Bellarmine University
ScholarWorks@Bellarmine

Undergraduate Projects | Undergraduate Works

12-2020

How Apocalypse Now Adapts Heart of Darkness’s Imperialist Critique to a New Medium and a Different Culture

Samuel Battle
Bellarmine University, samueldavidbattle@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bellarmine.edu/ugrad_projects

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Battle, Samuel, "How Apocalypse Now Adapts Heart of Darkness’s Imperialist Critique to a New Medium and a Different Culture" (2020). *Undergraduate Projects*. 2.
https://scholarworks.bellarmine.edu/ugrad_projects/2

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Works at ScholarWorks@Bellarmine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Bellarmine. For more information, please contact jstemmer@bellarmine.edu, kpeers@bellarmine.edu.

Samuel Battle

Dr. Conor Picken

ENGL-450-01

December 2, 2020

How *Apocalypse Now* Adapts *Heart of Darkness*'s Imperialist Critique to a New Medium and a Different Culture

Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* remains one of the most widely beloved films about the Vietnam War ever made. Its depiction of the war is a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, which was set in the Congo during the African slave trade of the 19th century. The unconventional creative decision to shift the setting to Vietnam in 1968 is not as far out as it may initially seem, as Coppola chooses to translate Conrad's symbols and core themes of madness and darkness to a different medium. Among the most significant alterations stemming from the adaptation process is the story's protagonist: the original novella intimately focuses on the personal thoughts of Marlow as he tells his story, while the film version shifts the focus away from his equivalent Willard and towards the chaos that surrounds him throughout his journey. Both stories critique imperialism common to their respective time periods in ways that rely on their medium's form: *Heart of Darkness* has Marlow voice his horror and disdain upon seeing African slavery in his narration, while *Apocalypse Now* paints wartime American imperialism in Vietnam with a nightmarishly absurd brush using music and editing techniques. While both stories center on the same themes of madness and human capacity for darkness, Coppola's adaptation illustrates how little had changed in the decades

since Conrad's novella was published and puts more emphasis on criticizing America's armed forces for their continued cruelty in warfare.

To set the stage in more detail, *Heart of Darkness* is about a sailor named Charles Marlow recounting a trip he took down to the distant ivory trading post of one Mr. Kurtz, who is repeatedly shown to have charmed many of the people he has worked with. Upon reaching his destination, Marlow finds that Kurtz has actually gone mad and created a cult amongst the natives, installing himself as their deity figure. By contrast, *Apocalypse Now* revolves around Captain Ben Willard, who is given a classified mission to find and assassinate Colonel Kurtz, who has gone AWOL and become an enemy of the American military. Kurtz's madness and cult are still present in the adaptation, though his followers now include fellow American soldiers. In both versions, the story concludes with the demise of Kurtz and the protagonist taking their leave from his compound. This basic outline is treated significantly differently by Conrad and Coppola, with the latter altering with abandon the characters, setting, and nuances from the former's original work.

In comparing the source material and adaptation, it is imperative to begin by thoroughly establishing the fundamental common ground the novella and film share. The overall plot structure, wherein the main character takes a crew on a journey down a river in a foreign country to find Kurtz, makes the transition intact. Also, as noted by literature and film scholar Linda Cahir, there are three primary stops the characters make in both stories that are tied to an increasing prevalence of madness, building up to Kurtz's compound as both the destination and the summit of this strange darkness (183). In addition, both versions prominently utilize sound to illustrate the darkness that the protagonist witnesses, albeit in vastly different ways. As Conrad critic Annika J. Lindskog explains, Marlow's narration in *Heart of Darkness* frequently describes

the African jungle as being unrealistically silent aside from manmade noises (47), which she interprets as a concerted "resistance to sensory input" (44) that functions as a microcosm of his futile struggle against the darkness he finds in the Congo (55, 58). By contrast, *Apocalypse Now* frequently plays music and noise like the din of combat, associating them with American soldiers – keeping the thematic ties to humanity's darkness and directly tying it to the film's overarching critique of American imperialism. Even though their respective approaches to depicting the darkness intrinsically tied to imperialism differ radically, both stories still share a "splendidly similar" narrative (Cahir 182).

