

Telling and Re-telling Stories:

Studies on Literary Adaptation to Film

Edited by

Paula BALDWIN LIND

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CHAPTER EIGHT

COPPOLA'S *APOCALYPSE NOW* AS HERMENEUTICS FOR CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*¹

BRAULIO FERNÁNDEZ BIGGS
UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES, CHILE

The experience of reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) could become an overwhelming task. The narrator's magnificent point of view –that of Marlow– positioned from the prow of the *Nellie* while he talks to his shipmates lets in its all-embracing atmosphere. Conrad is able to have the reader feel himself on the vessel, have him become one of Marlow's companions, by hearing his mysterious account as narrated through laconically-described, though disturbing, memories. The novel lets the reader into Marlow's narration by means of still another narrator who introduces him several pages before, and who is also one of "us"; that is, another companion on board the *Nellie*, sitting on the prow with Marlow. As we know, in the rest of the novel Marlow's voice will be included in between inverted commas throughout almost a hundred pages right up until just before the end when, in a brief last paragraph, he interrupts the narrator to say:

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the

¹ This chapter is part of a paper that was presented at the Congreso Internacional de Literatura y Cine, Universidad de los Andes, Santiago de Chile, 9-10 October, 2013.

uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky— seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.²

The reader is surrounded by the same atmosphere as those who, on that deck, are listening to the narrator, delivering his long tale, at night in the estuary of the river Thames, and the reader, too, is affected by it. As one of Conrad's Spanish translators suggested, "el gran hallazgo de Conrad [fue] hacer al lector un sitio entre la comunidad de los oyentes que asisten al relato oral de Marlow."³

At the same time, the reader is surrounded by the mystery in Marlow's narration and, above all, becomes a part of it. Marlow remains mysterious, as everything he tells us is enigmatic in both what is clear and what is deliberately obscured. Thus, what can the reader—the listener— feel with phrases like this?: "I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness— that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions."⁴

We all know Marlow is looking for Kurtz. We know that he is navigating up the river and that things happen, many things. Nothing is completely unobscured or totally clear. On the contrary, everything is mysterious, opaque and murky. It is neither ambiguous nor confusing, but rather all lies in shadows... even Kurtz himself; even Marlow's feelings towards Kurtz are left in total darkness. On the other hand, the images are always projected and expanded, as the "semantic fields" are not closed but in a constant flow of progression. Vanishing points directed towards those who understand also appear. Perhaps the only brutally clear episode is the final one, when Marlow lies to Kurtz' girlfriend regarding his last words.

All of the above does not stand as the novel's flaw, but rather, as its greatest achievement, as it is in full accordance with its main objective, its soul, and its tale; we travel to the heart of darkness. Can we expect clarity, objectivity, lights, or evident guidelines? Certainly not. We should also bear in mind, *a fortiori*, that this heart of darkness is seen as a metaphor for the ineffable wild depth only. For in truth we are travelling to the depths of the human heart, to the shadows of its very own darkness, even to a sort of primitive state, to the wilderness, and to an original chaos in

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 124.

³ Miguel Martínez-Lage, "... La verdad según Marlow", in Conrad, Joseph. *Los libros de Marlow: Juventud, El corazón de las tinieblas, Lord Jim y Azar* (Madrid: Edhasa, 2008), 29.

⁴ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 111.

which that human heart, freed from ordinary constraints, seems to approach the demonic. No geographic coordinates are assigned to this place or point in this direction; neither cardinal points nor clear guides of any kind. And there cannot be! In this journey towards the deepest darkness of the human heart we can only encounter a terrible and disturbing mystery. Or, as Kurtz discovered, “the horror...”

