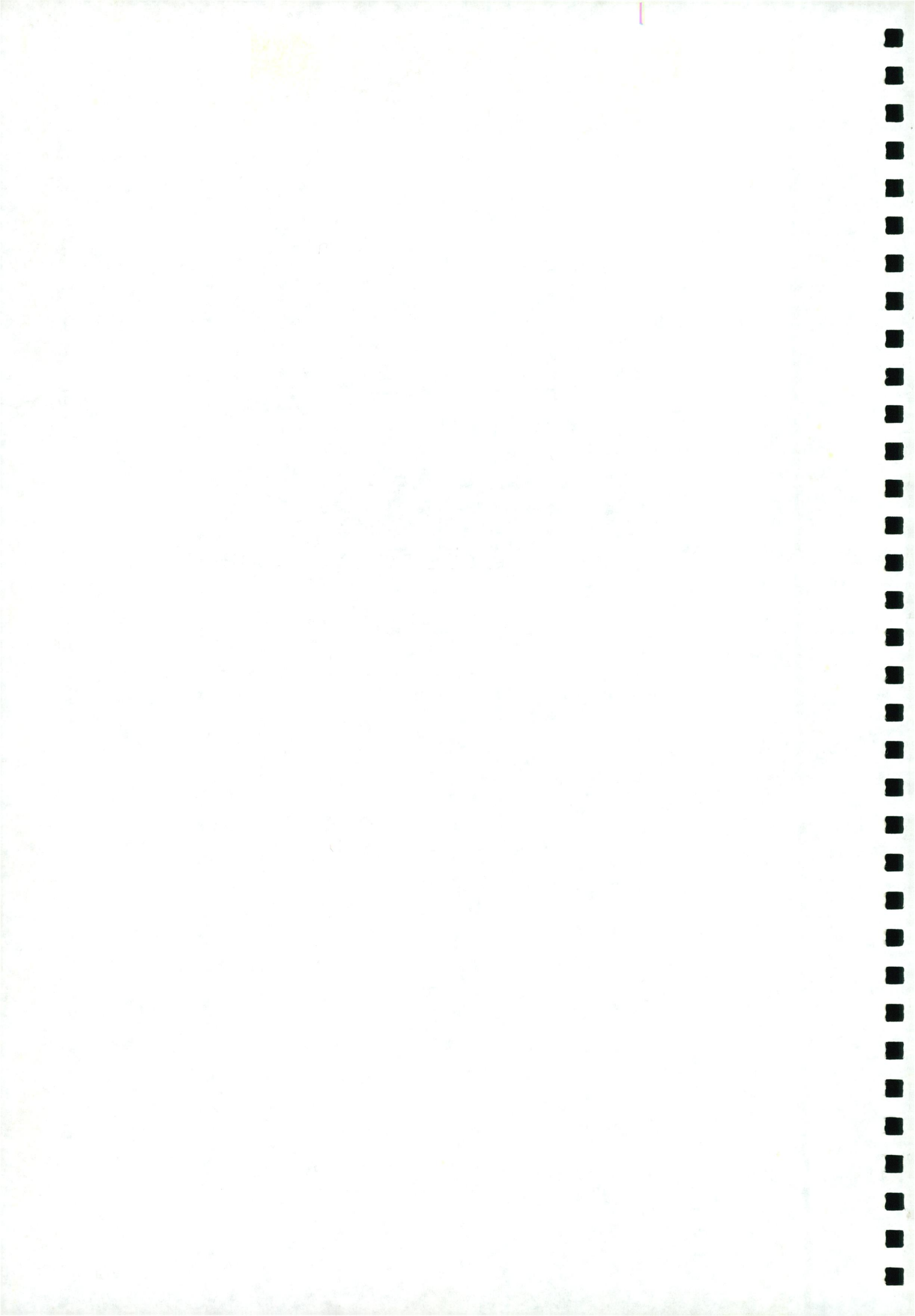




jacob's
ladder
Order out of Chaos



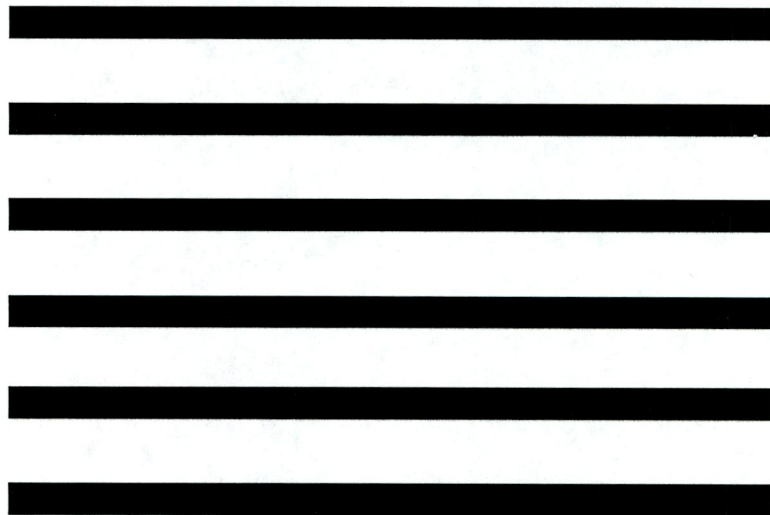
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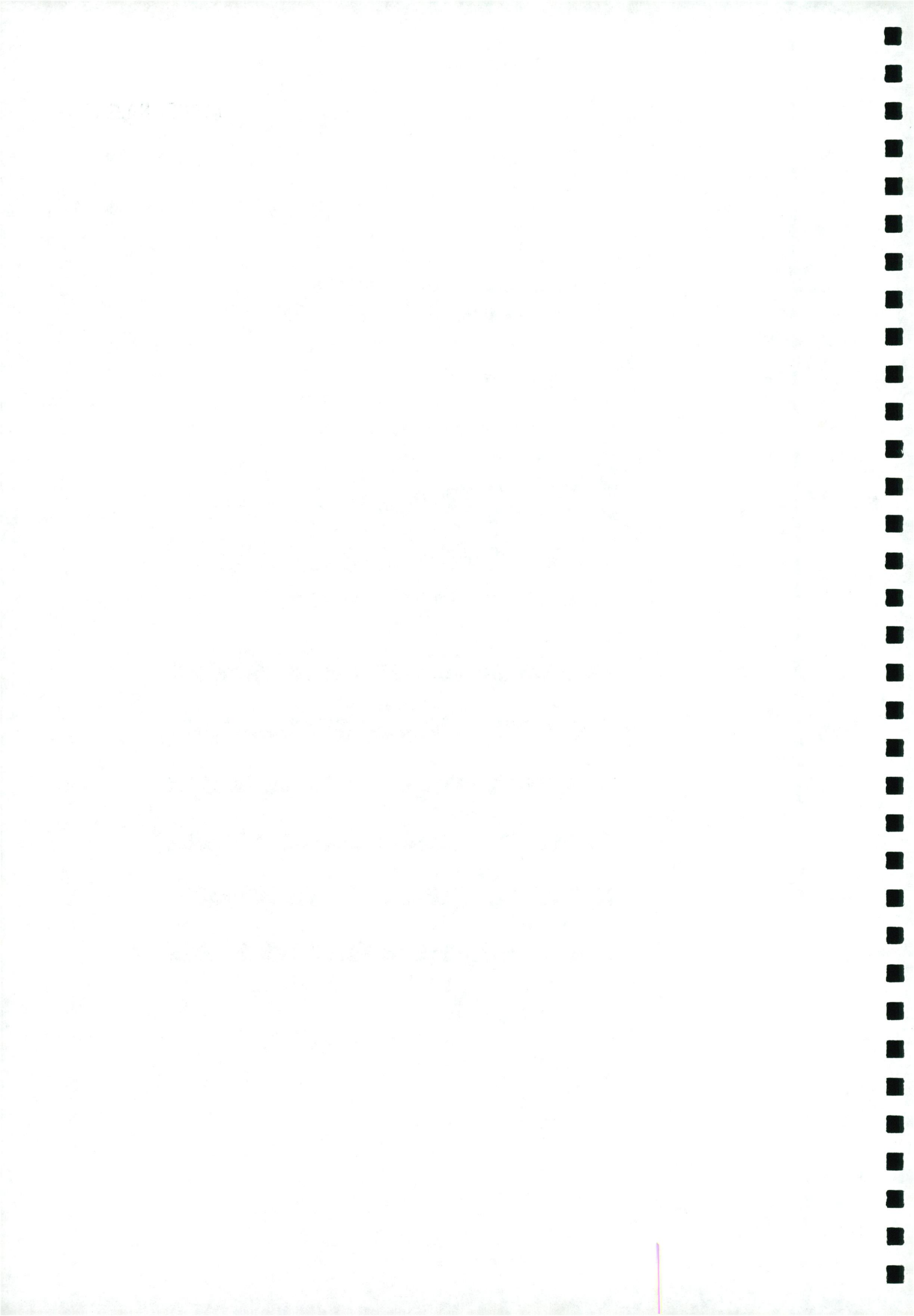
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National College of Art and Design
Department of Visual Communication

jacob's
ladder
Order out of Chaos
by Niamh Mary Jackman



1991



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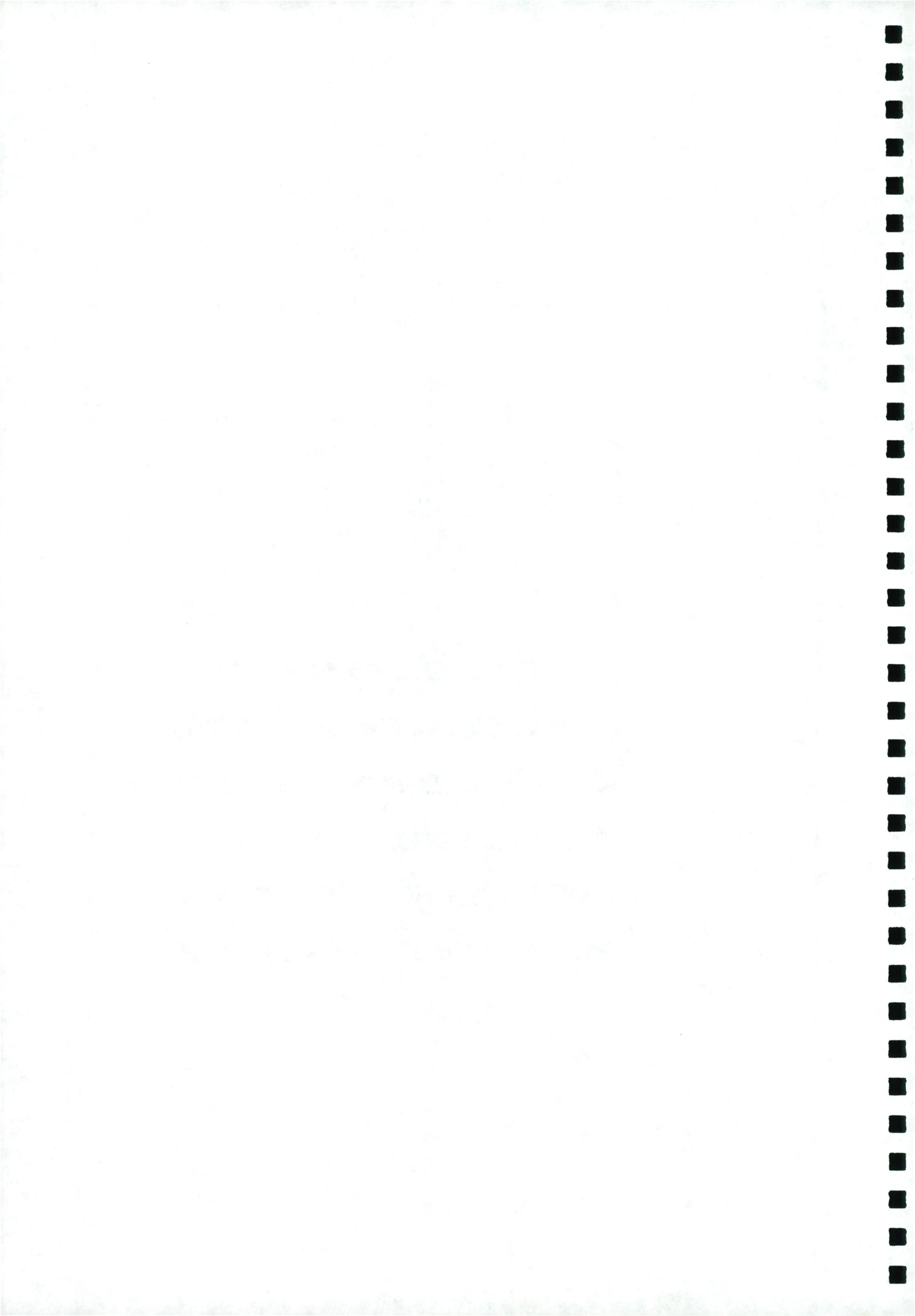
Complementary Studies

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Bachelor of Design

in Visual communications

1991



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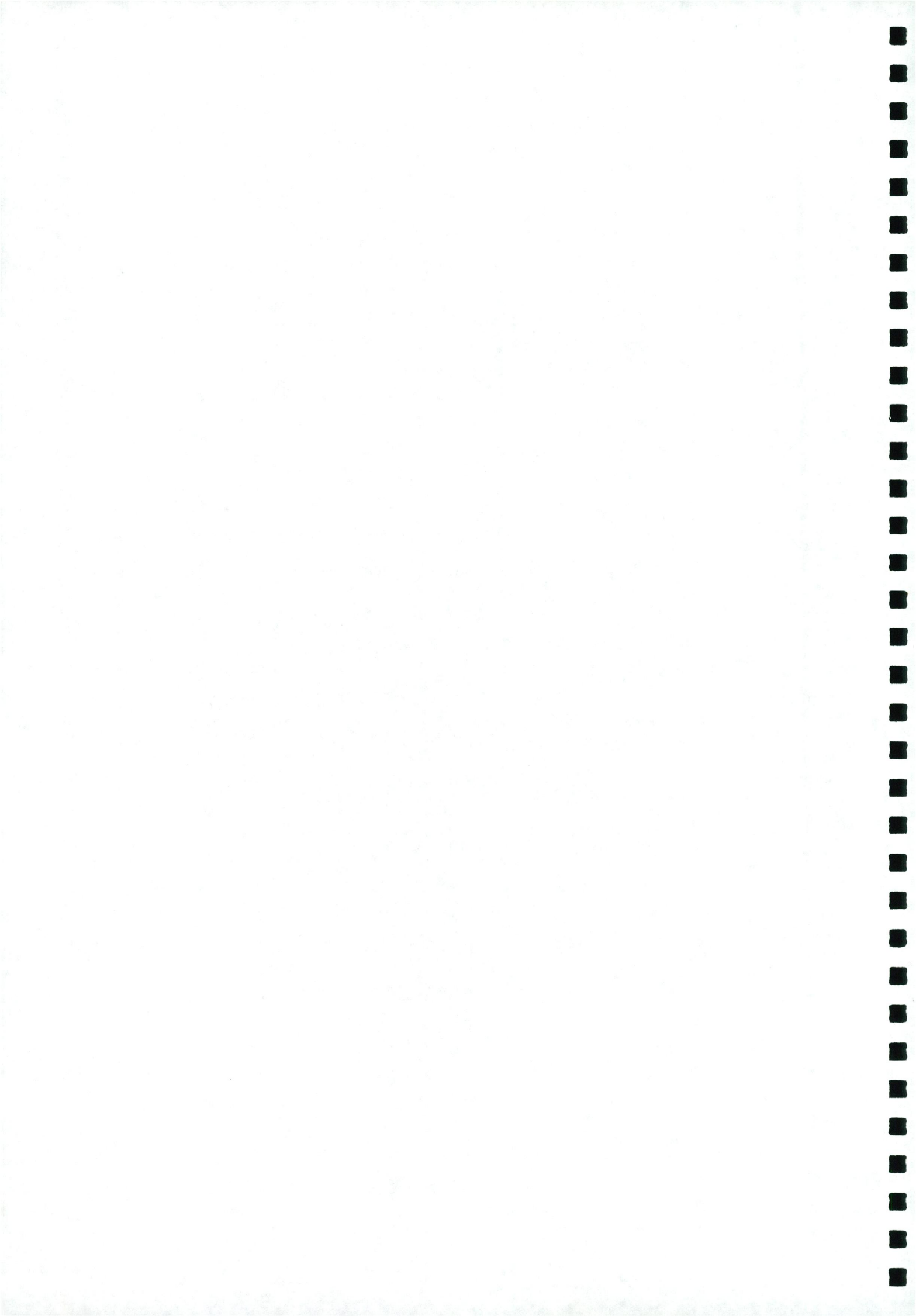
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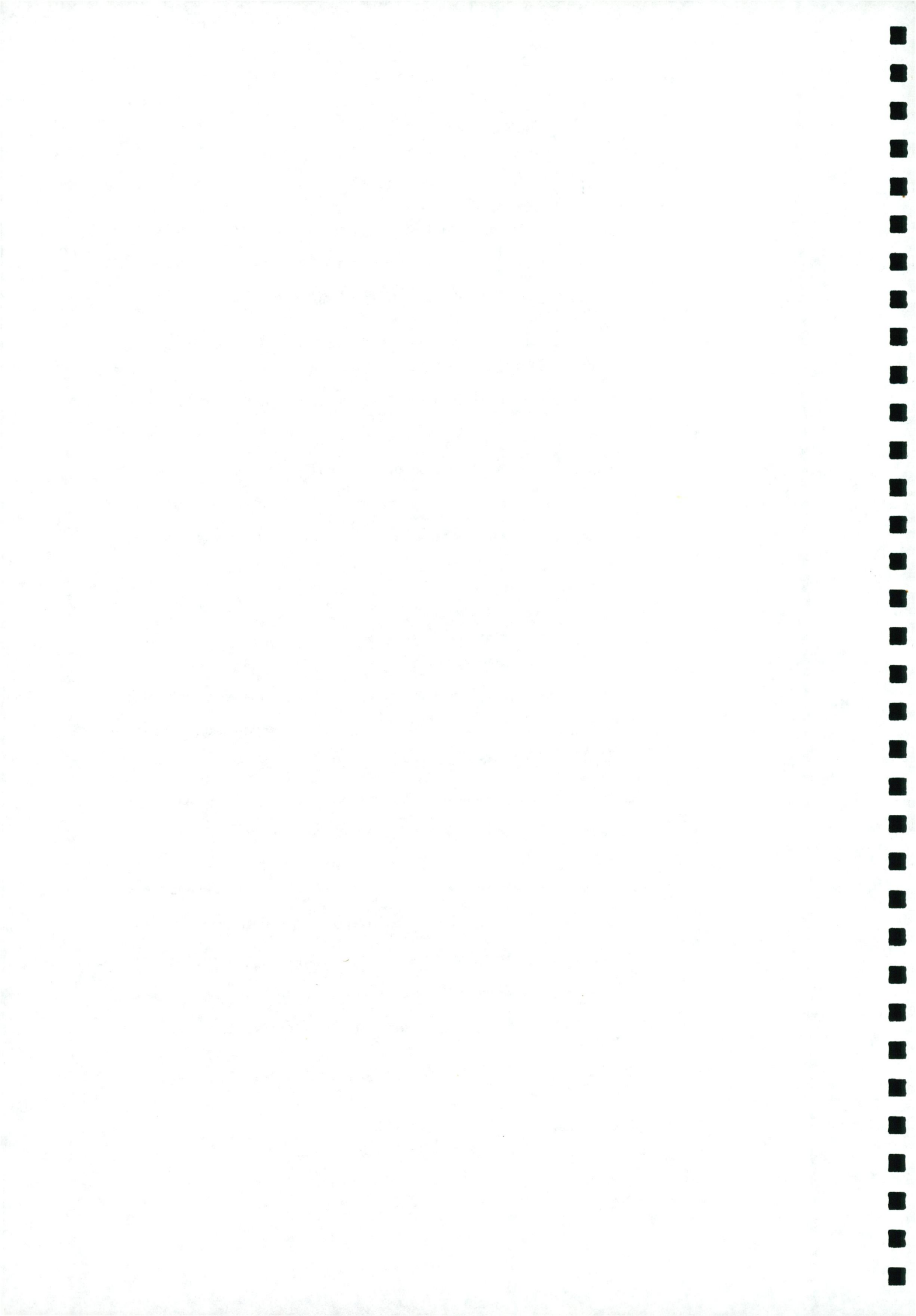


(i)

Vietnam: Mekong Delta 6th October, 1971. American Soldiers sit around, smoke dope and wait for some action. One of the soldiers begins to hold his head, 'there's something wrong'. Another falls over, fitfully banging his head fitfully on the ground. News of an offensive over the radio; 'movement in the tree line'. The action becomes confused: the camera moves erratically from one view point to another. There follows a series of short cuts and choppy, frenetic editing: images of dismembered bodies, a black soldier puking thick white liquid, exploding bombs, and Jacob in the jungle looking for cover. The camera moves through the jungle accompanied by the sound of heavy human breathing, this we presume is Jacob's. However, Jacob then comes into view and, bayoneted by the unknown assailant, falls to the ground.