Another area where *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* share crucial similarities is in their protagonists' developing fascination of Kurtz, which both narratives set up very early on. Conrad's novella establishes this plot thread before the story itself even begins, as Marlow mentions the "fascination of the abomination" (4). This foreshadows his mounting fixation on meeting Kurtz, which is developed further as the narrative progresses – for instance, he finds himself feeling disappointed at the possibility that "[he] would never hear him" (Conrad 34). Of course, this is also one of the earliest hints that Kurtz himself is a deeply reprehensible character. Meanwhile, in *Apocalypse Now*, Willard directly outlines the parallels between Colonel Kurtz and himself by proclaiming that "there is no way to tell his story without telling my own" (Coppola) – a facet of the original novella's plot that originally took some time to become apparent. This trait is one of the few things Marlow and Willard have in common with each other, and it helps keep the adaptation tethered to the core concepts of its source material.

Speaking of the original novella, *Heart of Darkness* structures its message around the development of Marlow, creating a personal narrative that communicates Conrad's critique of imperialism. Conrad critic Wallace Watson succinctly describes his arc as a "sensible and

sensitive sailor [who] undertook the Congo journey largely on a boyish whim" (37), only to unexpectedly encounter horrors that leave lasting scars upon his psyche. The written form of the story allows Marlow to explicitly articulate his thoughts, which becomes especially apparent when he makes his first stop on the Congo river. Seeing a great many Africans being forced to work on a project that appears to be fruitless, he is "horror-struck" (Conrad 12) by the sight of people being reduced to "black shadows of disease and starvation" (Conrad 12) through no fault of their own. Moments like these are key to reshaping his worldview: while he grew up implicitly subscribing to a romanticized view of visiting the unknown, as indicated by his childhood anecdote about his fascination with the then-mysterious lands of Africa (Conrad 5), he bluntly appraises European imperialism as "taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (Conrad 4) after his journey. Marlow becomes the novella's primary method of criticizing imperialism as immoral, with his personal moral development forming the backbone of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole (Watson 38).

Another important facet of Conrad's rhetorical approach is the role Marlow plays in the structure of the novella's narration. The narrative begins by setting up the frame story, where an unnamed narrator listens to Marlow talk about his journey to Kurtz while sitting aboard his ship in the River Thames. In effect, this means that the bulk of the story is told through two layers of lenses, with the unnamed narrator serving as a conduit for Marlow. On the surface, the former largely recedes into the background and does not appear to color Marlow's own point of view in any appreciable way. However, the few occasions where he resumes control of the narration show that he is both a mirror of Marlow's arc and an important asset in Conrad's statements on madness, darkness, and European imperialism.

To be more precise, Marlow begins *Heart of Darkness* after having already gone through his character development to contrast with the naivety of the unnamed narrator. As the literary scholar Seymour L. Gross explains, the latter takes in the placidness of the River Thames and describes the scenery primarily through light-based imagery, indicating his innocence (169). It also serves as an "ironic prologue" (Gross 169) for Marlow's very first line, where he proclaims that the river is "also […] one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 3). This narrator's perception begins to shift as Marlow tells his tale, beginning to feel "faint uneasiness" (Conrad 20) some time after Marlow recounts the episode where he saw the heinously poor conditions under which slaves worked. This occurs in tandem with the sun going down, leaving the narrator unable to see Marlow at all, which Lindskog ties to Marlow's own narration describing Kurtz as nary more than a voice (57-58). She goes on to describe this as evidence that Kurtz's darkness "contaminated" Marlow, which then spread to the unnamed narrator by proxy – the story provides a "'glimpse of truth', whether asked for or not" (Lindskog 58).

Lindskog's phrasing is indicative of Conrad's mode of discourse – he uses the first narrator as a representative for his audience, gleaning wisdom from Marlow's tale. The prose itself is critical to imparting his message, as Marlow's word choice and conspicuous omissions reinforce the broader message about how all of humanity is capable of carrying out unspeakably dark behavior. Conrad stresses that this applies to even people who are considered "civilized", tying into his criticism of European imperialism as utterly immoral. The conclusion of the framing story suggests the commonality between Africa and Europe on a subtler level: as Lindskog puts it, "Marlow's story has thus brought the darkness and the corruptive force of the wilderness into the heart of the civilized world, and into the life of the frame narrator" (58). This twisted enlightenment also bears a metatextual element, as described by Gross – the first narrator

reaches a higher level of understanding by listening to Marlow tell his story, which "demonstrates Conrad's faith in the moral efficiency of experience through literature" (170). This metatextual emphasis on the story itself is something that is specific to the written word; in other words, the message of *Heart of Darkness* is largely dependent on its medium.