I find this extraordinarily well understood and conveyed in Francis Ford Coppola’s film. And therefore the experience of rereading *Heart of Darkness* after watching *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is a revelation. We know Coppola, together with John Milius, who based the script of the movie on Conrad’s novel. In general terms, the movie’s plot has evident similarities with the book, even though the scenario has shifted from the Belgian Congo –explored by rubber and ivory extracting companies at the end of the nineteenth century, to Vietnam in the 1970s, with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in the midst of war against the United States. Where there is no exact equivalence we find an enriched symbolic correspondence. Thus the initial chaos, the river, the ship navigating through threatening waters, Kilgore, the party for the soldiers (a scene charged with phallic symbols), the helicopter with the prostitutes (“The Playboy Bunnies”), the photographer, the reading of Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”, etc. There are many examples of such echoes or correspondences in the film, but this has not left everybody satisfied. For instance, in “Make Friends with Horror and Terror: *Apocalypse Now*”, Saul Steier, one of Coppola’s most severe critics, complained about the bizarre and grotesque nature of many scenes of the movie⁵. Such an opinion seems prompted by a desire for an excessively literal comparison of both works. I think Conrad’s achievement with his mysterious language is not different from, but akin to what Coppola achieves through visual effects. Conrad’s book is literature; Coppola’s film is cinema⁶. It is all about creating an atmosphere of delirium and excesses, incomprehensible to those in its midst. According to Garrett Stewart, what Conrad attains with nuances and metaphors, Coppola achieves it through spectacle, by “trying to find in visual chiaroscuro and collage the equivalent of the writer’s brooding,

⁵ Saul Steier, “Make Friends with Horror and Terror: *Apocalypse Now*,” *Social Text* 3 (1980): 118-119.

⁶ To grant him some justice, and as many critics have done too, they have set the perspective of *Apocalypse Now* as an interpretation or metaphor of the Vietnam War and the American attitude towards it. I do not agree with this either, but critique seems coherent under this point of view.

rhetorical cadences and driven iterations.”⁷ John Hellman adds that it is about the “aspects of a complex presentation of one source in the terms of another.”⁸ On the other hand, there are similarities in the narrative between the two, as Linda Costanzo Cahir has suggested in “Narratological Parallels in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979): While a crew member from the *Nellie* tells us about Marlow’s story, Coppola’s camera does the same with that of Captain Benjamin Willard in Vietnam. Both men are restless and the stories of both inspire restlessness. And even though the end of the film sets itself apart from the novel –Willard murders Kurtz while the moviegoer is presented at the end of Coppola’s movie with the sacrifice of a cow by villagers– its ultimate meaning remains the same: Millard/Marlow has touched the horror and in the lie told to Kurtz’s girlfriend we find his murder symbolically implied.

As Cahir said, “Coppola understood that technique and theme, structure and meaning are inseparable entities. To tell a story differently is to tell a different story. Ultimately, it seems, Conrad and Coppola tell the same tale.”⁹ But the truth is more than merely “seem”; Coppola has effectively told the very same story. Thus his narration –his cinematographic story– does not only enrich but also enlightens Conrad’s literariness, as it functions, I suggest, as a kind of hermeneutics for *Heart of Darkness*. As Stewart argues, “departing from Conrad, Coppola gains access to their common theme at a deep level. The revisionary impulse becomes, as it sounds, a second look, harder, darker.”¹⁰ Moreover, it is an unlimited story, “never exorcized, the oldest story of all: the truth about human nature.”¹¹ Let us see why...

Since the publication of T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” we have conceived the idea that past literary works do not only influence those of the present, but, at the same time, the contemporary works also modify our perspective of those older works, and how we read them. New works are explained by those from the past; in other words,

⁷ Garrett Stewart, “Coppola’s Conrad: The Repetitions of Complicity,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 3 (1981): 456.

⁸ John Hellman, “Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1982): 430.

⁹ Linda Costanzo Cahir, “Narratological Parallels in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1992): 187.