This is our starting point. This is where Jacob's Ladder begins and ends. Vietnam, the setting, is real, what follows is a vision; a preview of hell apparently brought on by a bad trip. All the action takes place in the panorama of Jacob's mind, complete with memories, of both the near and distant past, and summations about the future. Here the present, the actual, is portrayed only in very short interspersed cuts to Vietnam.

Jacob wakes with a start, touches the place of his wound and looks around him. Jacob is older now and dressed in civilian clothes. He is on a subway train, the compartment is empty but for him. He reads the posters; the first sets the scene as New York, 'a crazy town', the second spells H-E-L-L in large red letters printed on black and warns of a life on drugs.

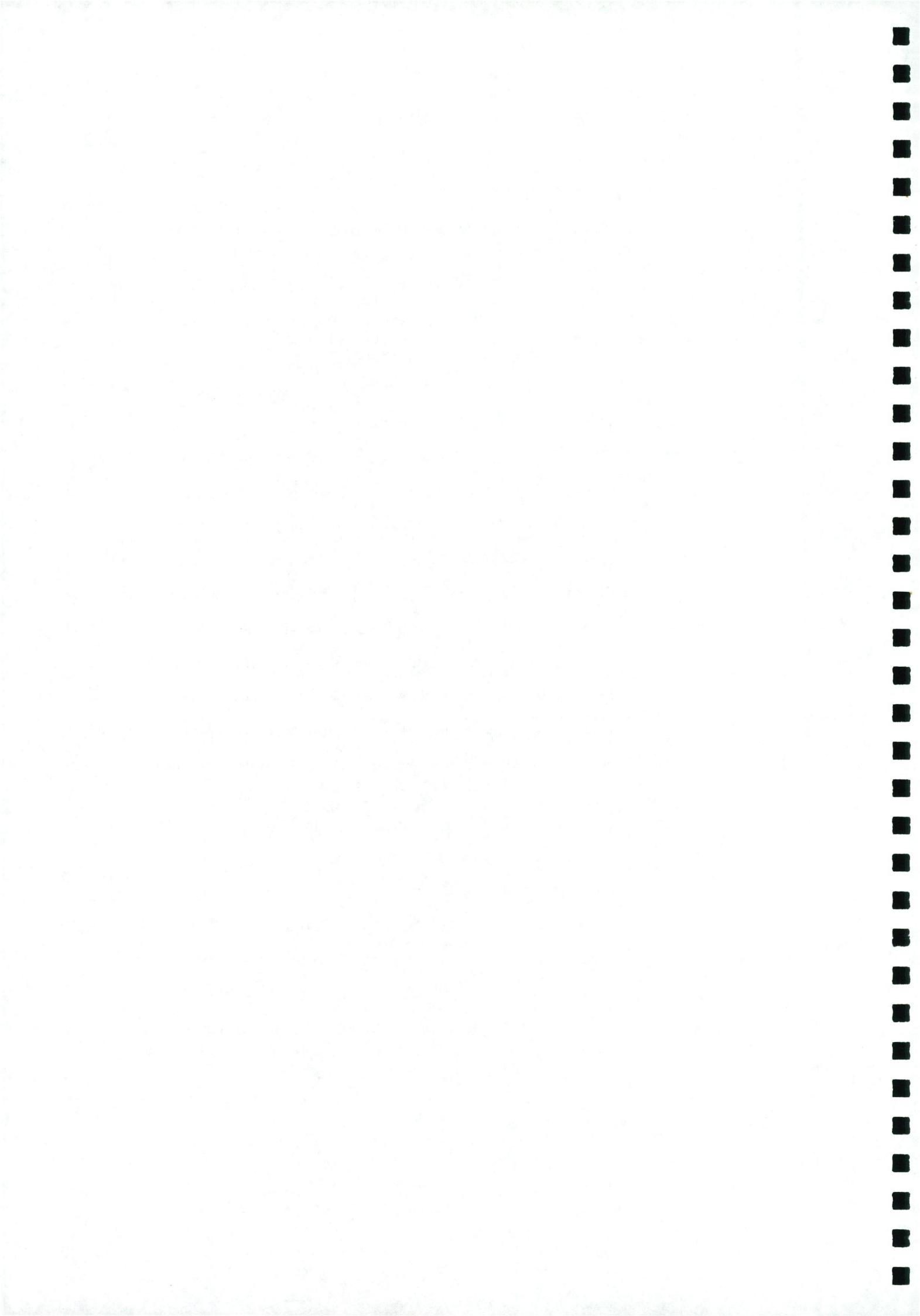


This is our introduction to what follows: the nightmare of a 'bad trip'.

Jacob alights at Bergen St. and finds the station closed. The posters on the station walls entitled 'Ecstasy' suggest the drug and remind the audience of Jacob's drug-induced state. He must cross the tracks. Here the pace of 'reality' seems to slow down as Jacob taps the tracks with his foot and proceeds carefully. Apparently engrossed, he loses his sense of time. Everything is quiet except for the clinking of the tunnel bulbs signalling the approaching train. Jacob looks up, the white lights of the train and the sound of metal on the tracks rush towards him. Jacob moves over and back unsure which way the train will go. Finally he throws himself to the side of the tracks. The train goes by, ghostly forms pressed against each window.

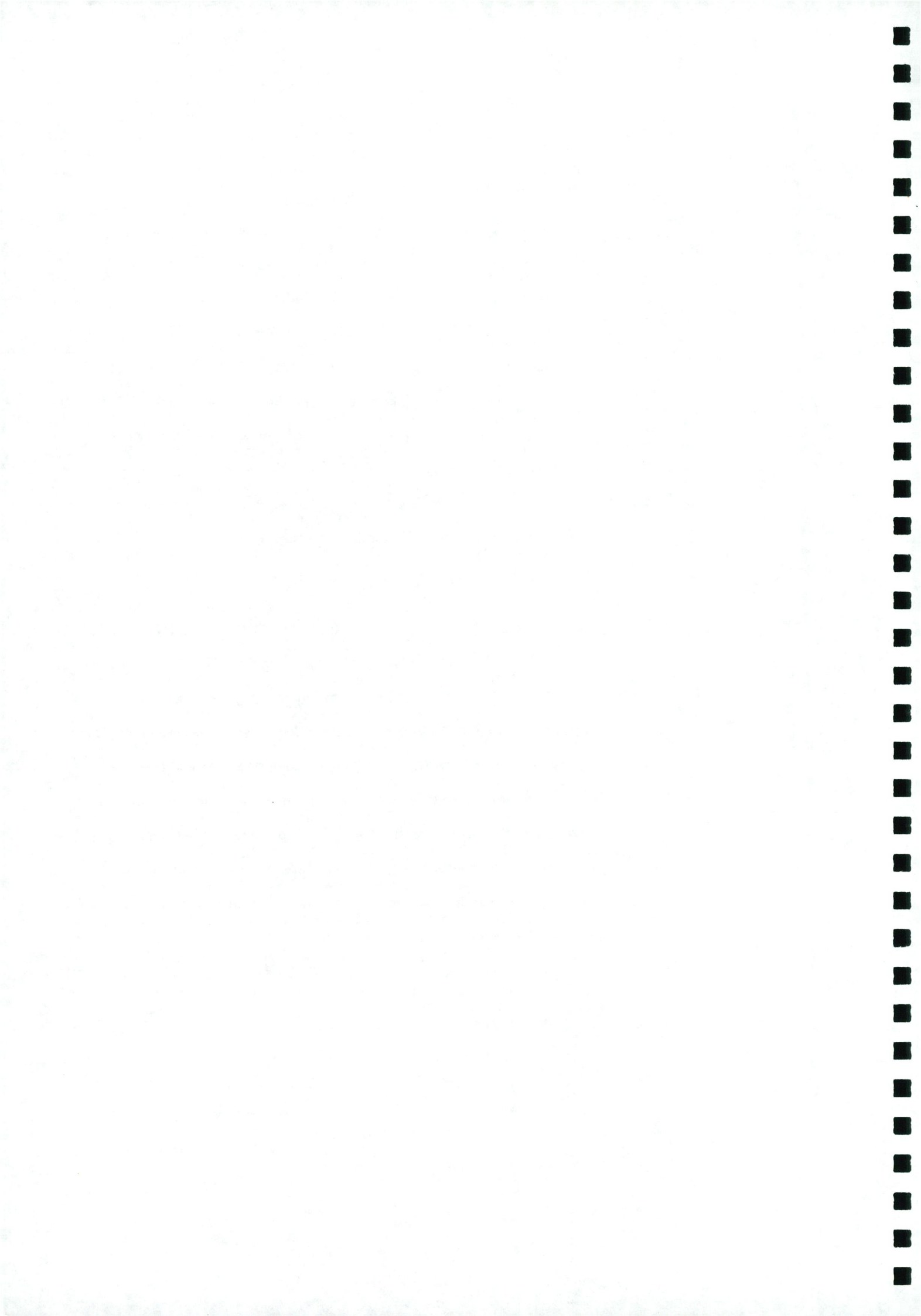
As the film progresses Jacob's sense of confusion becomes more acute and the hallucinations grow worse. On his way home from work Jacob is chased by a car, in the back window of which he sees ghost-like shapes, reminiscent of those pressed against the windows of the train, their heads are shaking violently just as did the soldier's in Vietnam.

During the dance scene Jacob's hallucination begins when he goes to the fridge for a beer but finds instead, a demonized piece of meat. Back in the room where Jez is dancing he lifts the cover off a bird cage, the bird starts against the bars and screeches. Jacob then meets a fortune teller on the stairs who tells him his lifeline indicates that he has already ceased to exist. Meanwhile 'what's goin' on?' is being played in the background.



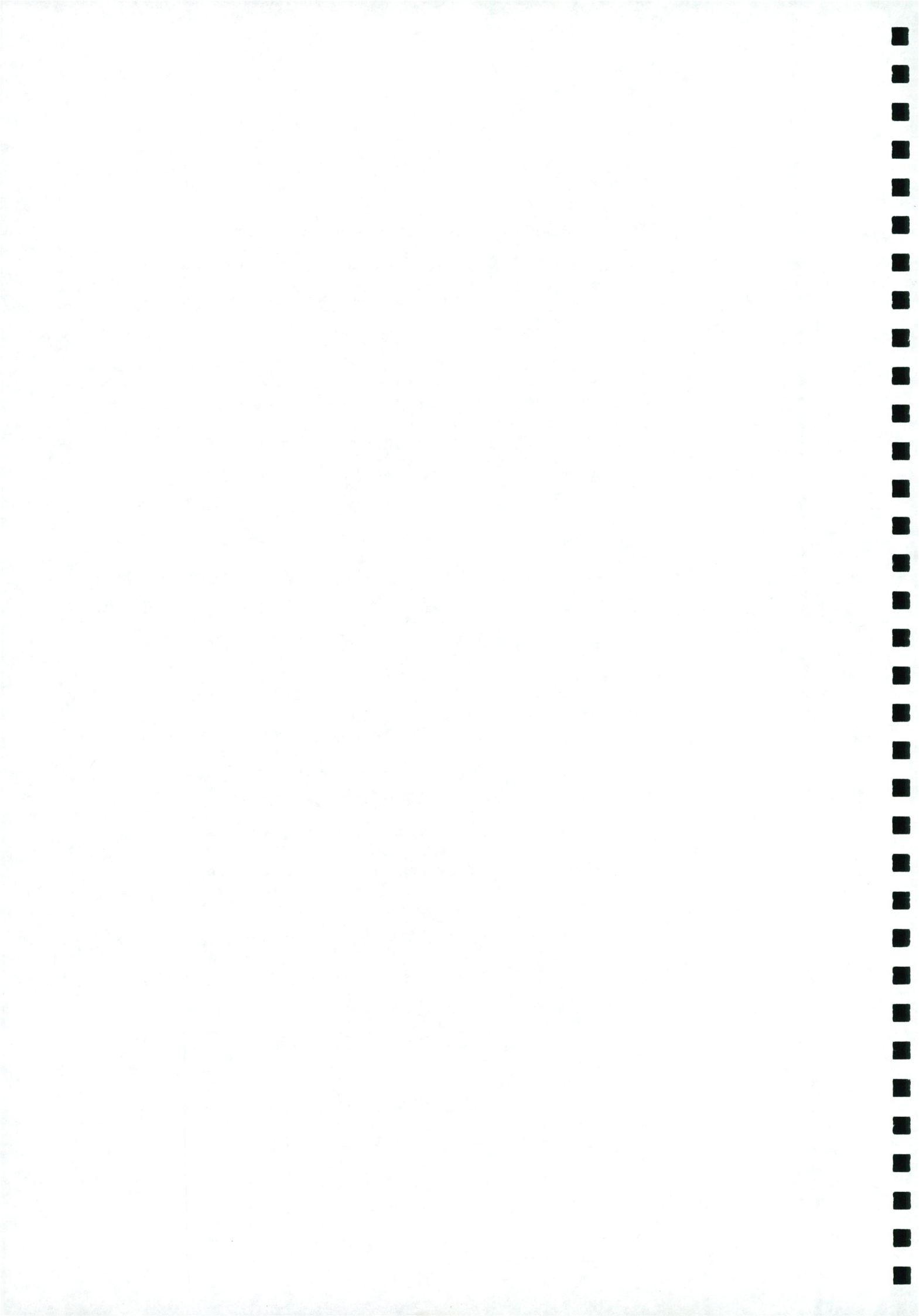
Downstairs again and Jacob, as he makes his way to Jez, passes couples writhing on couches. A blond woman passing Jacob cackles loudly at him. Then looking to the door he sees a satan-like figure – the uncaged bird flaps noisily overhead – image of gnashing teeth – 'satan' turns into a black man and back again, his head shaking violently. Jacob himself echoes these movements and his glasses are knocked to the ground. On regaining them he sees Jez dancing provocatively – bird's wings (grown large) flap at her side – it's tail rubs her thigh – Jez moans – wings flap – it's tail is now between her legs – Jez bends over and a white horn juts from her mouth. At this stage Jacob collapses, screaming, and the strobe light cuts to a slow pulse-like beat.

And so Jacob's demons are partly based in reality – the shaking head of 'satan' and the white horn (recalling the white vomit) are images derived from Vietnam – and partly based in his imagined reality – the laughing woman and the caged bird becoming a giant demon with gnashing teeth and the general air of debauchery leading this demon to mate with Jez. The elaborate visual effects in this scene may seem over-indulgent and gratuitous but, plot wise at least, it aids Jacob's passage to his 'fever dream'. 'The psychological effects [of L.S.D.] are feelings of irritation, hostility and anxiety; a sense of being overcome by confusion..... loss of time sense – one "feels out of time"; perception of visions – some pleasant some horrible (LSD "opens the gates of heaven or hell"); and finally a feeling of removal from the world'.



His demons vibrate and appear stretched and melting. These effects are similar to those caused by hallucinogens: perception is so intensified that even inanimate objects vibrate and writhe. In the scene directly following that of the dance, Jacob – who is running a temperature of 106° – lapses into another hallucination, his 'fever dream'. This time however his sense of time (albeit imagined time) which up 'till now has remained controlled becomes confused. His past and his 'future' intermingle: he is back with Sarah, his first wife, and tells her of his nightmare life with Jez from the post office, but Gabe is also in the dream. Jacob joined the post office after Vietnam, ('after 'nam I just didn't want to think anymore') and Gabe was killed before he went to Vietnam. So on 'waking' not only does Jacob not know what is real and what is unreal within his vision, but he can no longer be sure if his vision is the only vision. At the very least he 'feels out of time'.

Lyne has made it clear from his use of imagery and images that Jacobs hallucination is drug induced. The loss of his sense of timing and the resultant confusion and paranoia aptly conveys the effects of this type of drug. This drug theme runs through Jacob's Ladder from the posters on the subway walls to Michael Nueman's revelation at the end of the film. However, the closing title relating to the suspected use of the hallucinogenic drug BZ by the U.S. Army is somewhat distracting. The drug as used in the film acts first and foremost as a viable way of initiating Jacob's vision, it also serves to discredit the military as the administrators of the drug in the first place. This however should not deflect us from



realising the actual cause of Jacob's vision: the war itself. It was ultimately more damaging that the military continued to fight a futile war than that they may or may not have experimented with aggression increasing drugs.

