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NARRATIVE MODE, MIXED IMAGES, AND ADAPTATION IN FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S *APOCALYPSE NOW*

German E. Vargas

If it is worth doing, it can't be done;
if it can be done, it isn't worth doing.

*Critic John Simon on the dramatization of fiction*¹

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, it left with it a legacy of destruction, confusion, division, and chaos that ushered in a new generation of films and literature in the United States which sought, some with more success than others, somehow to recreate the events that happened there for an audience that needed to come to terms with the atrocities of ten years of warfare and the implications of their nation's moral, political, and military self defeat. In 1977, Michael Herr, who had been a journalist during the War, published a book of his journal entries from the time he spent there. In 1979 film director Francis Ford Coppola released *Apocalypse Now*, a film which culminated four years of work on the part of the filmmaker and which was based on the short novel *Heart of Darkness* published in 1902 by Joseph Conrad. There is a historical connection between these events; Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* bridges the gap between colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* and the Vietnam War and does so through events, images, and places presented by Herr in *Dispatches*, who co-wrote the narrative for the film.² Through this combination, Coppola creates a film that successfully addresses the primary concerns of a piece of literature while adding a new dimension to them by setting them in a different historical and cultural context and building upon and commenting new meanings created by the merging of these two texts through the creative singularities of the film.

¹ Quoted by Watts, 41.

² According to the film's credits.

Heart of Darkness has two narrators, both of whom are characters in the story who exist on different levels in the narrative. Marlow, the captain of a river steamboat in Africa tells the narrator a tale that makes up the bulk of the novel, of a journey down the river and the encounter with Mr. Kurtz. The unnamed main narrator then tells the reader about Marlow telling this story. The reader as audience does not have direct contact with Marlow; he speaks in the first person to the narrator and the narrator speaks in the first person to us. Although *Apocalypse Now* is in part narrated by a narrator/protagonist, U.S. Army Captain Willard, he is the only visible narrator who speaks in the first person. This mode of narrative is the way *Dispatches* is structured as a work of journalistic nature. However, given the importance of the two narrators in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow takes the narrator on a journey to the heart of Africa that in the end symbolizes a tour through the darkness that can lie in the human heart, one has to consider the position of the audience with respect to the narrative in *Apocalypse Now*. In order to do this we must first understand Captain Willard's nature as the narrator of the film.

Clearly filling in the role of Marlow in terms of the adaptation of the character, Captain Willard becomes "the caretaker of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's memory" (0:9:41-46) in the same manner that Marlow does near the ending of *Heart of Darkness*. Willard says, however, that "there is no way of telling Kurtz's story without telling my own, and if his story is a confession, then so is mine (0:9:51-10:00)." Willard is therefore aware that he is telling a story; he is conscious of his narration and how it lets us see beyond the story itself into his perception of and reaction to it. We are then the objects of Willard's story about Kurtz and we become an equivalent of Conrad's nameless audience-narrator, therefore a tacit layer in the narrative of the film, an implicit rather than detached observer with insight into Willard's thoughts and a fragmented knowledge of his past. The journey into darkness is then ours as well. We receive it through Willard's reflection and experience in the same manner that the actual narrator in *Heart of Darkness* receives it from Marlow. The voice-over narrative we get from Willard, along with his awareness of telling a tale, confirms our incorporeal presence within the framework of the film. This can be seen as a representation of our reception of the Vietnam War as a period and as an event. The war presented in television and in print was one arguably different from the one actually going on. The resistance that it encountered in the United States reflected the inner turmoil and conflict that lay dormant after three major wars in the previous 65-75 years of United States history. Whether orally, by letter, by book, or by screen, most observers of the Vietnam War were spectators of a

narrative, truthful and/or otherwise, which unfolded before them and recounted the action taking place in a remote, foreign, and for some, exotic land.