¹⁰ Stewart, “Coppola’s Conrad,” 456.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 456.

there is no vanguard without rearguard.¹² So as to provide a strictly literary example, it is indeed true that Joyce's *Ulysses* cannot be understood without Homer's *Odyssey*. But it is also true that after *Ulysses* we no longer read Homer in the same way. For Eliot, this forms part of the intrinsic nature of his concept of "continuity" or "tradition" in Western literature. We find a superlative example of the above in our case study—in which two artistic genres that are radically different (cinema and literature) come together. Then we are faced not only with Conrad's influence over Coppola, however important it has been. Nor is it about Coppola (and Milius) basing his movie on the Polish-English writer's novel, so as to write the script and film it from the same model. All of this would still be merely "continuity" or "tradition". When I propose seeing *Apocalypse Now* as hermeneutics for *Heart of Darkness*, I base my assumptions on the idea that Coppola has rewritten, cinematographically and with every formal and contextual adjustment, an identical *mythos*; the same poetic myth of the novel. For Hellmann, both works pursue "similar purposes in the dreamlike (or nightmarish) effect with which they render reportorial detail,"¹³ "a psycho-symbolic journey within to the unconscious."¹⁴

It is about retelling the same poetic myth with other tools, other materials, in a single unit. Thus, as it is consistent with itself, in the new creation—the new *poiesis*—the old myth seems new, revealing, even discovering other shades and details as it unveils itself. It does not modify its essence, but we see it in a way we had not seen it before. It shows angles that in the "previous version" had been displaced by others, preferred if you will, or emphasized. We know the poetic myth is the cause of a series of actions and episodes and not the other way around.

¹² "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new". T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1998), 28.

¹³ Hellmann, "Vietnam", 430.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 431.

That is why it admits other versions –in the sense we have been discussing so far– without losing its essence. It is all about bringing complementary angles into play that do not cancel each other out. The myth’s truth is so vast –the “heart of darkness” so profound– that neither version exhausts it, so each of them –close to the essence– shows aspects, multiple aspects, that are necessary precisely because they belong to it. If the poetic myth is the “soul of tragedy”¹⁵ as the animation principle, forms and elements with which the artist expresses it can vary, as they do in this novel and in this film. Thus, the issue is neither Vietnam nor the Congo, neither Marlow nor Willard, even less is it about Kurtz as a rubber businessman and ivory agent, or about a famous colonel in the American Green Berets. With the consistency they achieve, as art objects with the same internal consistency as reality, they manifest the same poetic truth of, as Stewart puts it, “the human mind’s recurrent nightmare of its own abyss.”¹⁶ And this is what matters in the end. This is why I refer to the concept of a “version” that asks to be understood. That version must be about the myth itself, not necessarily coping the precise time and place or plot, or other elements of the original that are less central, more incidental, than that underlying myth.

George Steiner stated that “the true hermeneutic of drama is staging.”¹⁷ Why? Because it is in the attempt to display the formal elements in a genuine and consistent way *by means of* or *in*, when a poetic truth will show or manifest itself and where we find the question regarding the ultimate meaning. I think films usually fail in their effort to adapt novels (or cinematographic adaptations of literary works, which is the same) precisely because what they do is to simply transfer the plot –an articulation of actions– from one artistic language to another. Following Aristotle’s ideas, poetically speaking, cinema (imitating with images and sound) will never achieve the same as literature (imitating with words). Even though both arts do not differ much in what they imitate, they definitely do differ in the *means* by which they imitate and, most certainly, in the *way* in which they imitate¹⁸. Thus, they will never be poetically comparable and the film version or adaptation will usually fail, as has so often occurred. It is all about the insuperable difference in the mimetic

¹⁵ *Poetics* 1450a38-39.

¹⁶ Stewart, “Coppola’s Conrad,” 474. Regarding the title of the film, his article finishes in the following way: “Apocalypse, now or to come, means in its own original sense, after all, not only Doomsday but Revelation” (Idem).

¹⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.