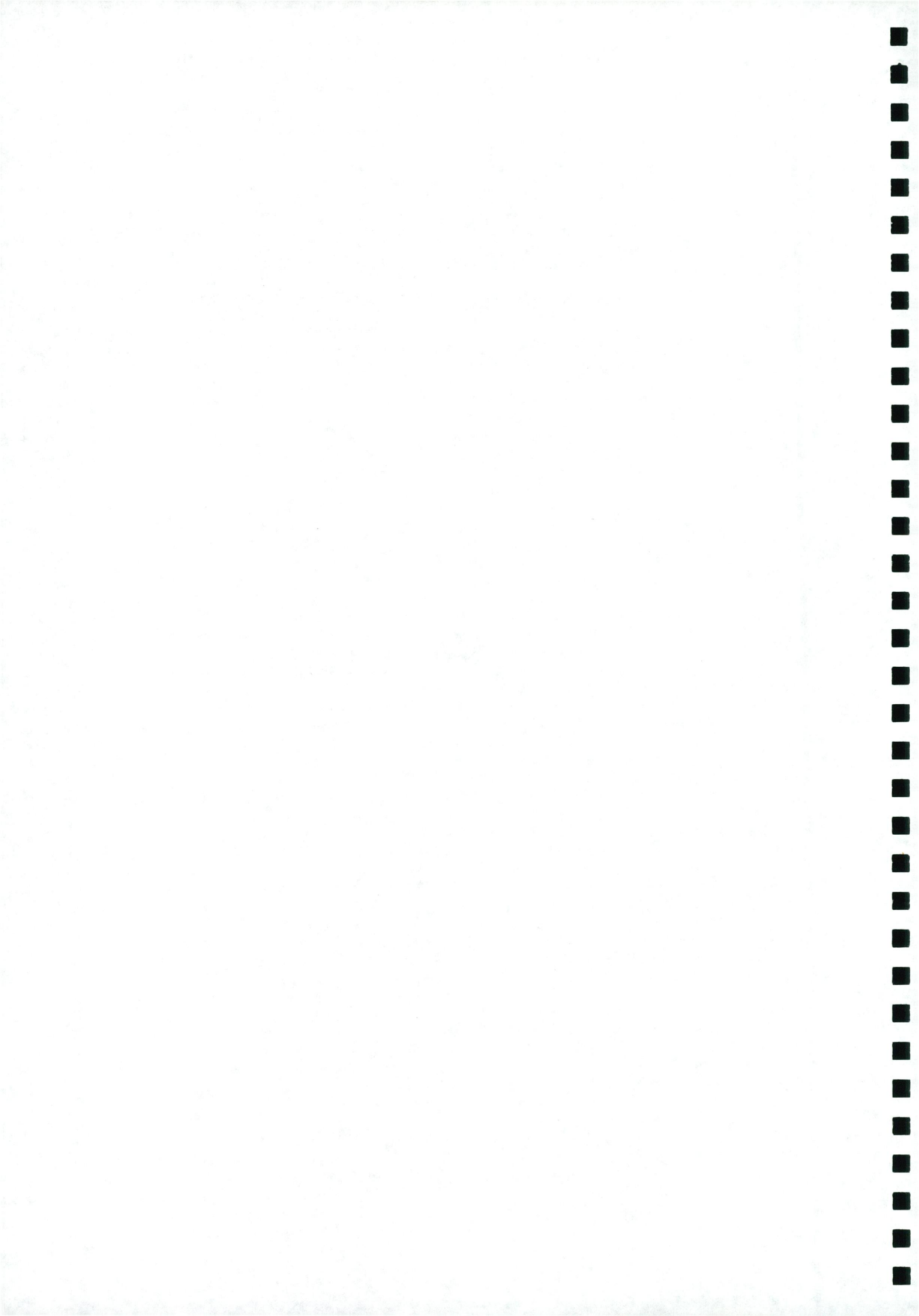




Fig 1. The long train of spirits

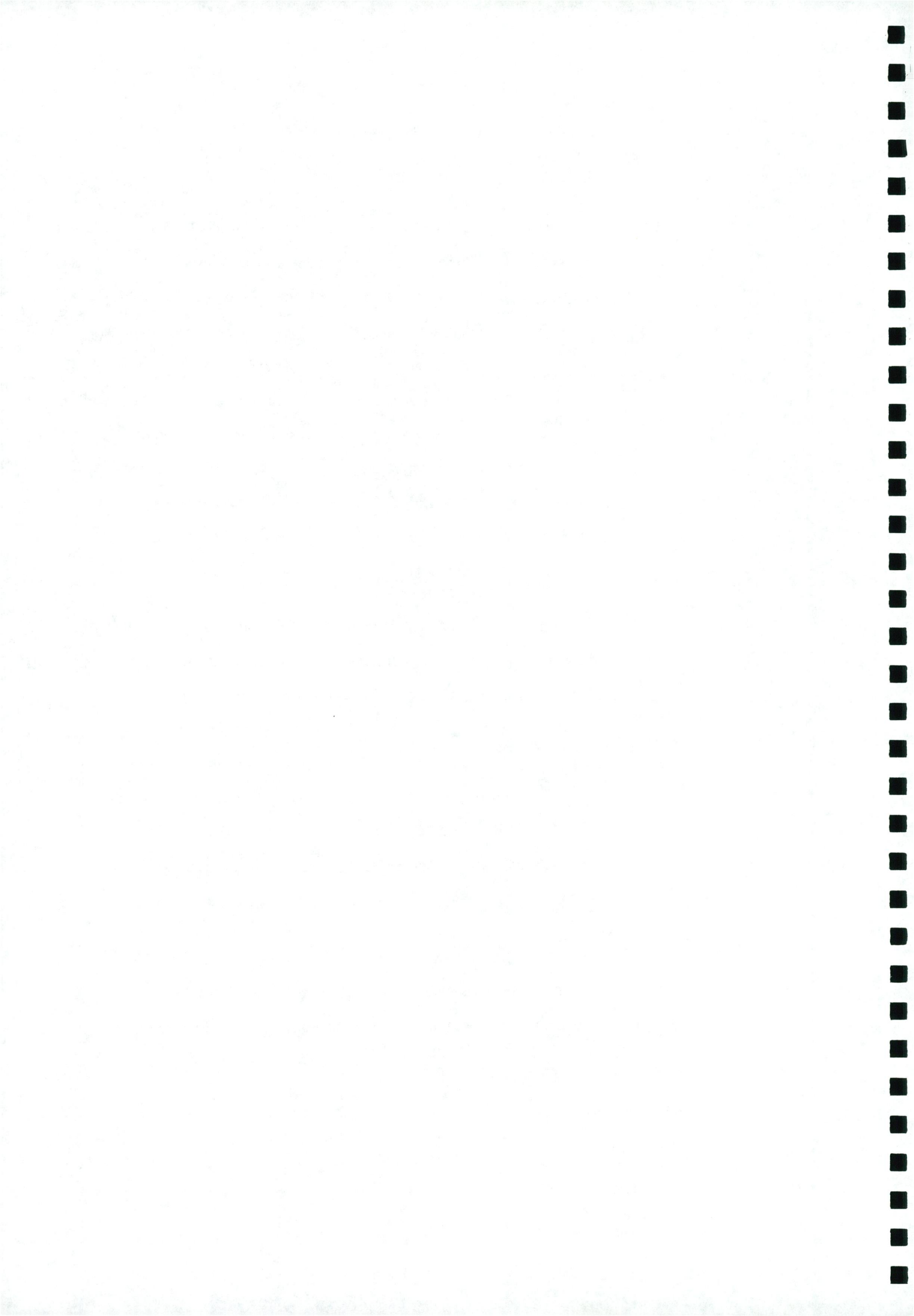


(ii)

The drugs theme in Jacobs ladder is inextricably linked with military conspiracy, it is the American Army who are the protagonists, using hallucinogenic drugs to 'increase aggressive tendencies' deliberately cultivating the 'dark side' in order to win the war. During the early part of the film there are only hints at military intervention – Jacob is chased by a black car which we later realise belongs to military 'heavies', mysterious explosions due to 'electrical faults' lead to the deaths of other vietnam veterans. When Jacob goes to the hospital, as part of the veteran out-patient program, he finds not only has Dr. Karlson been killed due to a car explosion but all record of both himself and his patients have been removed from the hospital files.

After his 'virus' Jacob receives a phone call from another veteran, Paul Gruniger. They meet and Paul proceeds to tell Jacob of the demons he sees 'crawling out of the woodwork', of his inability to trust anyone and his assertion, "I'm going to hell and that's as straight as I can put it". Jacob, of course, recognises his own story in that of Pauls, this meeting serves to suggest a link between the night of the offensive Vietnam and Jacob's own visions. From this point onwards Jacob becomes convinced of a military cover-up. Paul's fate, however, is that of Dr. Karlson's: on leaving the meeting place he puts the key in the ignition of his car and while waiting for Jacob is unceremoniously blown

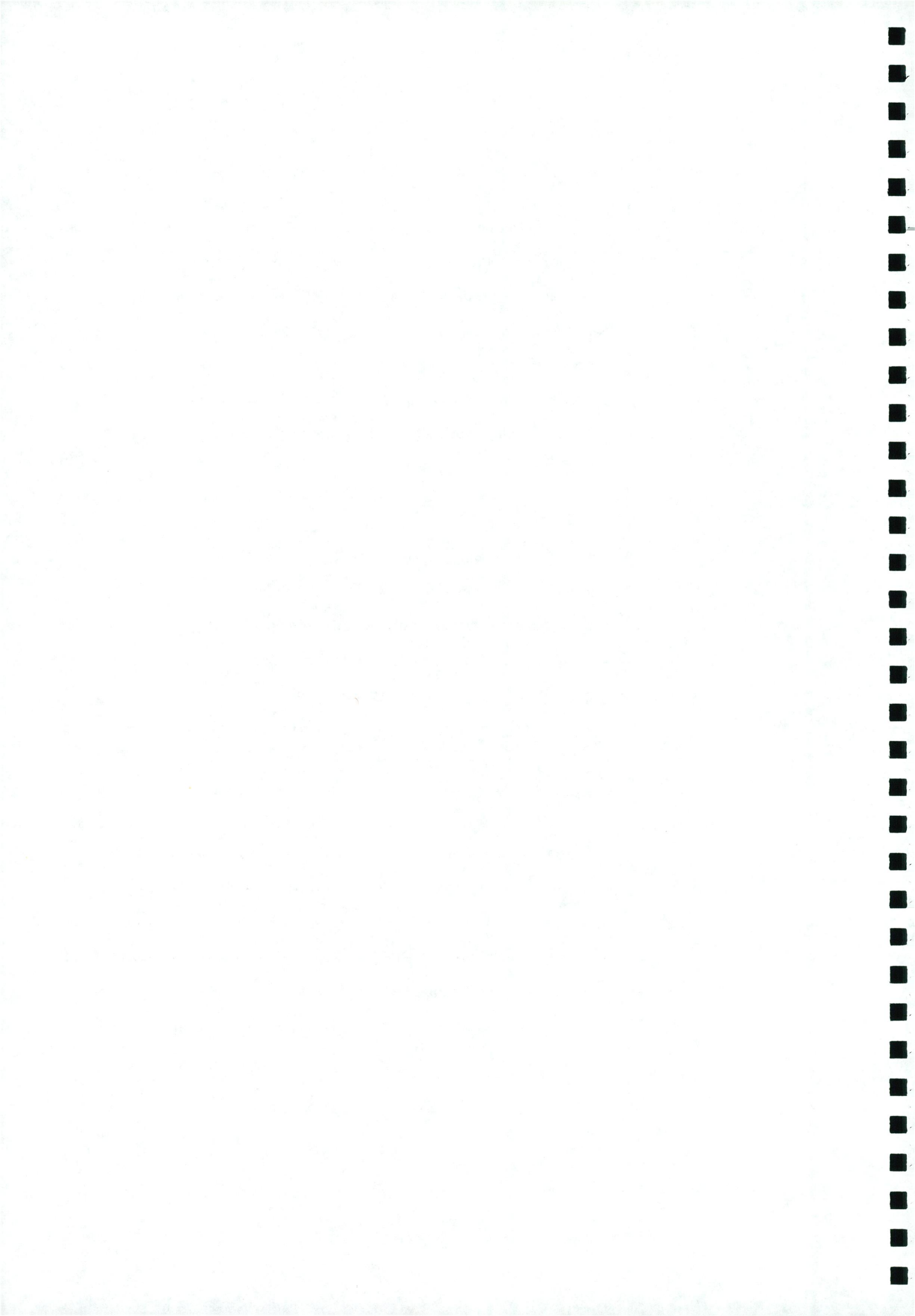
At Paul's funeral the veterans we see in the opening shots of Vietnam are present. Jacob tells them of Paul's paranoia, of the demons he saw and



how he thought he was going to hell. All six of them are suffering the same symptoms. It is subsequently decided –with Jacob acting as spokesman – to bring a case before the courts against the U.S. Army. There follows a scene with Mr. Geary, their would-be lawyer, who decides to take the case and proceeds to take sworn depositions from all of them. On leaving the courthouse Jacob makes his own way home while the other five go their own way. Simultaneously a black car drives off following the others of the group.

Jacob hears from Jez that Mr. Geary isn't taking the case after all, she tells him 'he said you didn't have one'. Jacob rings Frank who admits to having dropped the case 'War's war, things happen'. We see Frank in a darkened bedroom with two of the other veterans. Two of their number have apparently gone missing and none of the others are prepared to go ahead with the case. When Jacob checks with Mr. Geary he learns that the army have tampered with their files: according to Mr. Geary's information Jacob and his friends never went to Vietnam but were discharged after 'war games in Thailand'

Jacob is accosted by two suited men and carried screaming into a black car. These men tell Jacob that the army was part of another life – rhetoric previously echoed by Frank. They say that they've been watching Jacob and his friends for a long time 'frightening people with foolish talk'. In this, the latter part of the film Jacob's hell has become much more real – he realises that his beasts of previous scenes are now far more real and far more

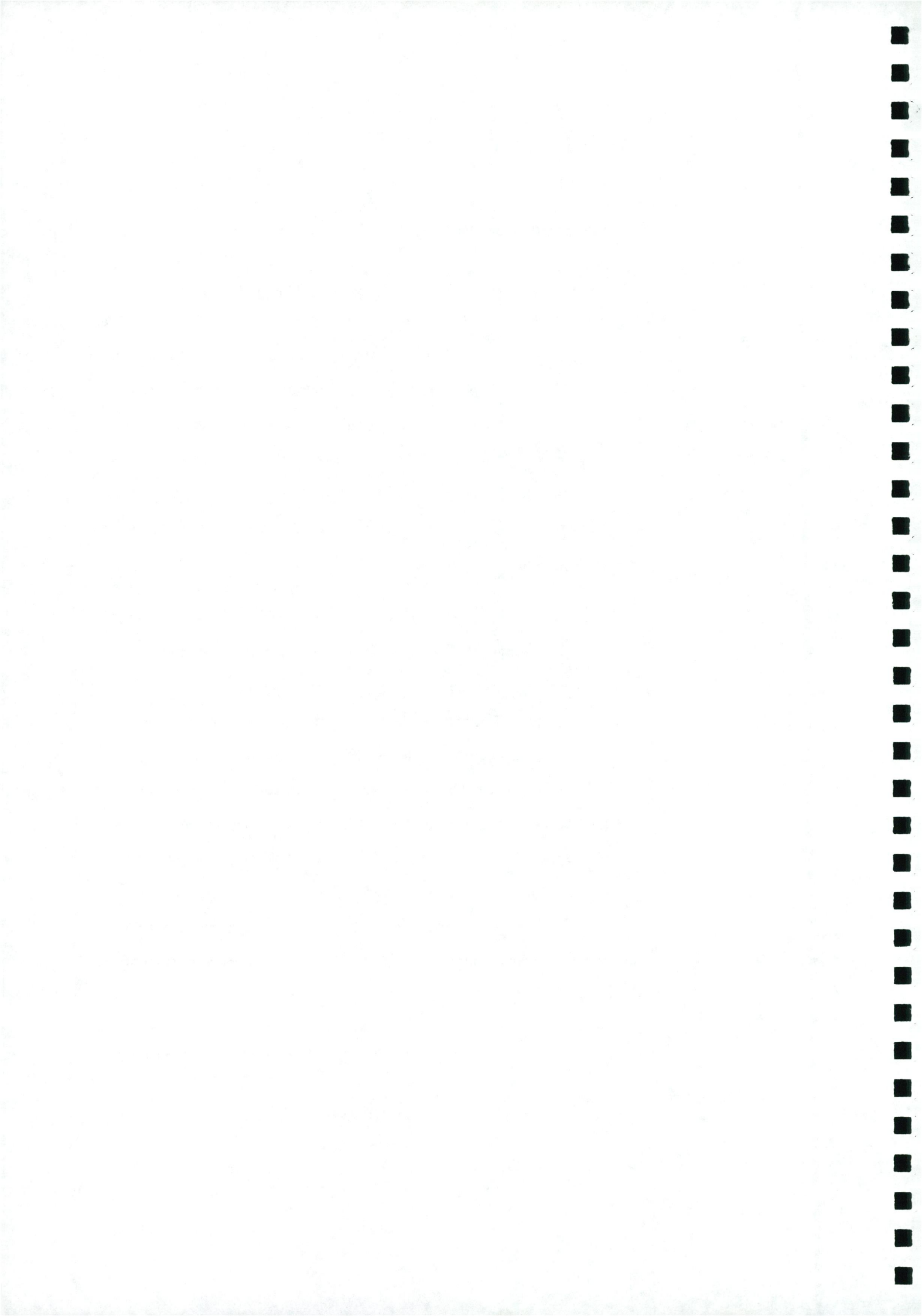


powerful; they are the military.

His images of vibrating heads and other demons are now confined to intermittent flashes, flashbacks in fact to the earlier part of his vision. After the hospital sequence all that remains are shots of a Satan head intercut with shots of Gabriel. Jacob looks over his past; his arts degree, his honourable discharge papers, old letters and photos from Vietnam. The phone rings, Jez answers, it's Michael Nueman; the man who warned Jacob about the military car and rescued him from Paul's explosion. He was a chemist in Vietnam, and wants to talk to Jacob about drug experimentation by the military.

At their meeting Nueman tells Jacob how he became involved in the military experiments and how the army, fearing a defeat resorted to the manufacture of and experimentation with specially cultivated hallucinogenics. This knowledge is a confirmation of Jacob's suspicions. However he still couldn't remember that last night in Vietnam. Nueman goes on to describe the drug: it was called 'the ladder– a fast trip straight down the ladder right to the primal fear, the base angel' He tells how these experiments went drastically wrong and how by increasing aggressiveness they only succeeded in indiscriminately increasing aggressiveness so turning the troops on each other. Pictures flash through Jacob's head, piece by piece he remembers that night and sees his fellow soldiers attacking and killing each other.

The next scene sees Jacob – dressed in his army clothes– looking for a



cab to take him to Brooklyn: 'home'. Once inside the cab Jacob's memories become clearer and eventually he sees the face of his assailant. This signals the end of Jacob's hell; he has finally made sense of the nightmare of Vietnam.

And so Jacob's hallucination has gone through two phases, the first being one of absolute confusion; a landscape of chaos peopled with demons. During this phase Jacob cannot be sure what is 'real' and what is 'unreal' – the time sequence of his vision will not remain constant: His imagined future life with Jez becomes a nightmare scenerio retold to Sarah after which he 'wakes' to the same 'nightmare'. The beasts or demons appear inexplicably and unexpectedly – the tramp with the veined tail, the violently vibrating heads, the huge bird \-like creature at the party.

Following the death of Paul Gruniger, Jacob begins to make sense of his vision. It is at this point that he begins to read Dante –a fact that would suggest he too has realised the nature of his vision: that of hell. It is also from Dante that Jacob realises the importance of recognising his demons as 'the will to chaos and death' within himself, that is, they should cease to be external beasts. In Jacob's case the progression of his vision is indicated by the fact that his demons gradually become more real. What started out as random demonic sightings became linked to the military – the black car and vibrating heads, the deaths of Paul and Dr. Karlson under mysterious circumstances. This builds up until the final discovery that Jacobs situation is a direct result of intervention by the military.