This voice-over narrative is also how *Dispatches* comes into the narrative of the film although not so much as an element of plot but as a vehicle of discourse. W.D. Ehrhart identifies as one of the stronger points of Michael Herr's recount of the Vietnam War in *Dispatches* the multitude of two line statements, fragments, and descriptions "that make you sit up and say yeah, goddamn; yeah, that's just what it was like (5)," such as:

"It was one of those days that I realized that the only corpse I couldn't bear to look at would be the one I would never have to see" (77)

"wake up...with only the taste of a bad dream in your mouth like you'd been chewing on a roll of dirty old pennies in your sleep." (33)

"We napalmed off [the Montagnards³] crops and flattened their villages, and then admired the restlessness in their spirit."

Ehrhart, a Vietnam War veteran and a writer himself calls Herr a "word-photographer," referring to this ability to capture images in words. This quasi-poetic form of narrative is present throughout Willard's voice-over reflections in *Apocalypse Now*:

"Shit. Charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." (0:19:54-20:00)

"Never get out of the boat, absolutely goddamn right; unless you were going all the way. Kurtz went all the way, he split from the whole fucking program." (0:56:23-31)

"It was a way we had around here of living with ourselves, we'd cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a Band Aid." (1:20:53-1:21:00)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow receives a bundle of letters and files given to him by Kurtz, which is substituted in the film by a dossier on Col. Kurtz given to him near the beginning of the film by a General who sends him on a mission to kill Kurtz, who has gone into Cambodia with an army of soldiers and Montagnard mercenaries. Willard is an equivalent to Marlow; he is not the same character in terms of the narrative since he embodies characteristics attributed to the narrator in *Heart of Darkness*. In the novel, the actual narrator is an ivory trader just like Kurtz, and as he listens to Marlow's tale his appreciation of Kurtz begins to grow. Captain Willard echoes this in the film since he

³ Generic French term for any of 187 "ethnic minorities" living in the mountainous areas of Vietnam.

belongs to the same group of Special Forces that Kurtz does and his understanding of Kurtz's tactics and his voice "really put the hook" (0:24:50) in him.

Willard's interest in Kurtz, which echoes Marlow's stated admiration and the narrator's curiosity as well as Willard's own appreciation and understanding of the man carries with it a sense of voyeurism which of course fits the cinematographic medium of *Apocalypse Now*, but is also reflected in various planes and characters within the film itself. When first coming upon land to meet Kilgore, Willard and the boat crew pass a television crew filming scenes from the war (the director of this TV crew is actually played by Francis Ford Coppola himself). This sense of voyeurism is also carried through in the character of the "fan" the photojournalist who hangs around Kurtz's camp, masterfully embodied by Dennis Hopper. This may be a reaction or a critique of the fallacious and/or feverish coverage of the war on part of the media, which bordered on obscenity, but it may also very well be a function of Herr's involvement in the project.

Besides contributing rhetorical devices to the spoken narrative of the film as well as a journalistic narrative voice, *Dispatches* draws, coincidentally or otherwise, a direct connection between the Vietnam War and *Heart of Darkness* in its presentation of the imperialistic British colonization of Africa as represented by Kurtz:

It was spookwar then, adventure; not exactly soldiers, not even advisors yet but Irregulars, working in remote places under little direct authority, acting out their fantasies with more freedom than most men ever know. (Herr 50)

This association was not the prompt for making a film based on *Heart of Darkness* set during the Vietnam War. It does, however, solidify the connection between the events of the war and previous colonizing or invasive efforts by the West upon other cultures, both in fiction as well as reality.