Apocalypse Now features a significantly different protagonist who is comparatively less involved in conveying the film's message. While Willard still provides monologues via voice-over, an approximation of Marlow's lengthy narration, they are given far less emphasis than in *Heart of Darkness*. This is a natural byproduct of the process of adapting the story to film, which necessitates translating written imagery into visuals. All the same, in various important scenes, his presence is somewhat diminished – Watson notes his reduced role in the three major stops on his journey, though "he still functions there to some extent as an implied reference point, and he does have a comment after each of these episodes" (36). The soldiers he travels with are given more pronounced character arcs as they grow increasingly frustrated with Willard's mission and end up profoundly affected by deaths among their group, making Willard himself come across as a borderline neutral entity.

On the subject of character arcs, one key difference between Willard and Marlow is that the former has already become traumatized by imperialism – not outright colonization like the kind Conrad attacked, but rather the less direct imperialism that American forces enacted in Vietnam. Coppola makes ample use of the audiovisual aspects of his medium in establishing his protagonist's PTSD: the very first shot in the entire film holds on an image of a jungle that is rocked by an aerial attack from nearby helicopters, with the only sound being the relatively calm song "The End" by the Doors (timed such that the vocals near-perfectly coincide with the initial explosion). This already dissonant scene partially fades into a close-up of Willard's face as he

lies down in his hotel room, overlaying a variety of shots depicting more helicopters laying siege to the jungle. This sequence is important for several reasons: in addition to establishing the sense of unease the film creates through deliberately mixing clashing tones together, it indirectly depicts Willard's memory of events from earlier in the war. The rest of the scene makes his trauma undeniably clear: after monologuing about his inability to find peace either at home or during his service, he ends up drunkenly punching a mirror and gruesomely injuring his hand as "The End" crescendos.

While *Apocalypse Now* characterizes its protagonist as already having been traumatized by "the horror" (Watson 37), American studies scholar John Hellmann posits that Coppola uses his PTSD to place him in a different role that is specifically suited to the medium of film. Specifically, Hellman's argument is that the director plays on the viewers' understanding of the hardboiled detective genre, which was well-established in American cinema by the late 1970s, and uses Willard to subvert its conventions and further his "investigation of both American society […] and American idealism […] in Vietnam" (431). On the surface, Willard resembles the typical protagonist of the genre in his gruff voiceover – Watson describes him as predominantly "grunting in the terse amoral clichés of pulp detective fiction" (37). However, his trauma has tipped over from mere "tormented purpose" into outright self-destructive behavior (Hellman 432), as evidenced by his alcohol-induced self-harm. In this interpretation, Willard's arc is "Vietnam forcing the hard-boiled detective hero into the investigation of his unconscious" (Hellmann 435) through which the film suggests that the "moral idealism" of the Vietnam War is an empty falsehood – a far cry from the conventions of detective films, which uses the moral ideal as its unchallengeable core (Hellmann 435). Therefore, Coppola synthesizes subverting pre-existing audience expectations with his criticism of the immortality of the war (and

American imperialism by proxy) in a manner that is only possible because of cultural context surrounding film in particular.

On the subject of the adaptation process, the shift away from *Heart of Darkness*'s layered narrators deeply affects *Apocalypse Now*'s mode of discourse. While the first, unnamed narrator in Conrad's novella functions partially as a stand-in for the reader, there is no such character in Coppola's film. This is part of why the adaptation seems less personal – the first narrator's increasingly intimate understanding of Marlow's worldview was a critical aspect of how the novella disseminated its moral (Gross 169), something which is omitted in the transition from a figurative to a literal lens for the story. As a result, *Apocalypse Now* lacks a character that anchors the audience to reality as the plot begins to delve into surreal, increasingly nightmarish territory – it simply leaves viewers to fend for themselves. While both stories center around madness, this change is why Coppola's adaptation feels significantly more dreamlike and surreal.