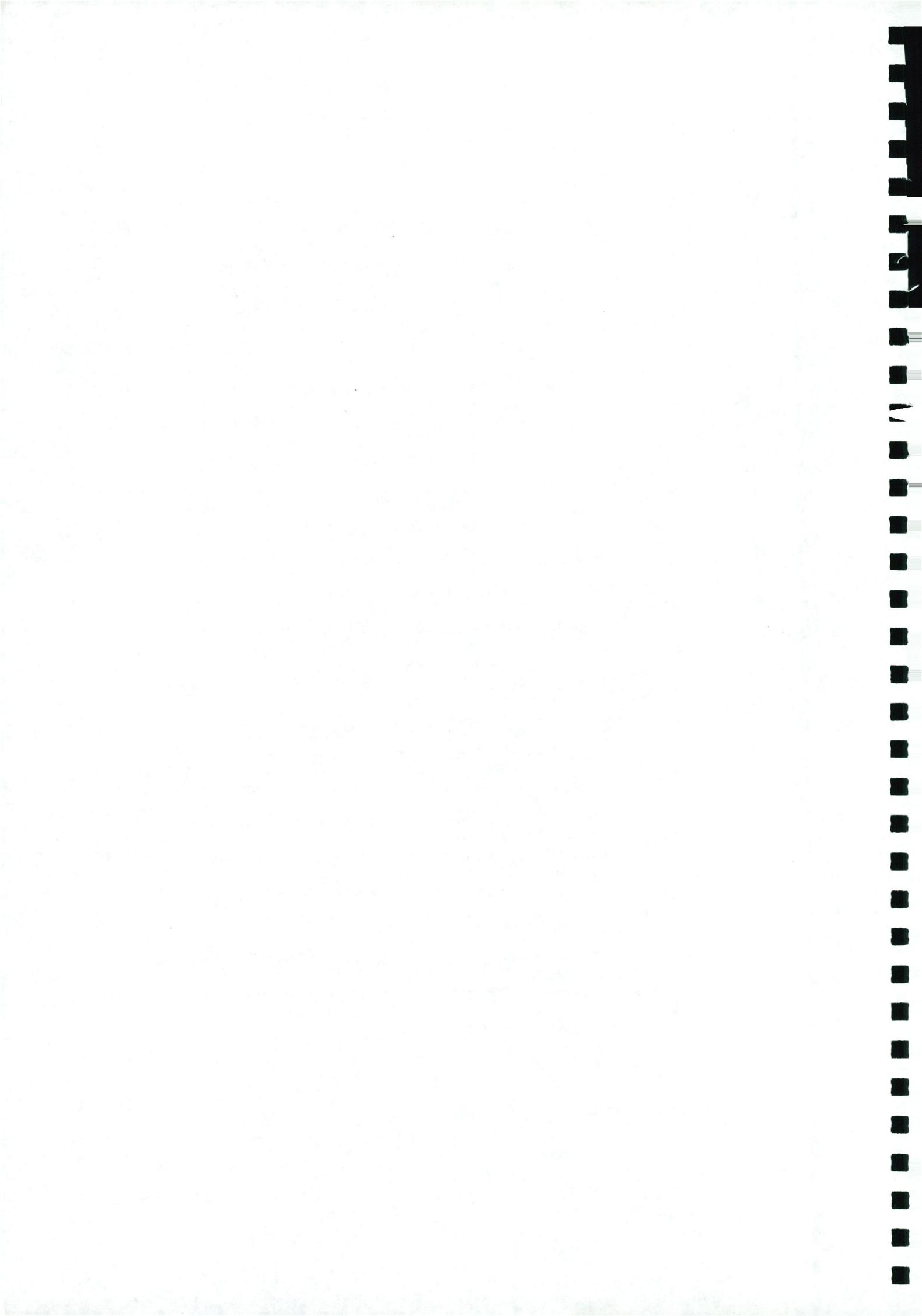




Fig 2. "She looks like a real bitch"



Fig 3. "Has anyone ever told you you look like an angel"



(iii)

The first instance of association with Dante is in the portrayal of Jacob as a soldier and scholar: Dante himself was a soldier fighting in the foremost troop of cavalry at the battle of Campaldino 1289 and was a man determined 'to study as much as he could'. So from the very outset of the film Jacob, who is fighting in Vietnam and referred to humourously as 'professor', can be identified with Dante, author of the Divine Comedy.

When Jacob wakes finding himself on the subway train he is unsure whether or not he has missed his stop. This is much like the 'sleepy dullness' which weighed Dante's senses down and made his passage from the 'right road' a vague and dream like one. Jacob looks around the carriage and reads the posters overhead, the first bears the legend 'New York may be a crazy town but you'll never die of boredom', the second, a drug-aid poster with H-E-L-L printed in large red capitals. Before alighting Jacob sees his first 'demon': a tramp completely covered over but for a large veined tail riling from under his coat. The 'gloomy wood' of the Divine Comedy is a symbol of sin and error: Lyne's modern day equivalent becomes a New York subway station. This is Jacob's initiation to hell and New York, the City of Desolation.

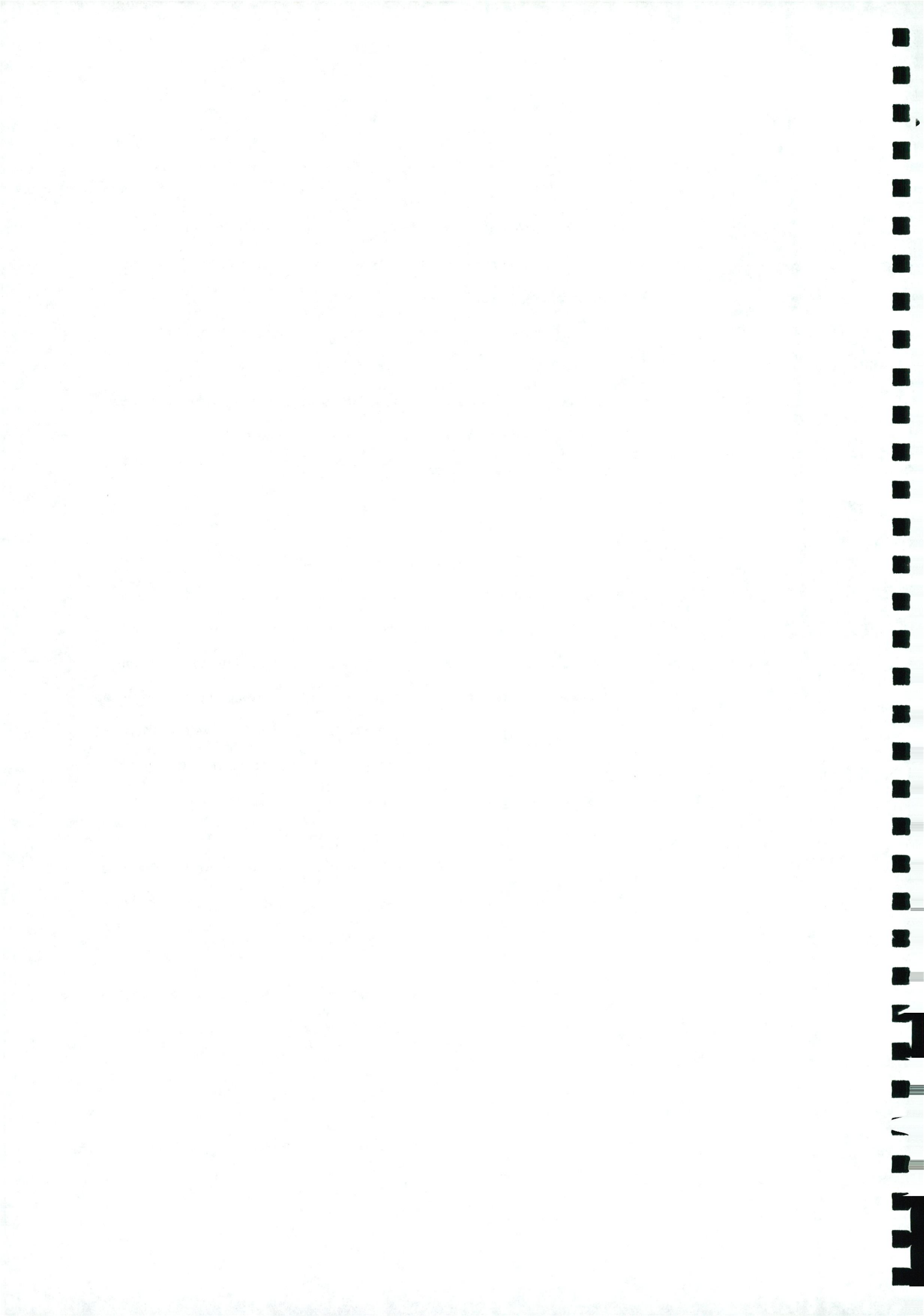
Jacob tries both exits, both are chained and barred 'blocking all progress'. Apparently Jacob is having trouble gaining admittance to hell, the reason being Jacob's physical state: he is still alive in spite of his wound and only those who have abandoned all hope may enter hell unhampered. Dante had virgil to persuade Charon to take him on board – while still in a



state of grace – across the river Acheron. Jacob has no such help but as the earlier drug reference suggests Jacob is in fact hallucinating, so this is a vision of hell only: a place in which he does not belong but through which he must travel to regain the 'right road'. Jacob sees the light at the opposite platform and proceeds to cross the tracks. When Dante first entered hell he too saw the shades of the dead and describes them thus, 'following came such a long train of spirits, I should never have thought that death so many had despoiled'.

Jacob's virgil is Louis Denardo, chiropractor. He is Jacobs first guide through hell. In the Divine Comedy Virgil is asked by the three Divine Graces to help Dante find his way through hell as "he through fear has turned". The first inkling of divine intervention we get is from Louis after the 'deep adjustment' of the neck setting; Jacob opens his eyes to Louis encircled in light, "anyone ever tell you you look like an angel?" Further on in the film, as Jacob becomes convinced he's in hell, Louis quotes Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic, and tells Jacob to 'reject doubt and fear', as in Virgil's words to Dante there is a way out as long as he keeps his faith and hope. Louis is only Jacob's first guide through hell, when Jacob ascends to paradise at the close of the film, 'Among the blest, in whose regions if thou then desire, to ascend; a spirit worthier than I must lead thee'. This worthier spirit; Dante's Beatrice, is Jacob's youngest son, Gabe.

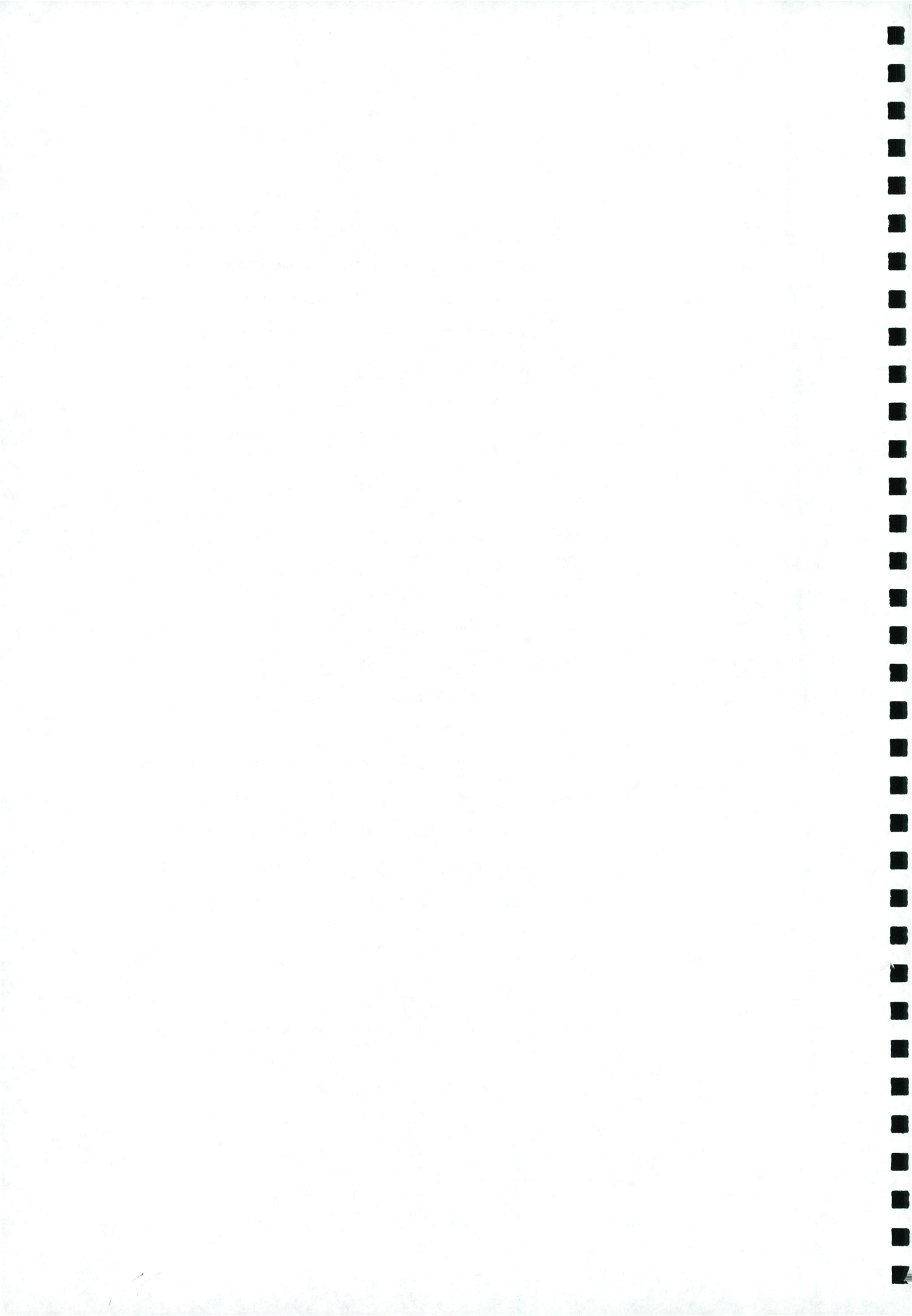
In Dante's dark and gloomy wood the soul's sins become externalised and appear to it like 'demons' or beasts with a 'will and power of their



own, blocking all progress'. There is only one way of coming through this vision of hell and that is by descending so deeply into your own soul that your sins no longer appear as external objects but as 'the will to chaos and death within yourself'. As we have already seen regarding the military, Jacob's demons become increasingly more real as his journey continues: they are no longer giant birds or deformed people but palpable conspiracies. This progression of 'demon perception' on Jacob's part is very much linked to the allegorical reading of the film as informed by Dante's own use of symbolism and allegory: the military-drug 'subplot' and its importance indicated by the parallel use of the Divine Comedy

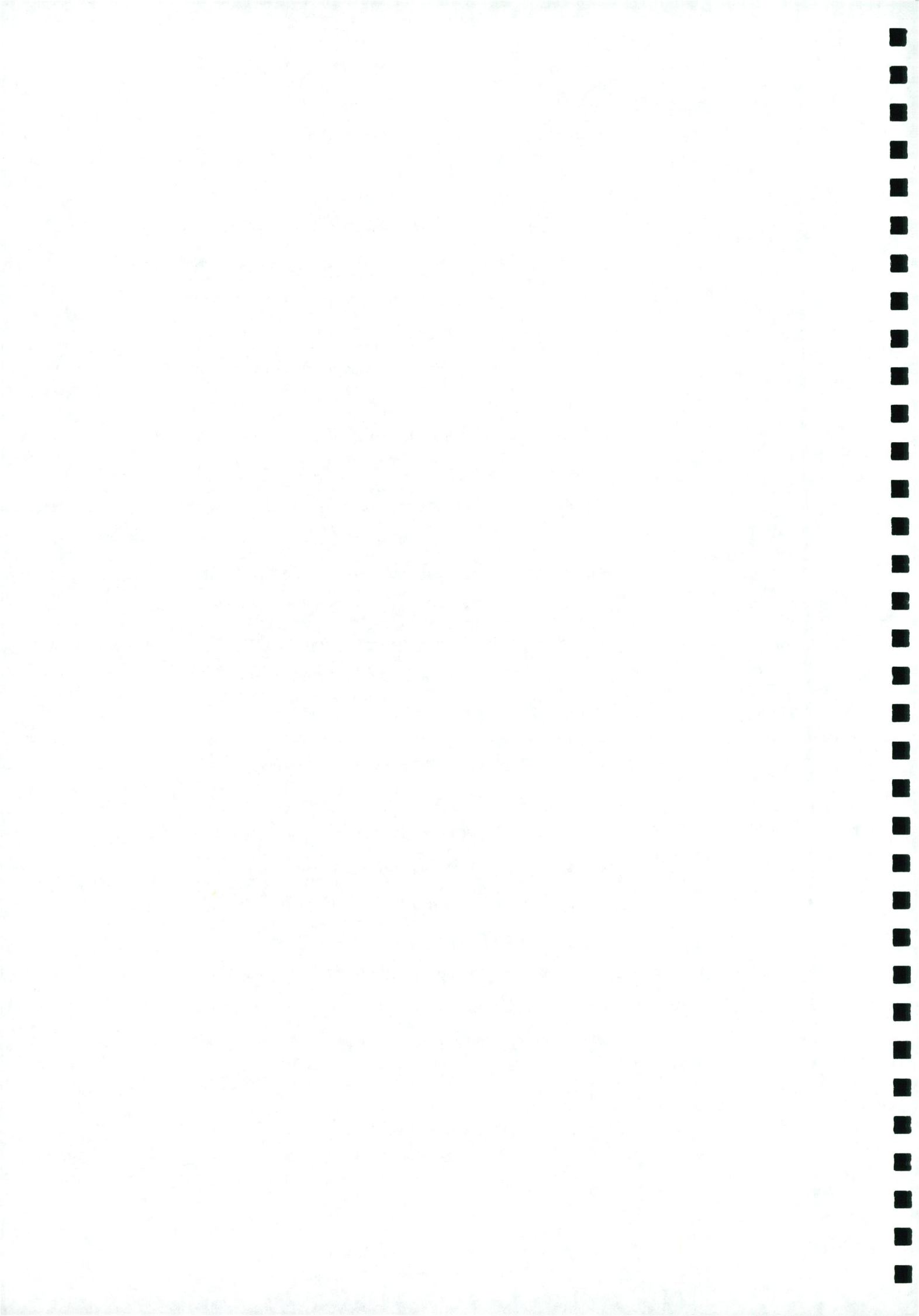
Jacob begins to see demons with greater and greater frequency. While at the hospital looking for Dr. Karlson, the nurse appears deformed – her cap falls off revealing a large wart-like growth on the back of her head. She is blocking Jacob's passage in a very physical way (by refusing to let him look for Dr. Karlson) and so she becomes one of his externalised demons. The party sequence may be seen as one in which Jacob's moral progress is blocked: 'Voulez vous coucher avec moi?' plays while Jacob is come on to by various women. The scene is one of debauchery: couples all but copulate on couches and as a result of this Jacob manufactures demons. He invisions Jez and the giant bird-demon apparently 'making love'.