Spoken language, however, is not the only contribution that *Dispatches* made to setting Conrad's novel during the Vietnam War in the film. Herr and his "word-photography" also contribute a multitude of images and motifs from the Vietnam War that connect Conrad's Novel with the history of the war and the experience of those who lived through it. One such occasion, a scene in the film, which has no counterpart in *Heart of Darkness*, presents a sequence that is described almost image for image in *Dispatches*. Willard and the boat arrive at the site of the "Do Lung Bridge" where there is a rabid battle going on. Looking around for the commanding officer, Willard runs into a soldier with a decorated grenade launcher and a detached

demeanor who moves slowly to fire over the trench. In *Dispatches*, Herr wrote:

The M-79 (grenade launcher)...was obviously a well-loved object; you could see the kind of work that had gone into it by the amount of light caught from the flares that glistened on the stock. The Marine looked serious, dead-eyed serious...He drew the weapon, opened the breach and dropped in a round that looked like a big swollen bullet, listening very carefully all the while to the shrieking. He placed the M-79 over his left forearm and aimed for a second before firing. There was an enormous flash on the wire 200 meters away, a spray of orange sparks, and then everything was still except for the roll of some bombs exploding kilometers away... (Herr 142)

This is reproduced almost exactly in the scene from the film. The reason for the soldier's detachment in *Dispatches* is that he is stationed in Khe Sanh, the site of a seventeen-day battle where close to 250,000 people were killed. This connection to the history of the war establishes the relationship between the intellectual environment of *Heart of Darkness*, which denounces the dehumanizing nature of imperialism, and actual events that echo these ideas; albeit from a Eurocentric perspective, but only as much as *Apocalypse Now* does it form the point of view of the United States. *Heart of Darkness* forms the theoretical background integrating colonialism as presented through fiction with the Vietnam War as presented through film in *Apocalypse Now*, even when some scenes are clearly adapted from *Dispatches*.

Another example of how *Heart of Darkness* and *Dispatches* integrate in *Apocalypse Now* is in the rearrangement of characters provided by Conrad's novella into new roles and personages through a characterization that is based on the people from the war that Herr describes in his writing. We can see this clearly in the character of Bill Kilgore. A hyperbolic and parodic character of archetypical John-Wayne⁴-cowboy attitude, which he carries along with the walk and the hat, Bill Kilgore is nearly carnivalesque in his enjoyment of the war, going to the point where he actually orders his men to surf during a firefight. Kilgore's radio nickname is "Big Duke" (0:37:21) showing how he is actually a hyperbolic parody of John Wayne, who was popularly known as the "Duke." Kilgore finds his equivalent in *Heart of Darkness* in the character of the manager, generally speaking an agent of the British colonization of Africa that Coppola has intertwined with the United States' intervention in Vietnam. They are managers of resources and men both native and foreign. In the novel, there is

⁴ Wayne co-directed and starred in his own Vietnam War movie *The Green Berets* (1968).

a certain quality of speech in the character of the manager that Coppola saw fit to bring over into the film:

... just after he said something it got intensified for an instant. It came at the end of his speeches like a seal applied on the words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable. (35)

This manner of speaking is present in Kilgore's characterization through dialogue rather than reference. At one point he says:

I love the smell of napalm in the morning...that smell; that gasoline smell; smells like (pause) victory. (longer pause) Someday this war's gonna end. (0:49:24-50:00)

Their similar way of speaking is where the equation between the manager and Bill Kilgore ends. The manager is described by Conrad as having "no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even" (35). Kilgore does not fit this profile at all, at least not when the physical aspect of organization, initiative and order is concerned. At another level, that of emotions, ideology, and coherence, there could not be anyone so disorganized as he is. Willard reflects on him afterwards:

"If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz, it wasn't just the insanity and murder, there was enough of that to go around for everyone." (51:00-11)

This can be easily answered and is actually answered by Willard himself later on "Kurtz had gotten off the boat; (0:56:23) "he could have gone for general, but he went for himself instead" (0:57:49-53). Kilgore can be better described by characteristics presented throughout *Dispatches*:

On operations you'd see men clustering around the charmed grunt that many outfits created who would take himself and whoever stayed close enough through a field of safety. (57)

A lot of people knew that the country could never be won, only destroyed, and they locked into that with breathtaking concentration... (59)

Kilgore presents this image of the "lucky grunt"⁵ with a tinge of irony and, oddly enough, nostalgia as he prepares barbecues for his men and they have a beach party right after a battle, Willard tells us (even though we can see it on the screen):

⁵ Popular nickname for an infantryman in Vietnam (Olson 511).