¹⁸ Cf. *Poetics* 1449a7 ff.

doing, unless, as I propose, the poetic myth is rewritten using the proper means and ways of imitation regarding the art in question, in this case the cinema; that is, with the same mimetic object and exploiting cinema's own elements. In so doing, the adaptation will poetically work towards a result and an aesthetic effect that are true to its own nature. If the object of mimesis is to achieve the same, and the film, with the elements that are inherent to that media, works poetically to achieve a result and an aesthetic effect on the audience according to its own nature, the result will not only have an intrinsic value of its own –the purpose of any work of art is its own perfection– but its effect will also be both new and equivalent. Stunningly new... like seeing the same thing with new eyes: two different mirrors for the same face. It will be an identical animation principle –the fable or plot as Aristotle's "soul of tragedy"– for different aesthetic objects.

Even though it is not the main topic of the present chapter, I still consider it a relevant digression for what has been said so far to insist upon the impossibility of cinema *adaptations* for novels. Not, at least, if we consider an adaptation, as I previously explained, as a mere transfer of articulated actions from one argument line to the audiovisual format. At the most, this film will be true to the episodes in the novel, to that simple notion of "what it is about", but it will never be true to its soul, to the principle that animates it. Novels and literary works are not *about* something; they *are* something, as German E. Vargas comments:

If one holds fiction to be an imitation of nature, then likewise one would think that cinematographic adaptations of literary works would be imitations of literature. *Apocalypse Now* proves that this is not necessarily so. It also proves that there is more to literary adaptation than fidelity, infidelity, and additions. In this film, we see a multiplicity of texts, for instance, as well as musical and historical associations or adaptations, and the ways in which these texts and adaptations can all intermingle and cohere. By mixing rather than translating the images, narrative, and ideas of literary works as with other "texts" such as musical pieces and historical events, Coppola is able to develop a subtext for the film that freely incorporates any association that is relevant to its purpose.¹⁹

Consequently, so as to effectively adapt, in the sense of recreating in its genre, cinema should *film the poetic myth*. In my opinion, this is precisely what Coppola has done in *Apocalypse Now*.

¹⁹ German E. Vargas, "Narrative Mode, Mixed Images, and Adaptation in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*," *Atenea* 24, no. 2 (2004): 98-99.

Let's ask ourselves: what is the substance of *Heart of Darkness*? What is the essence of *Apocalypse Now*? A journey through an unknown land in search of an unknown heart of a man who is out of control, whose delirium to play God has seduced men beyond—at least one step further—what is reasonably human, given the *hybris*. And this man must be taken away, at whatever cost, as he *must not* remain there for his own sake; that of his hypnotized subjects and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, the searcher who is looking through the unknown is getting to know himself. As Steier suggests, the film “takes the form of a quest, a form used as a metaphor of the search for origins and self-knowledge, and seemingly inverts it by pushing the central character [...] deeper and deeper into confusion and the unknown.”²⁰ As scenario and context we find hundreds of signs, clues, and remains of what this man—this terrible and dangerous unknown man—has left behind and has been able to understand or translate as “the horror”. And that is all...²¹ If all this can be poetically articulated, if it manages to become an aesthetic object whose perfection lies in itself, the importance of whether it is cinema or literature is relativised. We do not care anymore for the ambiguous language or the subversive images affecting us. But I say “we do not care” in terms of tools, resources, and elements *in* which the myth turns into existence, precisely what matters the most: its aesthetic truth, what it is as a poetic work.

As Marlow says about Kurtz, “[h]e has something to say. He said it”²². What? “The horror! The horror!” It is not an elaborated phrase but a linguistic condensation of what lies at the heart of darkness. Kurtz has not

²⁰ Saul Steier, “Make Friends with Horror,” 115. The author includes other interesting references to “racism” in the movie, attitude that is also present in Conrad’s novel. Refer to 120-121.