This may be seen as a transition in Jacob's hell. The scene with Jez and the giant bird ends in Jacob swooning – a thing not unlike Dante to do – and running a temperature of 106°. This fever and Jacob's subsequent sub-



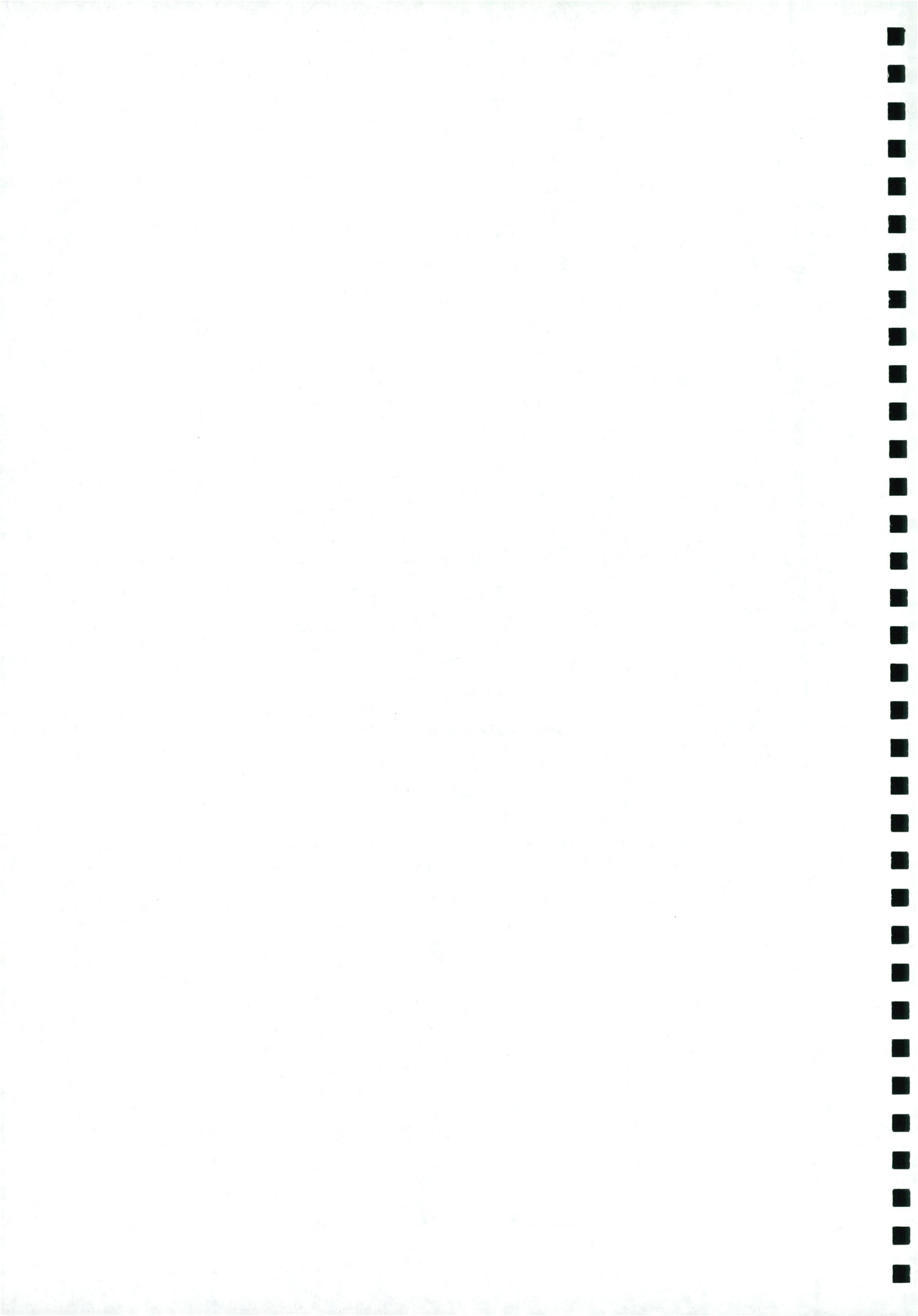
mergence in a bath of ice calls to mind Dante's river phlegethon ' the river of boiling blood'. 'The sinners whose fiery passions cause them to shed man's blood are plunged in this blood bath forever'. In the \ul Divine Comedy this river signifies the descent into the nether regions of hell. There is reason to suppose that this is also the case in Jacobs Ladder. The shedders of man's blood can be seen as the military as it is directly following this that Jacob has his first confrontation with army 'unofficials'. Also, we learn from the Comedy that the prostitution of words is much worse than the prostitution of the body: Jacob's sin of lust is dealt with at the beginning when he sells his soul for a 'good lay', but the military enter the fray of hell much later on. Jacob, in describing his 'dream' to Sarah says 'I was burning from ice': in the last circle of hell the punishment changes from intense heat to intense cold– here traitors are submerged in ice of varying degrees. And so Lyne has placed the U.S. Army in the ninth circle of hell.

When Jacob reaches the hospital after his struggle with the military he is in the very pit of hell: the wheels of his bed swivel and catch in human innards, the corridors are stained with blood. A picture of madness follows; figures fitting our most cliched images of asylum inmates –straight–jacketed deformed and demented characters abound, some raving others completely docile. Further on human limbs are piled against the red bloodied corridors down which the bed must pass. It's parallel in the Divine Comedy is Dante's valley of disease, in the ninth circle of hell. Here Dante's 'corrupt heart' is the image of a diseased society where



every value of that society is false and 'alternates between a deadly lethargy and a raving insanity'. As far as the dismembered limbs are concerned Dante has this to say. "If each should show his bleeding limbs unhealed pierced, lopt and maimed," there nothing, nothing whatever to that ghast sight in the ninth bowge revealed No cast stove in by cant or middle ever so gaped as one I saw there, from the chin down to the farthole split by a cleaver.'

The deception of the military and their subsequent attempts to silence Jacob, however, give rise to the image of a 'diseased society' in the pit of Jacob's hell. 'As we have already seen, regarding the military, Jacob's demons become increasingly more real as his journey continues: they are no longer giant birds or deformed people but palpable conspiracies. This progression of 'demon perception' on Jacob's part is very much linked to the allegorical reading of the film, as informed by Dante's own use of symbolism and allegory discussed below.



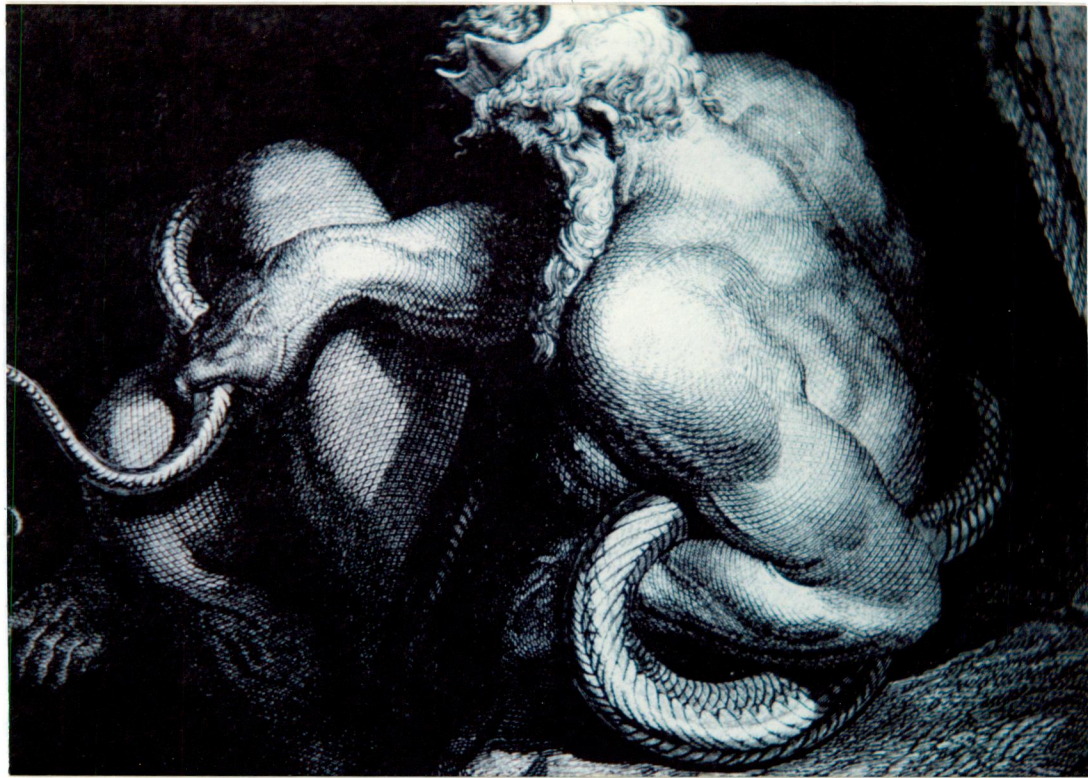


Fig 4 Minos - the Judge of hell - tail which he girds around himself (tramp on the train)

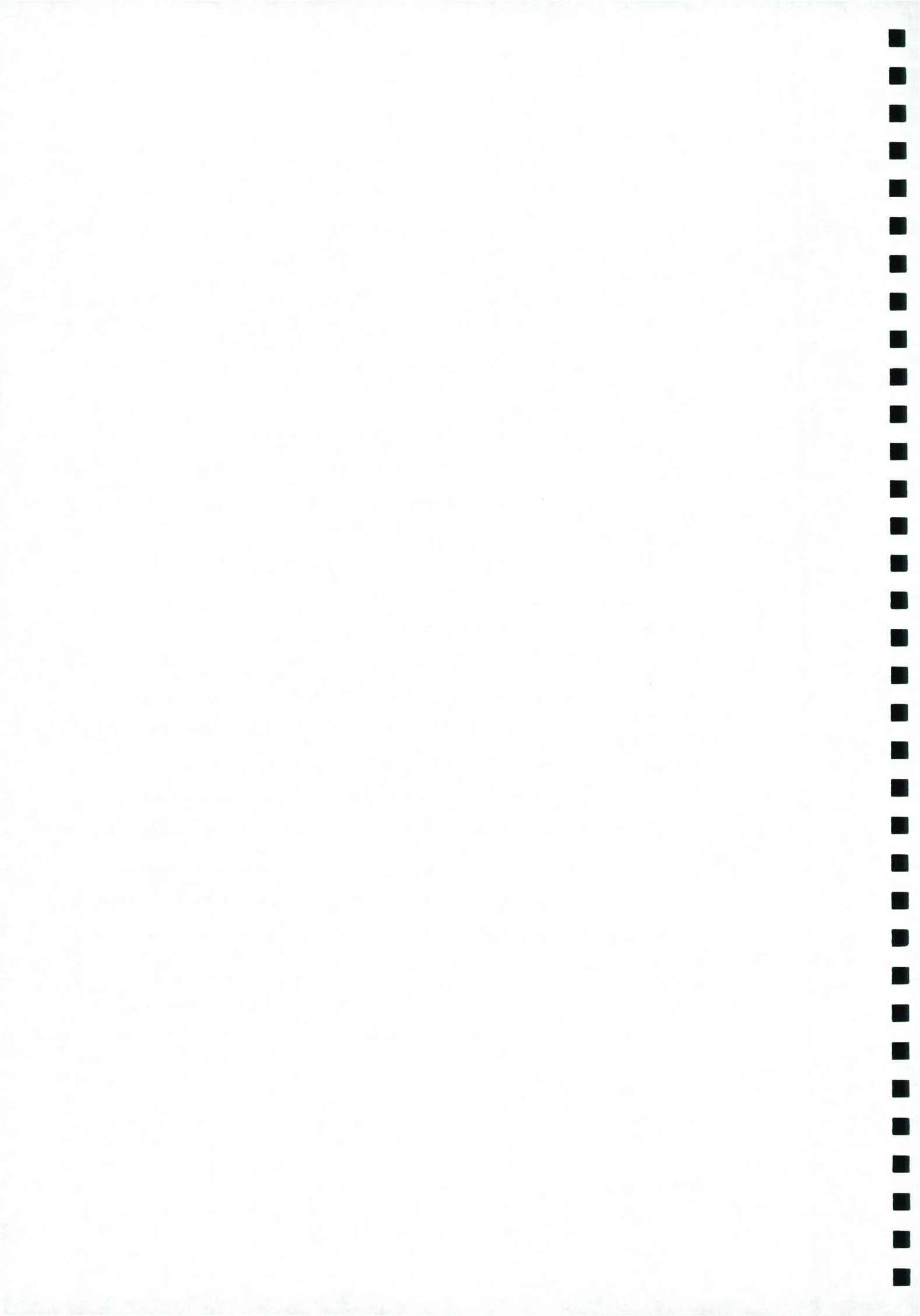


Fig 5 "demon birds"



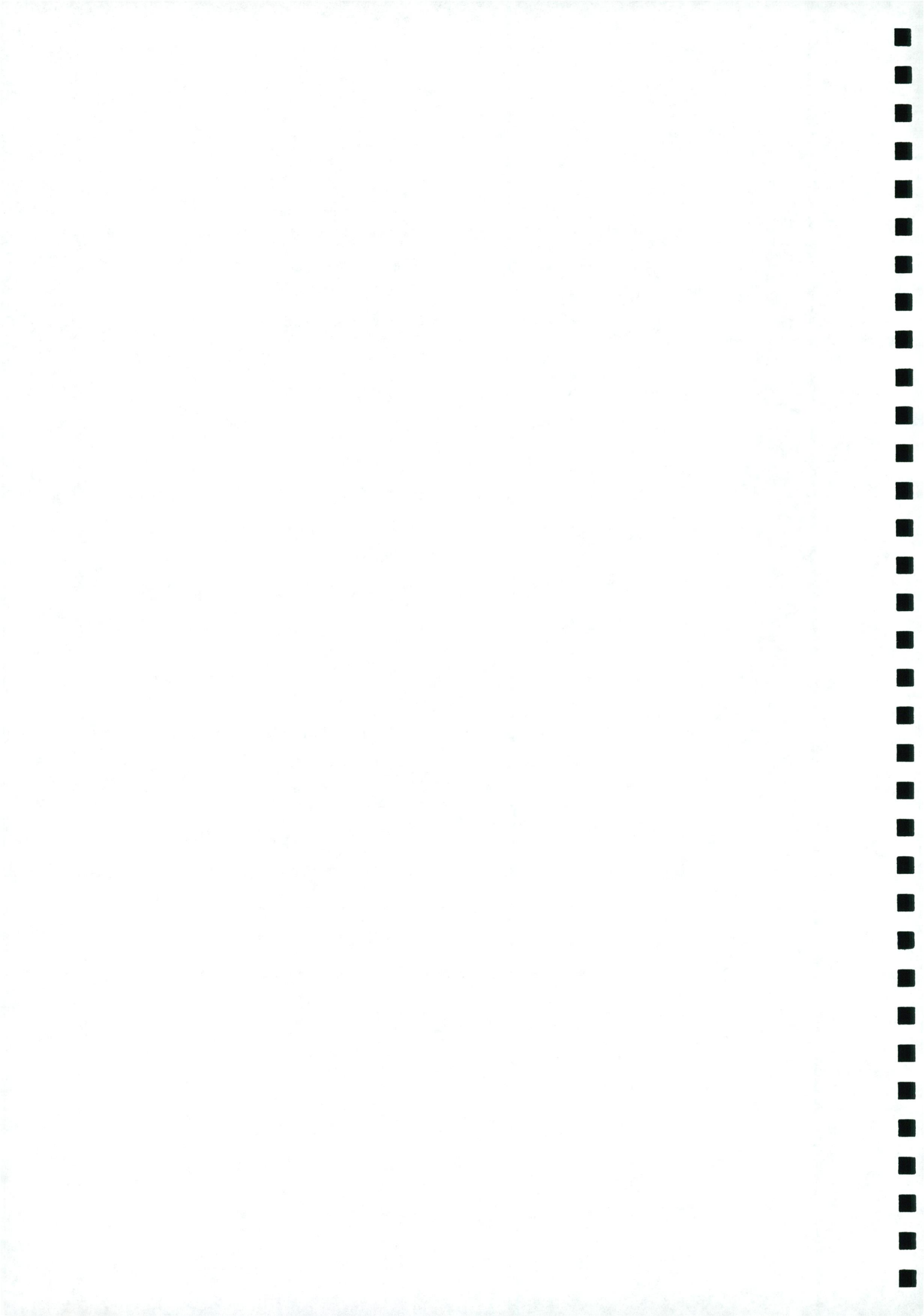
Jacob's Ladder is set in America of the late seventies. It is in the words of one reviewer 'a portrait of psychological breakdown, paranoia and fear'. Multiple diegesis – portrayal of other dimensions: a world encompassing other worlds – is so prevalent in Jacob's Ladder that even within his vision we suspect other 'realities' all the while remaining unclear if his vision is actually a vision – there is no convenient vignetting of the frames within which reality diverges. Instead the action goes from Vietnam 1971 to New York of the late seventies with little or no warning. The effect of this, when seen on a large screen, in the dark, is to return us to the world of dreams 'where horror began' (p.53) and we feel all the confusion, all the anxiety and paranoia that Jacob portrays.

If we look on Jacob's Ladder as a horror film, – and some aspects of it certainly are horrific – we see it as a film with sometimes gruesome but not very original horror-effects: the ghosts on the train in the opening sequence seem quite hackneyed and there is always a certain humour in a ghost who waves in retreat. The gnashing teeth of Jacob's demon-bird, during the dance scene, are obviously inspired by Alien's vaginal-teeth. What is really horrific about Jacob's Ladder is time: it is the sequence of events that lead us to distrust our own eyes and leaves us with uneasy feelings of paranoia. Nothing in the film seems to fit – it is as if Jacob has been transplanted into a world which looks the same but has some alien perception of reality. Coleridge has likened horror stories to "fever dreams", in that they have the asymmetry of a nightmare – they are images of the uncanny and inexplicable. James B. Twitchell in his book *Deadly I*



Pleasures calls horror the 'cinema verite of the psyche' (16, p.41) and considers the fact that horror defies logic it's most disturbing quality.

But we have already seen how closely Jacob's Ladder is linked with Dante's Divine Comedy and how through this connection it becomes apparent that Jacob's vision is a vision of hell, not a physical place but a hellish world or a hellish New York to be more precise. In this hell real people exist and talk to Jacob and true to the dictates of hell Jacob is aware of his past and can foresee his future – this is the subject matter of his vision. The present is all that escapes him. Even Jacob's demons make sense as re-used images\ from his memory. The more you look the more it becomes apparent that Lyne has very carefully and intentionally built up a filmic structure which closely echoes that of the DivineComedy. Lyne's other images and references also make perfect sense: the reference to Camus' 'The Stranger' is apt, as the 'out-of-touchness' with which Mersault interacts with people reminds us of Jacob's own confusion in his chaotic landscape. Even the decision to translate L'Etranger as 'The Stranger' as opposed to the more common 'The Outsider' takes into account the added uncanniness of the former. Louis, the Virgil of the piece, quotes a medieval mystic Meister Eckhart – Eckhart was appropriately enough a contemporary of Dante's who believed, quite against the teachings of the Church, that it is through the intellect and not the will that we reach God. Eckhart was seen as a heretic by the Catholic Church and made an exile not unlike Dante's own enforced exile, and indeed Jacob's alienation.



So Lyne's film although apparently chaotic and random in it's shocks is a well thought out and conscious work. It is no "fever dream" although that is, in effect, what it appears to be. For an understanding of the work I will again turn to Dante. In a letter to his patron Can Grande Della Scala, Dante explains his own intention, he says; "the meaning of this work is not simple ... for we obtain one meaning from the letter of it and another from that which the letter signifies". he was describing of course his use of allegory; the story with a meaning other than the literal. In the same letter Dante goes on to explain the literal and allegorical meanings of the Divine Comedy: literally, he says the sense of the work is "the state of the soul after death straightforwardly affirmed", allegorically the work's subject is, "Man as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of his free will, becomes liable to rewarding or punishing Justice". The reason I quote the above is that it is this similarity or "borrowing", from Dante by Lyne, of the very method of creating meaning that is in my opinion of paramount importance if attempting to understanding Jacob's Ladder'.