“they choppered in the T-bones and the beer and turned the LZ into a beach party; the more they tried to make it like home, the more they made everybody miss it.” (0:32:04-16)

“He was one of those guys who had a weird light around him, and you knew he wasn’t gonna get so much as a scratch here.” (0:32:35-40)

He is presented then as a “warrior-poet in the classic sense”⁶ (i.e. in terms of rape, pillage, and plunder, and then drink); he even has a trumpet man playing a cavalry charge as his helicopters take off for battle, alluding to old cowboy movies, which he parodies, and marking the tradition of the unit he leads, the Air Cavalry 1st of the ninth which, as Willard tells us “was an old cavalry division and it cashed in its horses for choppers and went tear-assing around Vietnam looking for the shit”⁷ (0:27:03-07). Although he might not be physically injured, his psyche is well beyond repair; it was like that, perhaps even before he got to Vietnam.

He also embodies the senseless destructive power that characterized the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War mainly with his nearly addicted affinity for napalm; at one point, he muses: “napalm son, nothing else in the world smells like that” (0:49:08-11). His destructive and antagonistic drive is also seen in his use of Richard Wagner’s overture “Ride of the Valkyries” as “psy ops” or psychological warfare. As he says, “It scares the hell out of the slopes,⁸ my boys love it!” Wagner’s opera, which serves the psychological purpose of scaring the Vietnamese and raising the morale of Kilgore’s men, is “a symbol of sexual energy channeled into militarism,” according to Bernard F. Dick (158). Dick points out that “Ride of the Valkyries” was originally used in association with the Third Reich and World War II in the film *Brute Force* (1947):

Had the same music been used in a WWII movie in which bombs rained down on German cities, American audiences would have applauded; in the light of the Vietnam debacle, however, “The Ride of the Valkyries” is accusatory rather than nationalistic. It is as if Coppola were accusing America of emulating Nazi Germany by invoking the spirit of Wagner to justify war. (Dick 158)

This theme of senseless and fallaciously nationalistic slaughter finds parallels in the other memorable songs from the film, such as The Doors’ “The End” which appears ironically during the opening sequence of the film, the Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t get no) Satisfaction,”

⁶ A term used by Dennis Hopper’s journalist-Kurtz-fan character to describe Kurtz.

⁷ Slang for battle.

⁸ Soldier slang term for the Vietnamese people, very pejorative.

and even the trumpeted cavalry charge. The association of music and war is discussed by Herr in *Dispatches* at one point:

...the war made a place for you that was all yours. Finding it was like listening to esoteric music, you didn't hear it in any essential way through all the repetitions until your own breath had entered it and become another instrument, and by then it wasn't just music anymore, it was experience. Life-as-movie, war as (war) movie, war-as-life; a complete process if you got to complete it, a distinct path to travel, but dark and hard, not any easier if you knew that you'd put your own foot on it yourself, deliberately and—most roughly speaking—consciously. (65)

This search for a place all his own is perhaps what Kilgore tried and failed to achieve with the barbecuing and the surfing. The voices of the soldiers and their actions have become an instrument of this overture of violence. These soldiers now embody the spirit of rape and aggression that Dick attributes to Wagner's music, which was coincidentally composed only a half century before Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*.

Another aspect of Kilgore is provided by the cinematography of the film itself. From the first time we see him on screen, Kilgore is consistently seen on the right side of the plane, almost always on the extreme right or walking from left to right (with one or two very brief exceptions). On one occasion he is seen walking from the right of the plane to the left, but the camera shies from him, scanning away, keeping him effectively stranded on the right, and stopping only when he does, leaving him again on the right corner of the plane. This is a visual representation of the static, stubborn nature of the man and his extremist, right-wing, genocidal, and fascist tactics and inclinations, something that perfectly matches the Nazi motif established by the use of Wagner's piece. Ironically, World War II is said to have been the beginning of the post-colonial era and through the Vietnam War, the United States embodied to a certain extent the imperialist regime that it fought in Europe during World War II, something that is clearly seen in the film through its connection with the anti-imperialistic, although Eurocentric, content of *Heart of Darkness*.