²¹ There is another interesting element: both, the movie and the novel, share, and Fabio Viti reminds us: the criticism to civilization: “La barbarie, la tenebra, l’oscurità che prima era identificata nella natura ostile si rivela nella sua vera essenza: la barbarie non è altro che un prodotto della civiltà, la contrapposizione tenebra/luce non esiste più. La natura non è il male perché il male è un risultato della civiltà. È la condanna conradiana del colonialismo. Il male, la barbarie appaiono nella natura, nel selvaggio, non perché appartengono a questo universo, ma perché è la civiltà a proiettarli fuori da sé. Al termine del viaggio nella natura selvaggia e ostile Marlow/Willard incontrerà il prodotto massimo della sua civiltà: Kurtz.” Fabio Viti, “Il primitivo secondo Kurtz. L’apocalisse dell’uomo civile nelle ‘culture della crisi’,” *La Ricerca Folklorica* 10 (1984): 91. As complement to the racial and gender issues, see Worthy, Kim. “Emissaries of Difference: Conrad, Coppola, and *Hearts of Darkness*.” *Women’s Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 153-167.

²² Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 116.

only seen this darkness, but also contributed to it. At the same time, he is the voice: in the novel as well as in the movie he is presented as a voice.

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror –of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision –he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath– The horror! The horror!²³

Probably, a partial understanding of the above led Marsha Kinder to affirm that Coppola, when identifying Kurtz with the war atrocities, distorts the topic of power and alters the delicate equilibrium between Conrad's novel and Vietnam. In this line, she adds, "the film succeeds in forcing us to experience the horror of the war and to acknowledge our own complicity in it, but it fails to illuminate the nature of Kurtz's horror."²⁴ I propose the exact opposite. If considered correctly, Coppola has not set the focus on the war, nor did Conrad focus on the exploitation of the Belgian Congo. They are important elements of the background and scenery, but the main issue is unquestionably Kurtz. In fact, Kinder also suggests that the movie is "amazingly true to the story's core of meaning"²⁵ and "a masterful work that equals the power of Conrad's vision"²⁶. Moreover, it "must be seen both as a nightmarish vision of the historical events and as an exploration of one man's journey through madness."²⁷ This exact exploration sets Kurtz as the cause and object, with Millard personally participating, becoming an equivalent to Conrad's novel and serving as hermeneutics for it. Coppola is not telling the story of Vietnam nor is he creating a metaphor for it. Rather, he has poetically rewritten the myth of *Heart of Darkness* summarized in that shriek which is no more than a voice thread: "The horror! The horror!" As Stewart correctly argues; "the film's real power derives from its sustained attempt to transpose the story's incremental repetitions of style, plot, and psychology into a new cinematic register and a new century."²⁸

²³ Ibid., 115.

²⁴ Marsha Kinder, "The Power of Adaptation in *Apocalypse Now*," *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1979-80): 13.

²⁵ Kinder, "The Power," 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

²⁸ Stewart, "Coppola's Conrad," 455.

I am not in a position to know whether or not Coppola wanted his film to serve as hermeneutics for Conrad's novel. From the point of view of *intentio operis*, neither is the case fully clear that the movie serves as hermeneutics for the novel. Nevertheless, given the previous and main arguments being, as I insist, that of rewriting the poetic myth, for the spectator the movie serves as hermeneutics or it can, at least, work as such. This simply confirms, from another point of view, the Aristotelian postulate that "poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars."²⁹ In other words, poetic works deal with general truths and not with factual or empirical ones, as the historic discipline was understood during the times of the Philosopher. *Apocalypse Now* works as a hermeneutic exercise of *Heart of Darkness* precisely because it "relates" the "universal"; an identical general truth. I have discussed the movie as a hermeneutic exercise of the novel and not the other way round. Is this objective or subjective? Are there objective reasons to affirm there is only a one-way direction for this hermeneutic exercise? Or, does everything depend upon the reader/spectator's itinerary of receptions? If someone watches Coppola's film and then reads Conrad's novel, when this person watches the film for a second time, will its meaning be enriched? If the idea is to rewrite the same poetic myth, the answer cannot but be affirmative for both cases. With Eliot's dictum about how new works revise our reception of older ones firmly in mind, we realize that despite almost a hundred years having passed, between the publication of the novel and the film's release, if we see Coppola's film a second time, this time after having read Conrad's novel, we will necessarily see it in a different way. Our mental lenses would have changed.

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²⁹ *Poetics* 1451b5-7.

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