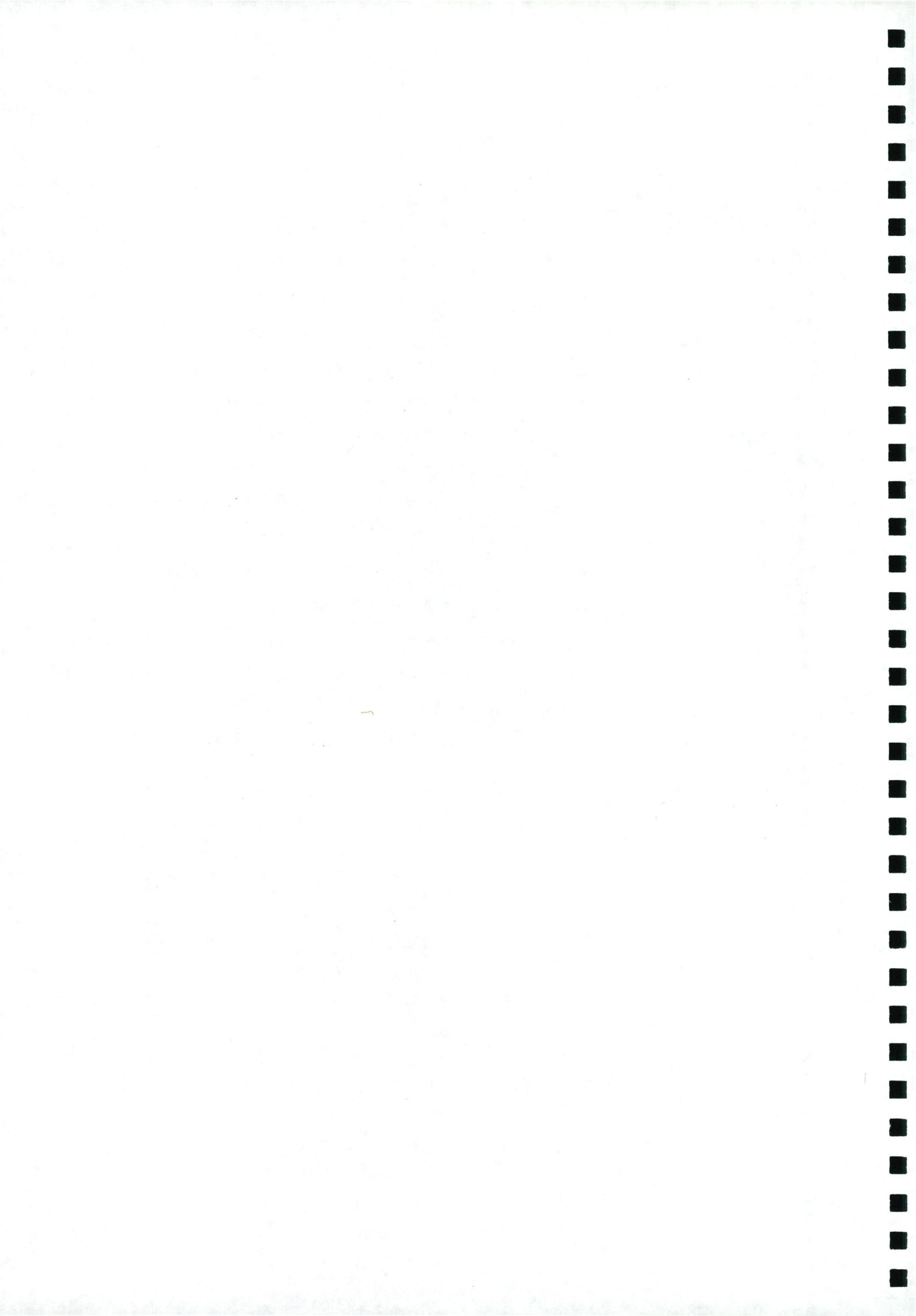




Fig 6.



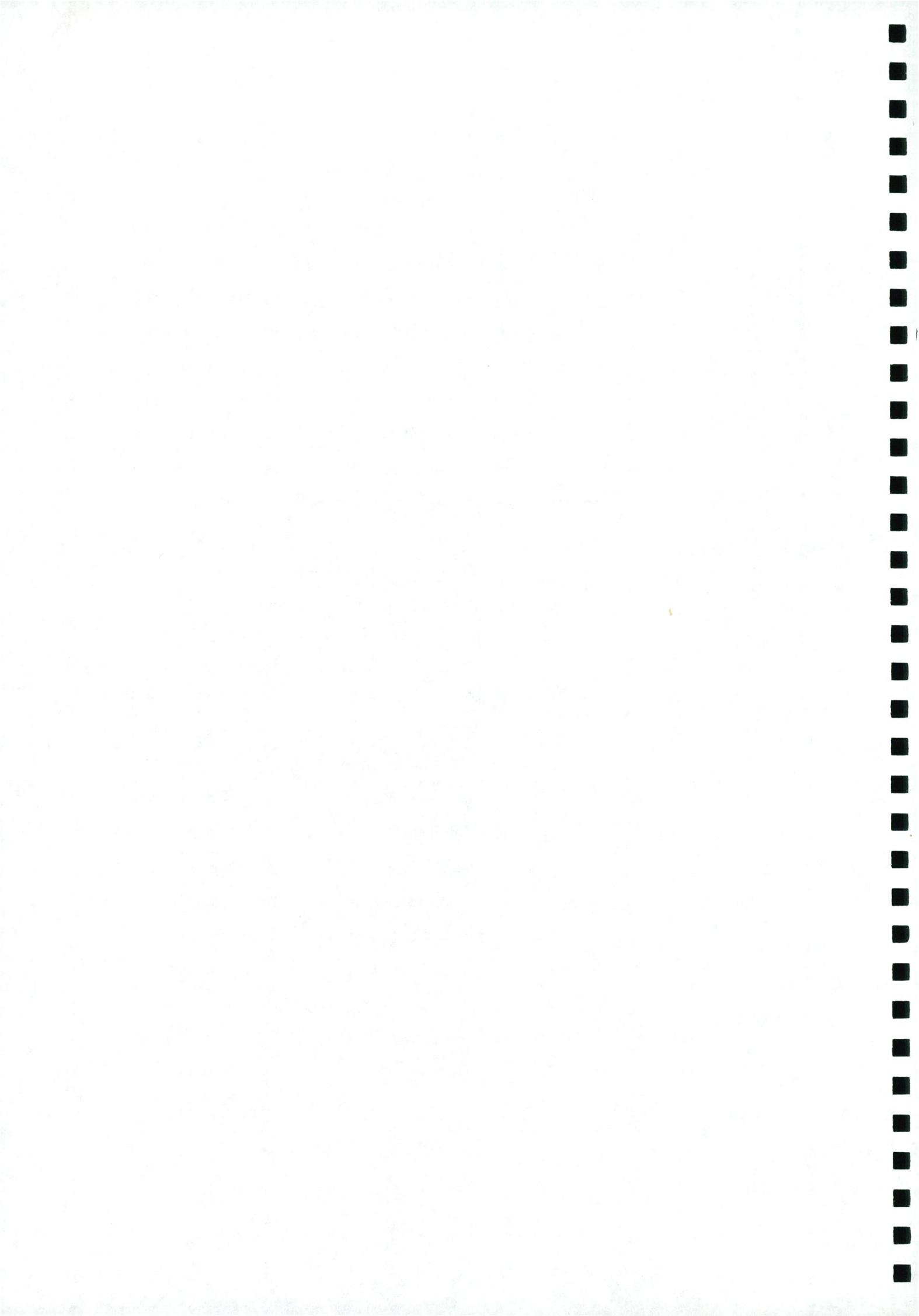
Fig 7.



(IV)

Allegory is the portrayal of experience through the use of images' To illustrate the use of allegory Dante cites this passage from the bible, 'When Israel came out of Egypt and the house of Jacob from among a strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion'. Dante goes on to explain the possible meanings, aside from the literal (i.e. the word of the text). Allegorically, he says, we may see the story as our redemption as wrought for us by Christ, morally it can be seen as the conversion of the soul from a state of sin to the state of grace, analogically taken it is the departure of the holy soul from corruption to eternal liberty. Dante suggests that the various readings of the same text are inherent in the letter of it: they are all valid readings of the text. He calls these three disparate readings allegorical since they differ from the literal and historical.

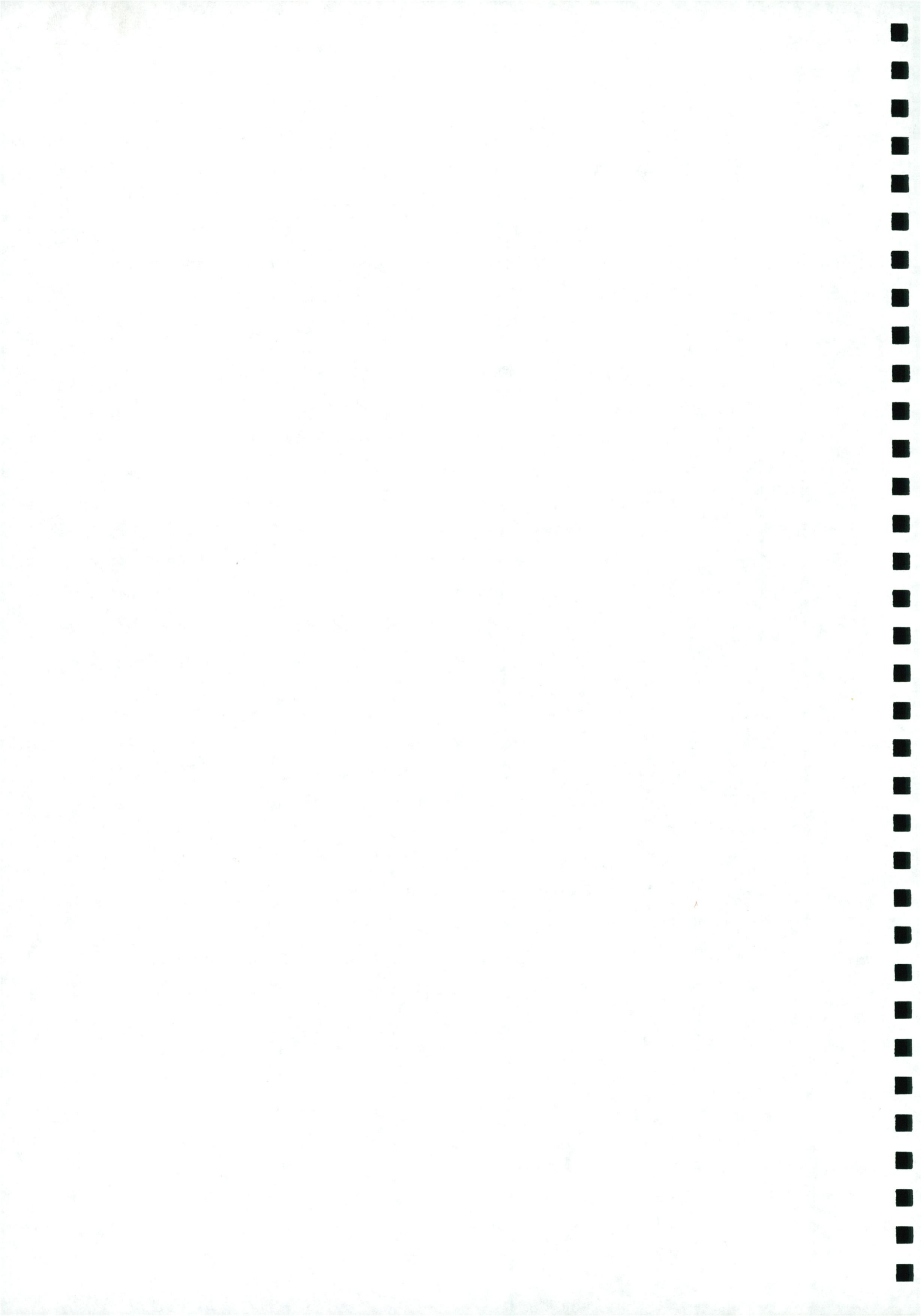
In general, allegory is a very abstract thing – nothing is said directly but rather veiled in layers of images and symbols. Dantes allegory differs in two ways from the more conventional type – instead of an unreal abstracted story in which the allegory takes place– Dante's allegory of Hell, Heaven and Purgatory while not meant to be realistic was fundamentally intended as a true story i.e. the journey of every soul after death. Also his use of symbolic personages as opposed to personified abstractions:his Virgil was a real person, a poet who embodied and was associated with the characteristics with which Dante wanted to imbue his guide through hell. Personified abstraction would be, say, the use of a women bearing scales to symbolise justice. Lyne's symbolism regarding his characters are given



biblical names in order to bestow certain characteristics on them – Jacob as patriarch and leader of men, Gabriel as the guide and interpreter– but these characters are placed in modern settings and interact with each other as people and so are further defined and further evolve the allegory. We are thus engaged by the fact that they are 'real' people and informed as to their individual roles in the film by their biblical counterparts. Just as Dantes hell is people with real souls lending his celestial stage sets the feel of a real environment so too is Jacob's Ladder.

I would like to proceed by discussing the particular symbolic references made by Lyne, as this forms a major part of his imagery in Jacob's Ladder. Virtually all of the foremost characters are given biblical names and the Divine Comedy itself – a book from which Lyne has borrowed many things –is a consciously moral work, in essence it is an allegory of the way to God. This is not to say that Jacobs Ladder is a religious film but rather to make clear that Lyne has made abundant use of religious symbolism. The first step in understanding any such work is to trace the origins of the symbols and on a broader scale discuss their relevance to the work in question

The biblical Jacob was a patriarch: father of many sons, Leader of all Israel. He was also husband to both Rachel and Leah. All of these aspects are reflected in the character of Jacob Singer – he is father of two sons, Jed and Eli, and leader of men: In Vietnam he is an authority figure and during his vision he is the one who pursues the case against the military. Jed and Eli are the names of prophets, it almost seems like a plea or a

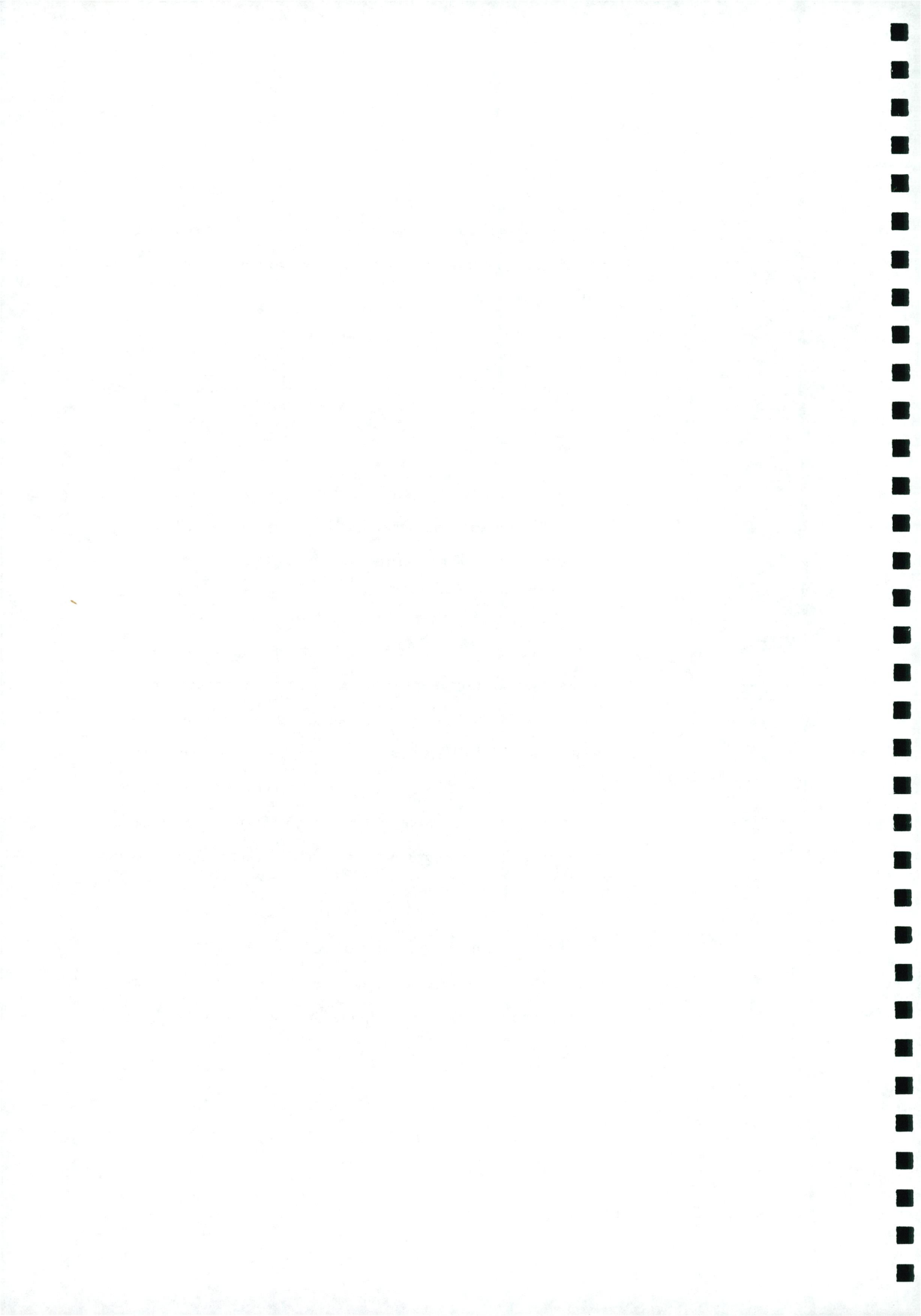


nudge to the audience when Jacob asks "Why can't you remember their names?" to ensure that they pay due attention to the 'symbolic personages' in the film.

Jacob Singer had another son – the most prophetic of them all --Gabe, (presumably short for Gabriel). The angel Gabriel enters the bible in the book of Daniel, here he reveals the meaning of Daniel's dreams. Later, in the New Testament, he foretells the birth of Christ and so is more than qualified to play the role of Jacob's ultimate guide to heaven. Like Dante's Beatrice Gabe is ready to receive Jacob in to paradise, he is a kind of divine Joseph, unraveling Jacob's dream of hell.

Rachel and Leah are the biblical Jacob's two wives, they have very definite counterparts in Jacobs Ladder: Sarah and Jezebel. They are Jacob's ex-wife and lover, respectively. These two women are at opposite ends of the scales where 'motherliness' (and consequently decency) comes into play. Sarah is the mother of Jacob's children, which is only natural considering God's blessing on her biblical sister, 'I will bless her and she will become the mother of Nations'. However, Jez is not so well-favoured her name is used to symbolise the woman who lures the Christians to fornication and idolatry in the book of Revelations.

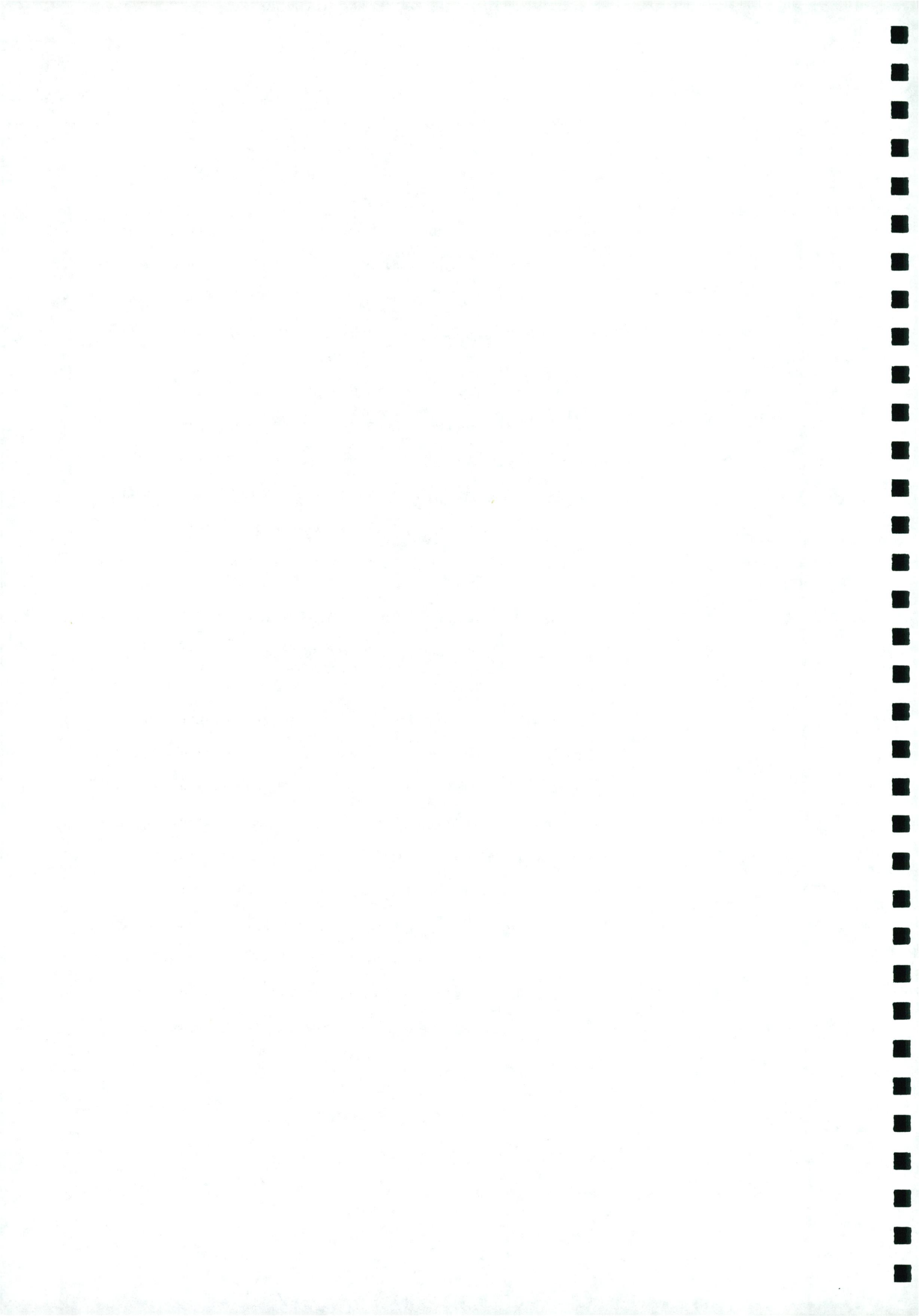
If we follow Lyne's Logic then we must conclude that Jezebel or Jez is the evil woman who has led Jacob astray and kept him from his family: 'There was no one else who had devoted himself so completely to doing wrong in the Lord's sight as Ahab – all at the urging of his wife Jezebel'.