The combination of fiction and fact is the main goal of the film, but it is also indicative of the relationship that film as a whole may have with literature as well as with history. 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. He also avoids ignoring any venue for significance or meaning that may arise from the combination of so many elements into the project. There have been several commentaries made on the part of literary and film critics on *Apocalypse Now*. James Monaco has this to say about the film:

...*Apocalypse Now* (1979), a stunningly conceived and elegantly filmed attempt to wring some meaning out of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* set in the context of the Vietnam War. Critics and audiences seemed to agree that the attempt was not successful. Despite its vividly felt metaphors of the American experience in Vietnam—perhaps because of its brilliantly constructed images and sounds—*Apocalypse Now* doesn’t seem to tell us very much about Vietnam. (295)

There are, however, a few things amiss here, in Monaco’s appreciation of the film. Firstly, there is no mention here of *Dispatches*, whose contribution to the film I have demonstrated and of which I have provided only a few examples of the many that can be found. Secondly Monaco, as many other critics who turn their attention to the Vietnam War and the literature and film that it produced, talks about the exploration of the American “malaise” and “experience” in the war. This comment, besides being wholly ethnocentric and marginalizing also undermines the transcendence of *Apocalypse Now* as an exploration of humanity (or the lack thereof), war as a living, ugly thing, and of the extremes of human psyche and behavior. Monaco’s reference to the film as unsuccessful is then not only ill informed but also misinformed in terms of both literary criticism as well as film. His attribution of this failure to the “brilliantly constructed images and sounds” that *Apocalypse Now* features shows how superficially he has interpreted the film in light of the few examples we have seen from the many more present in the texts. W.D. Ehrhart quotes General Kinh Chi: “If only American policymakers had taken the time to learn what every Vietnamese schoolchild knows, how very different might have been the course of the past 40 years” (67). It would seem then that this applies to critics as well. On the other hand Cedric Watts explains the relation between *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, which Monaco treats rather offhandedly. Responding to Simon’s (op. cit.) comment on the dramatization of fiction, he observes:

Apocalypse Now (1979) almost solved the problem by being a film

on rather than of a Conradian text: a spectacular transposition of much of 'Heart of Darkness' from the Congo of c. 1890 to the Vietnam War c. 1970: a selective magnification of the surrealist and ruthlessly prophetic aspects of the original. (41)

To this we might only add the "word-photography" and experience-memory of *Dispatches*, the other original text to this original film. Watts' commentary rectifies two of Monaco's assumptions about the film: first that the film is *about* the Vietnam War, which it is only as much as it is about *Heart of Darkness* or this novel is *about* the colonization of Congo; and secondly that it can *tell* us something about the war which it does by *showing* us more than anything else, concepts which Monaco misconstrues entirely.⁹

Apocalypse Now bridges the gap between literature and history by "transposing" *Heart of Darkness* with the Vietnam War through the incorporation of images, narrative, and discourse provided by Herr in *Dispatches*. This validates the seminal connection between the fictional yet anti-colonialist literary landscape of *Heart of Darkness* and the factual, anti-war, and physical history cast in *Dispatches*, providing us with a critical background for understanding the reality of the Vietnam War as presented in literature and film. Both works lead invariably through the wasteful, nihilistic, and sacrificial extremes represented by the abuse of political and military power in the search for an empire's well-being and its ignorance and lack of identification with the humanity of cultural others, which lead as both Kurtzes, Marlow, and Willard realize, to individual dehumanization, the true major theme of all three works.

German E. Vargas
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
United States of America

⁹ It is also befitting to comment that Monaco expects the film to tell us something about Vietnam. Whether he is referring to the country or the War with the United States is unclear, but I suspect that the latter is the case and so it should be referred to as the Vietnam War; 'Vietnam' is a country, not an event.

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