We know that this isn't the case: Sarah kicked Jacob out and he in turn sold his own soul 'for a good lay'. My objection to Lyne's use of the name Jezebel is its inappropriateness, however Jez' character and name are too unsubtle for her to be seen as anything other than a symbol.

Nonetheless the biblical references go on: in the very title of the film a reference can be found. As we already know the ladder is given to the name of the drug which induced Jacob's vision of hell, however, the biblical Jacob also has a dream "... he dreamt he saw a stairway reaching from earth to heaven with angels going up and coming down on it". So paradoxically 'Jacob's Ladder' represents both hell and salvation.

It would be folly to deny or fail to recognise that woman in Jacob's Ladder is seen as one of three basic types A. The mother of sons B. Temptress who leads these sons astray (Sarah was Jacob's biblical grandmother) or C. A crowd of petty flirts The first is embodied in Sarah a woman who, although she kicks her husband and father of her sons out for not getting a better job still manages to retain the look of an innocent; pure, caucasian and goodlooking, but not too goodlooking. The second is bodied forth in the sultry form of Jez, for whom Jacob has sold his soul, there is one moment of irony in the film where Jez, after seeing a photo of Sarah for the first time, saunters over to the mirror and says whilst looking at her own reflection 'She looks like a real bitch' (see fig.). And then come the rest, the veritable mass of young women who attempt to erode Jacob's already impaired morals: 'I live very near here and I'm very lonely' or



'Married,oh please,ah, divorced, I like that Here again women are expressed solely in terms of their sexuality and 'race sustaining power'.This is almost too cliched to take seriously.After all what man in his right mind would sell his soul to a woman named Jezebel who, more to the point doesn't go in for biblical names.

There is a blatant sexism in Jacob's Ladder. One thing I can say however, in this space between the Bible and the mechanisms of war is that all the characters in Jacob's Ladder are people who at least in part full-fill their respective roles in the film courtesy of their biblical alias'. Jacob and Gabriel are not really father and son at all,they are in fact the State and the Church personified: patriarchy and divinity. Likewise Sarah is not only the wholesome mother of Jed and Eli but rather she is the mother of all American sons.

Obviously enough Jacob's Ladder is not a film about character development. Lyne is no Scorsese,he is not interested in personalities, or in reflecting the world in a small slice of America. He has in fact completely 'lifted' his whole repotoire of characters from the Bible. Having said that, however Lyne has so succeeded in other respects that underdevelopment in the character area is the last thing we are thinking of as we leave the cinema. Confusion that necessitates calls for some sort of solution is the effect of Jacob's Ladder. An attempt at ordering the narrative and plot into some semblance of coherence leads me on to the importance of the war in, at first, American contemporary history and then in the film.

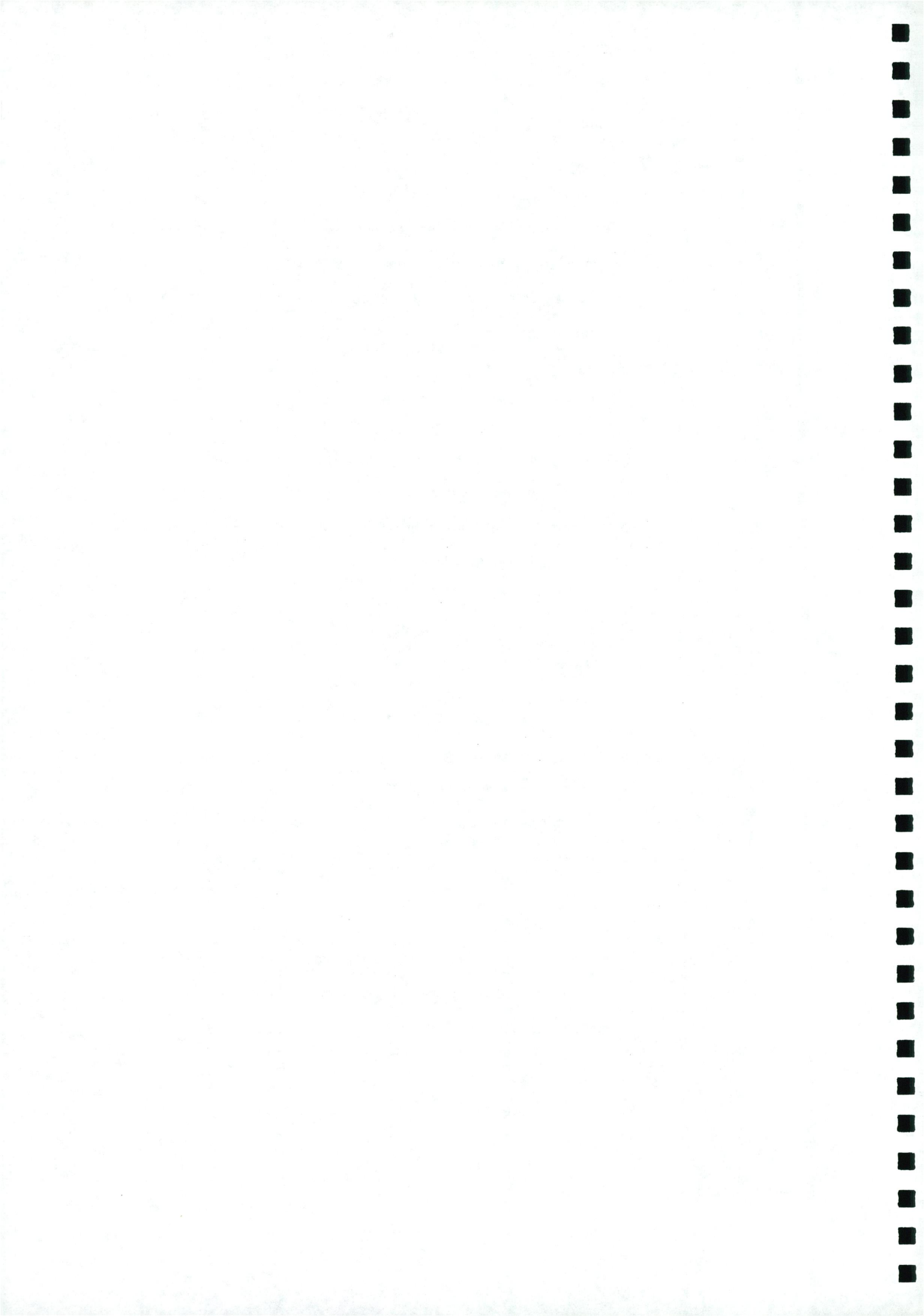
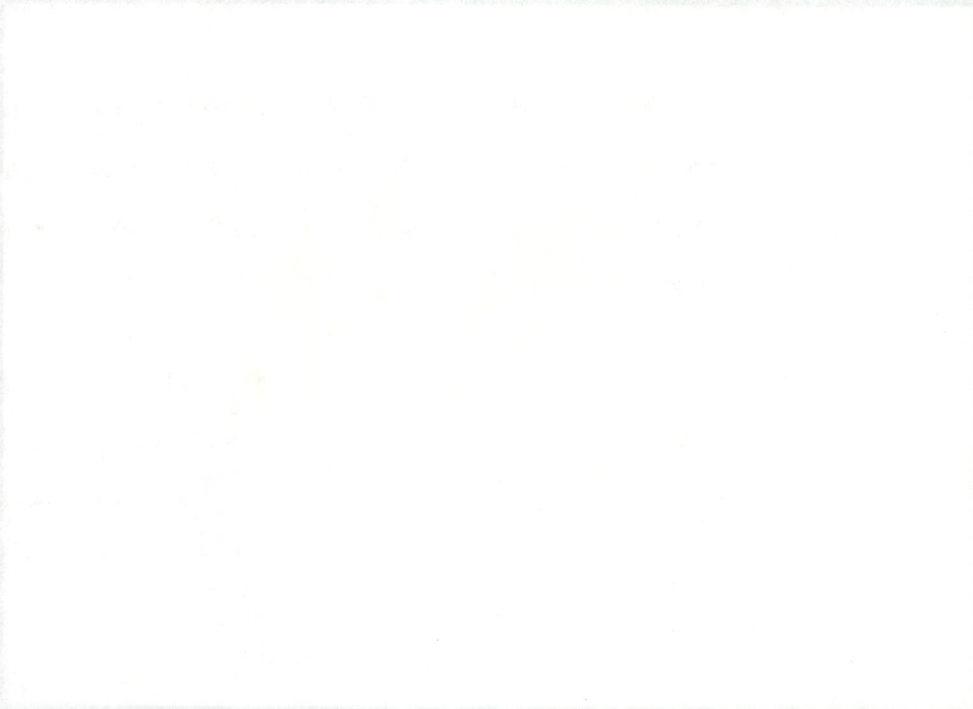




Fig 8. "Salvation"



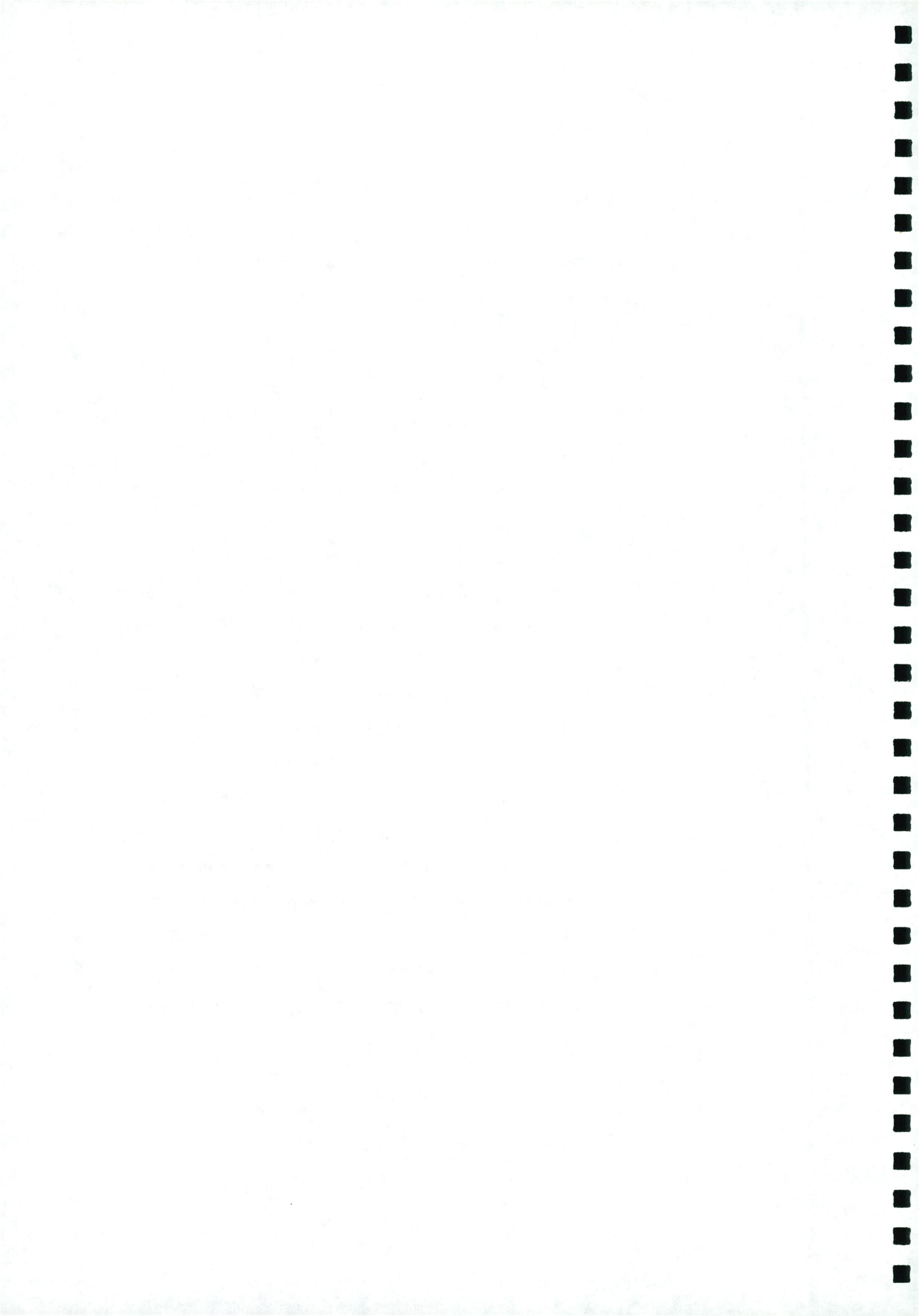
Fig 9. "looks kind & peaceful, the Guy!"



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The subject matter of the film is Vietnam— all the action takes place there and the material of Jacob's vision is directly related to it. How like the post-Vietnam America of Jacob's Ladder, then, is the reality for veterans of the war?

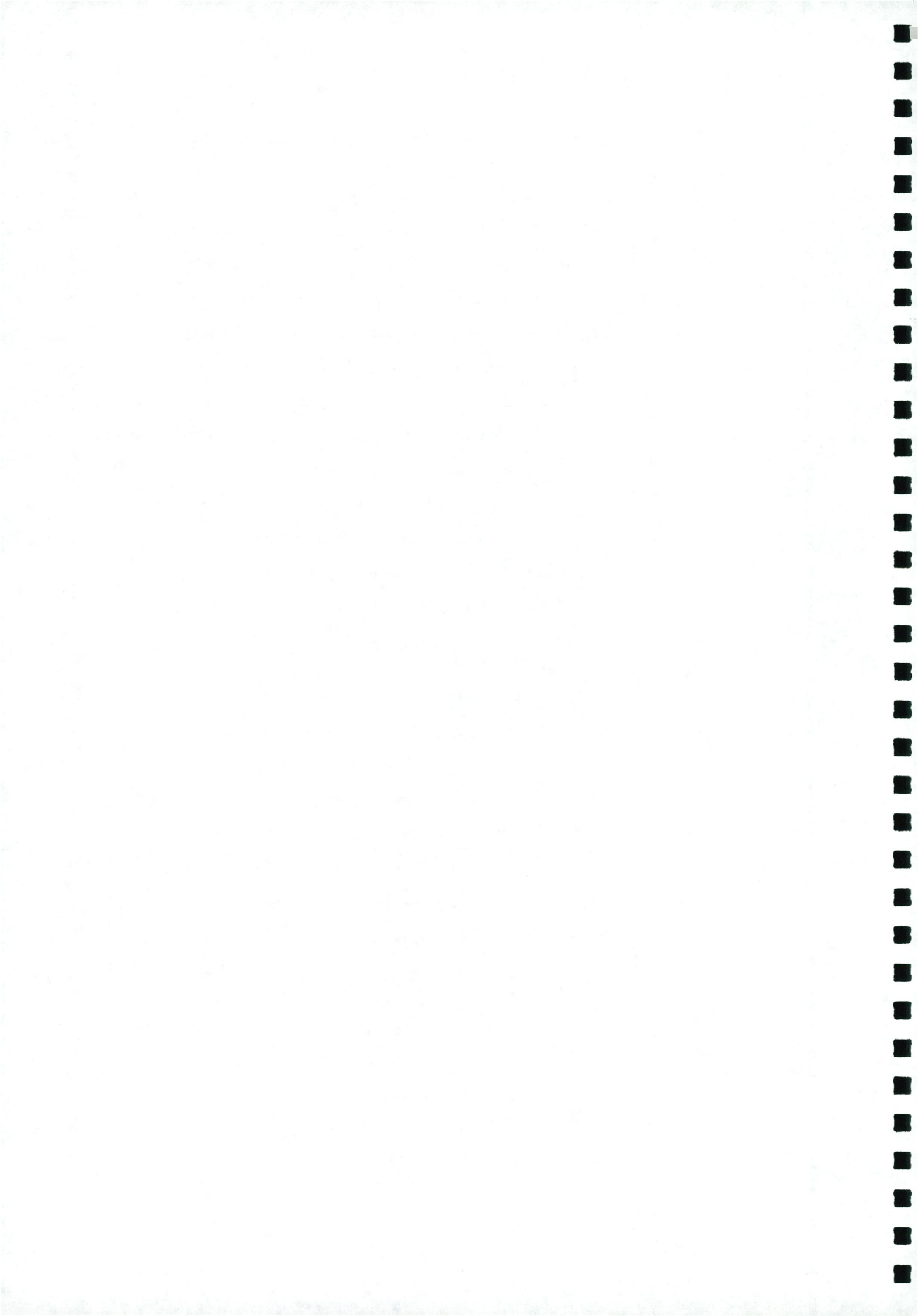
The Vietnam war is considered a unique occurrence in American history. It showed the government as conspiring against the American people. The Pentagon Papers were leaked in mid 1971 to the New York Times, it consequently became obvious to the American people that there were 'blatant attempts to lie to them. In 1971 on the 28th February the Washington Post carried an article in which this comment was made by one of the presidential aids 'if there is one thing the Americas are more sick of to-day than fighting in the jungles abroad it is fighting in the streets and campuses at home'. When the soldiers came home from Vietnam they brought the war home with them. In the words of historian Larry Bernam the war had 'become at once a human and a national tragedy in the United States' (19 p.591). Veteran soldiers came home from the war which was 'a complete structure of physical and psychic actuality, a whole self defining system' and were expected to re-assimilate themselves back into the American way of life. The nature of the experience of Vietnam made this extremely difficult but when the impression of Vietnam had also left its mark on the American public this became an impossibility. The America to which the soldiers returned was not the America they had left. It was the era of conspiracy and the soldiers that came back were not immune.



New York, the city of dis, as a place which looks familiar but isn't has obvious parallels for the soldier coming home to the city of Jacob's vision. One soldier was asked by his wife if he still loved her he said no; the war had such an immense impact such a power to tribalise every day life that afterwards nothing could be seen as the same, now nothing was sacred. Jacob can trust no-one, not his girlfriend, not his government, not even Santa Claus. That sounds flippant but it is not meant to be, the scene where Jacob is mugged by Santa comes directly after he is accosted by the military. The cumulative effect of both these incidents is the image of the diseased society already discussed. In a sense Jacob's discovery of conspiracy is being likened to a child growing up i.e. discovering the myth that is Santa Claus. Implying that post-Vietnam America was suffering all the terrible anxieties and confusions of adolescence.

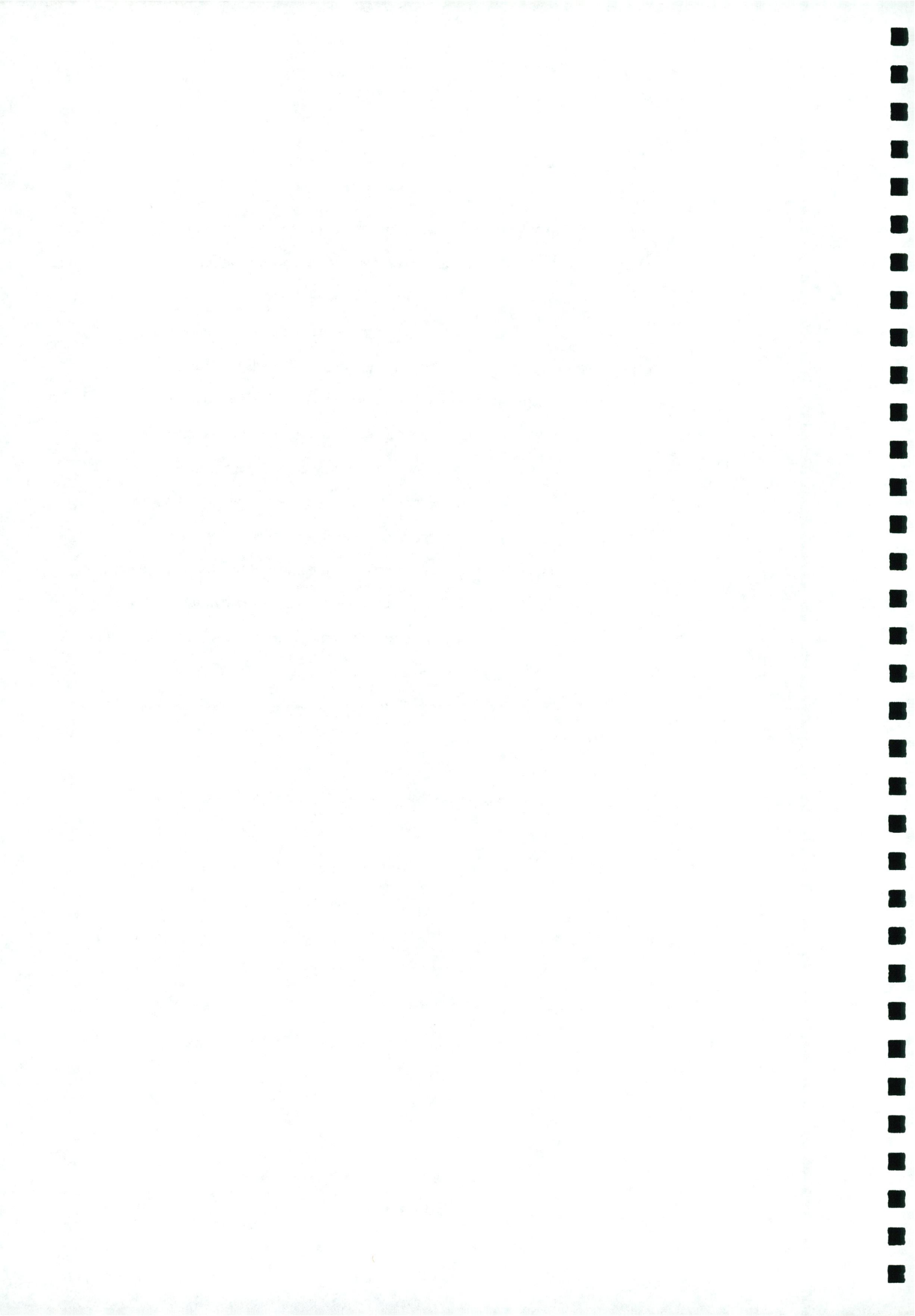
Jacob's Ladder acts as a kind of prophetic film (albeit after the fact). Jacob, who is symbolically elevated to one of the patriarchs of society is shown a vision, this vision is of life after Vietnam. But the question is why is it still necessary to allegorize a film about Vietnam? In answering this it is helpful to consider other works about Vietnam. There are of course some perfectly straightforward depictions of the War in Vietnam Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is one such film it deals with the war very visually and directly – I feel that it lacks some of the depth however of films like *'Apocalypse Now'*. It is a war film, any war, not necessarily Vietnam.

'Apocalypse now' is interesting because of its inherent study of power

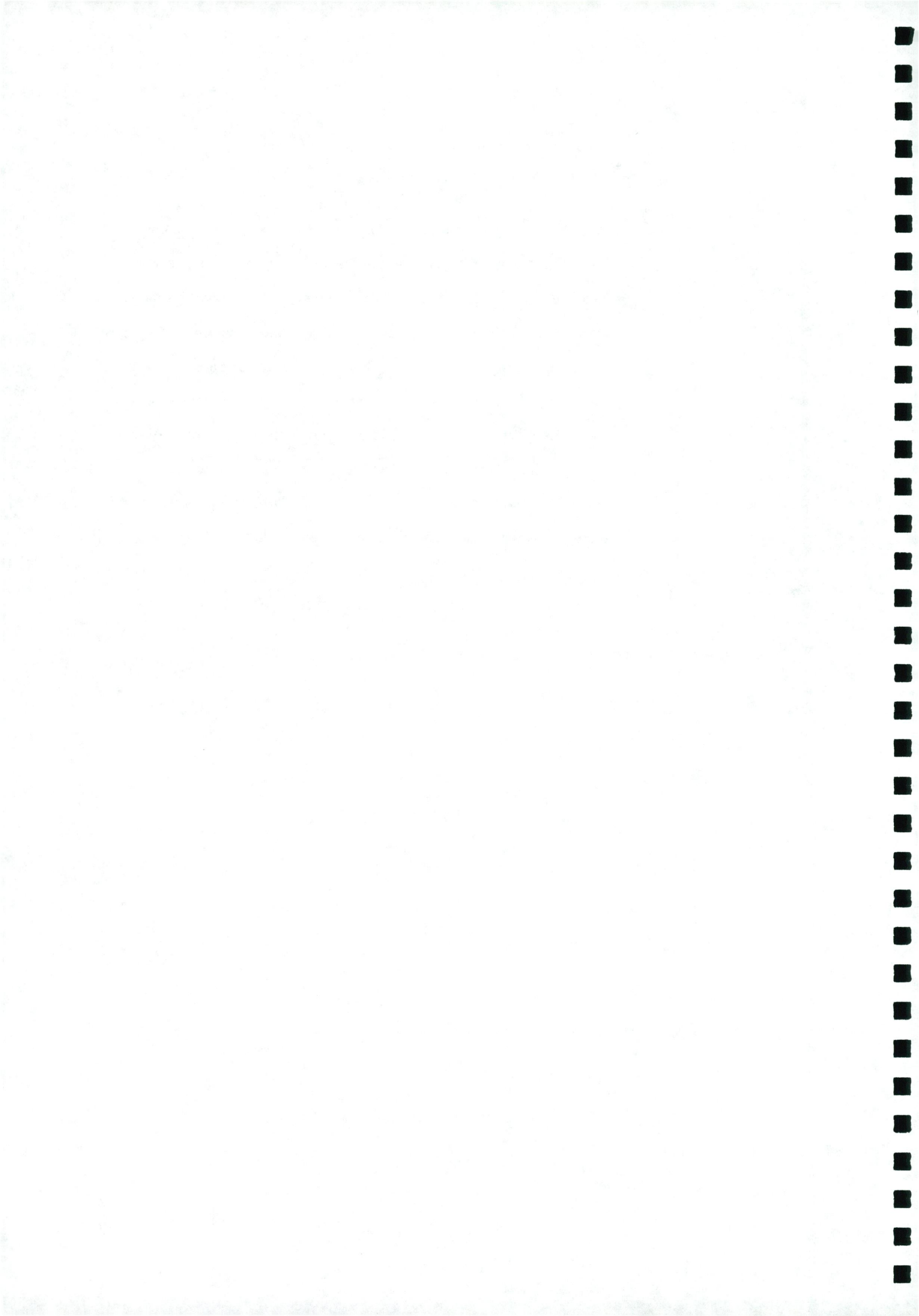


and manipulation. It is adapted from Conrad's Heart of ~~the~~ Darkness; a gifted 'company' director goes to the jungle. A transformation occurs the once brilliant business man becomes dangerous and power crazed. \ul Apocalypse Now sees Kurtz as an American general in Vietnam, he too has become a victim of 'the horror, the horror'. What is the horror? It is never fully explained by Conrad and we are never quite sure what he means. Presumably for Coppola it is related to the futility of the war in Vietnam the consequent horror of existence, but again we are not quite sure: it is a vague but very primal horror, a horror which defies words. Coppolla obviously recognised the power of the 'unknown quantity', he saw something in Conrad story which for him paralleled the war in Vietnam. This is not an unnatural or rather novel alliance. The 'mythic' or allegorical aspect of Vietnam related works in contemporary culture is not new: it has been used in plays and films since the war began. (Films such as Deliverance and Southern Comfort can be seen as allegories for the war).

And so Coppolla has also 'borrowed' he has also used the meanings and attachments of an otherwise separate piece of work to portray Vietnam. It is as if through using frameworks already in existence commentators on Vietnam are distancing themselves from the reality of the war while at the same time trying to imbue it with validity. It is as if the reality of Vietnam was altogether too inconceivable to relate. There is however another reason, that is the unwillingness of an American audience to hear the full demystified truth and perhaps the inability of anyone to tell it.\par

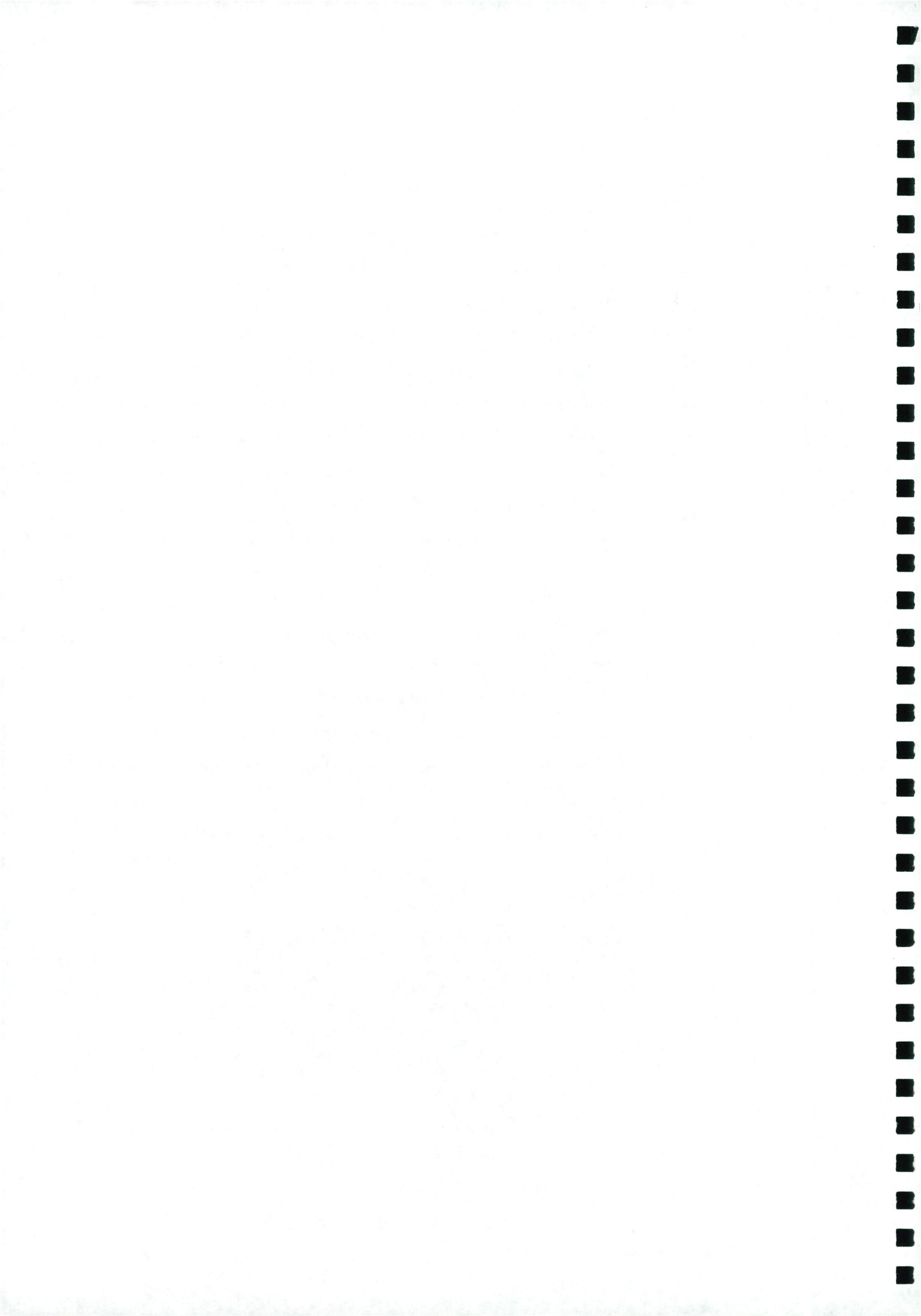


\page 'getting a handle on the experience once it was over, then, was not just a question of "readjustment" of the sort imagined in the story they told in every unit about the guy coming home and wiping off his dinner plate on the front porch – rather it was a problem of 'vision' in it's largest sense – of having undergone an experience so peculiar unto itself and it's own insane dynamic as to make nothing in life look altogether sane again and subsequently (and here would be the difference from other American Wars) of being sentenced, by unspoken national consent, to solitary confinement with the memory of it, urged to tell no tales please, and on the grounds that even were the experience of Vietnam to prove susceptible eventually to certain methods of explanations, there would be no one in the entire country who would care to hear about it'

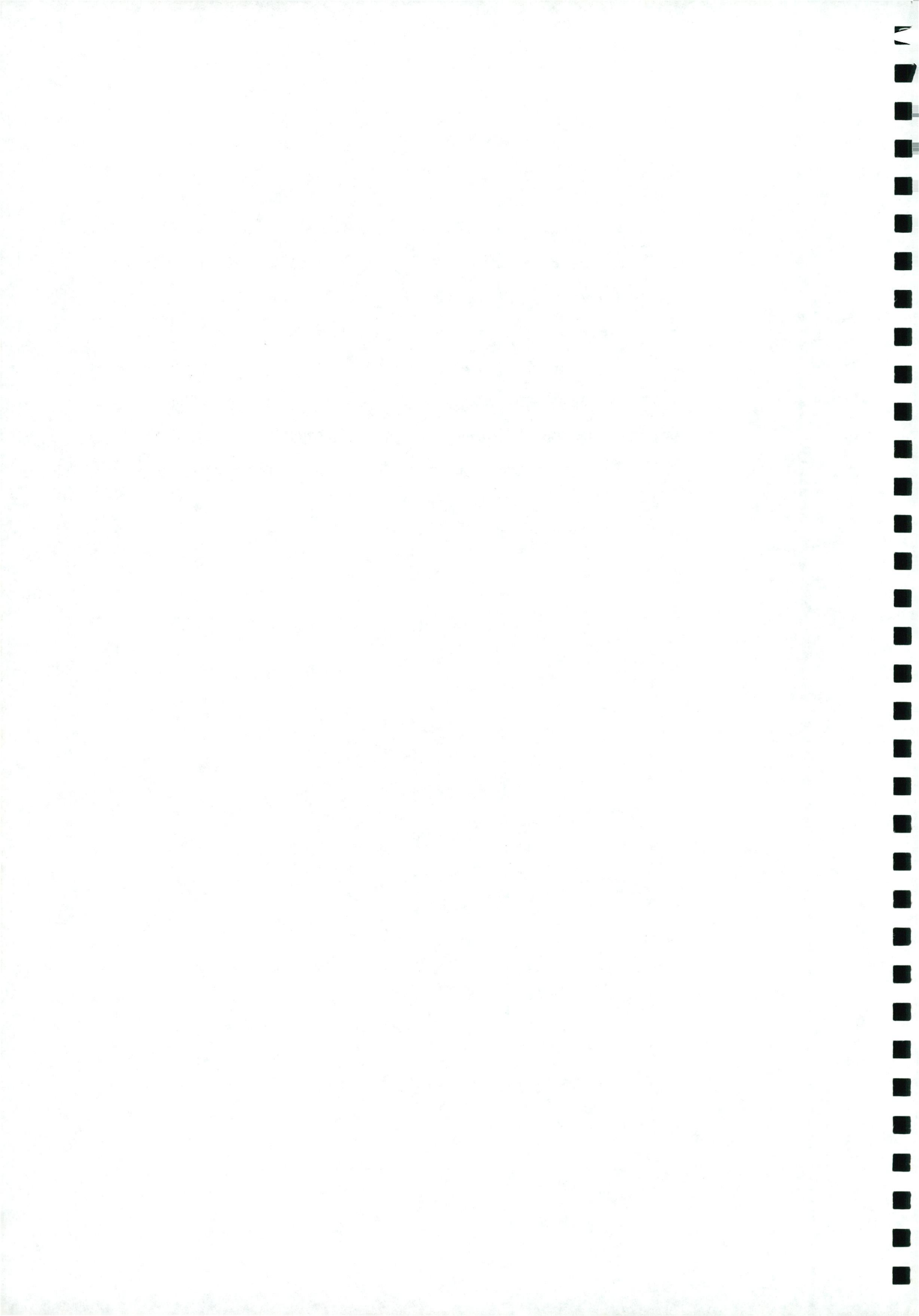


Not only is Jacob's vision an allegory of life after Vietnam and the wars effect on the American psyche but the film when taken as a whole, along with it's allegories, can be seen as a call for order. Jacob appears as modern man making sense of chaos. This reading is reflected in Lyne's use of the epic as a format for his work. He has taken a poem and used its existing meanings to build on and enhance his own work. To regard this as plagerism in any sense is incorrect, plagarism is the passing off of anothers work as your own, a feat which in this case would be difficult to pull off. Nor is it a simple retelling, the references are not limited to one source but converge into one (in it's self an attempt to make order from chaos.

Beckett has said that all writing is a work of reference. Flann O'Brien in *at swim two birds* suggested that all characters and all narratives be interchangeable as the needs of the novelist warranted, He stated that all writers were repeating things they had already heard said albeit 'usually said much better'. William Burroughs takes the idea of reference in art to an extreme with his 'cut-up' and 'fold-in' methods of writing. James Joyce used the *Odyssey* to porfray daily life in Dublin at the turn of the Century. T.S. Eliot sees Joyce's use of myth as an invocation to make order out of chaos. 'It is simply a way of ordering, of controlling and of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. Eliot believed that Joyce was an innovator in this regard, he had already realised that the novel as a form was obsolete and the novelty of Joyces work was as a result of the necessity for a new form.



Lyne has recognised the importance and importance of reference but in a more reconstructive way as opposed to the \deconstructive\plain methods of the modernist writers mentioned above (excluded Joyce). Lyne is not trying to subvert the film form itself, he is merely trying to make sense of that which makes no sense 'to try to talk about it or write about [Vietnam] ... was to risk being swept up into a self contained universe of discourse were anything from official euphemism to battlefield slang seemed the product of some insane genius for making sense and nonsense as indistinguishable as possible'.



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