Furthermore, the film replaces the novella's emphasis on Marlow's interiority with a focus on the external chaos surrounding him. There are several notable scenes where chaotic and grim scenes of warfare are contrasted with black comedy that comes across as disharmonious, none more striking than when Willard and company first arrive to meet with the Air Cavalry. Colonel Kilgore is more concerned with the quality of the waves in the area than he is with ensuring the area is safe from the enemies currently attacking it. In this and many other sequences, the film's soldiers are excessively cavalier about taking other people's lives, particularly the Vietnamese (the same scene culminates in two soldiers attempting to surf while under enemy fire). In general, Coppola presents America's contributions to the Vietnam War in an absurd and subtly surreal manner, parodying the illogical decisions made by the country's officials and soldiers during the conflict. While *Heart of Darkness* has Marlow explicitly voice

his thoughts upon seeing an unusual character – like asking himself "whether I had ever really seen him – whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon" (Conrad 47) after meeting a fanatical follower of Kurtz – *Apocalypse Now* instead leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable and confused by following up these bizarre events with little to no commentary from Willard.

This prevailing lack of clarity is another trait that the film inherits from *Heart of Darkness* and expands dramatically in adapting Conrad's story. Many studies of the novella stem from its muddled depictions of race, imperialism, and madness – for example, Conrad scholar Nisha Manocha's 2014 article about the author's deliberate use of ambiguous language as a means of subverting predominant cultural attitudes towards Africa. Since *Apocalypse Now* has several different intrinsic aspects of film to work with (primarily audio, camera movement, and editing), it uses them to construct a famously abstract and dream-life narrative that film critic Frank Tomasulo describes as full of "double binds and mixed messages" (153). For instance, he claims that the battle at "Charlie's Point" is shot and edited in an exhilarating manner so as to "glorify war and its godlike heroes" (Tomasulo 149) to the audience, even though its subject matter – the destruction of a Vietnamese village and its innocent inhabitants – would be tragic when viewed in any other light. Hellmann argues that Coppola uses this filtered lens as a means of depicting an abstract "hallucinatory self-projection of the American culture" (431) through Willard's journey, filming the scene so that the viewer would be put off by the dissonance between the cinematography and the actual content. Once again, *Apocalypse Now* utilizes its source material alongside tools that are unique to the medium of film to respond to contemporary cultural context and criticize America's involvement in the war.

Further evidence of Coppola's ambiguous presentation of the war can be seen in media critic Keith Solomon's article on the modern "spectacle of warfare". More specifically, he

analyzes how mass media and other visual depictions of contemporary armed combat have caused armed conflict to become a sensation in the eyes of the American public. *Apocalypse Now* is a natural subject for examination under this lens, given how it intentionally shows the Vietnam War in a sensationalized manner that is divorced from reality as part of its overarching theme of madness. However, Solomon implicates the film as a prime example of the deleterious effects it can have on people in real life, since the spectacular way it depicts violence threatens to overshadow the moral depravity associated with it. This is not an uncommon claim among film scholars – both Solomon and Tomasulo argue that Coppola is irresponsibly handling his subject matter, subjugating the tragedy he depicts in *Apocalypse Now* to aesthetic concerns.

The biggest challenge to Solomon and Tomasulo's common argument is that these early war sequences are made to look glamorous so that Coppola can start subverting this convention as the film goes on. It is understandable that scenes depicting morally troubling military action alongside bombastic music and flashy, oftentimes confusing camera movement can be interpreted as supportive of the war, but there are still subtle criticisms embedded in them. For example, the famous sequence where the war-mongering Colonel Kilgore plays "Ride of the Valkyries" as he begins to attack a Vietnamese village suggests Western imperialists forcing themselves upon a foreign nation without consent through his choice of song (which additionally hews back to the older tradition of European colonization). Starting around the time Willard's boat reaches the final stop on the river, the entertaining and relatively controlled chaos gives way to one that is overwhelming to the point where it ceases being enjoyable to watch. With bizarre music running the gamut from carnival-like to choir and constantly moving floodlights that leave roughly half the sequence shot in darkness, it exaggerates the spectacle so much that it interferes

with the audience's understanding of what is going on. This is fully intentional, being another example of Coppola playing on filmic tradition to criticize American forces in Vietnam.

In further addressing Solomon and Tomasulo's arguments, it is helpful to turn to primary sources to learn about Coppola's intentions for the film. In its initial release, as quoted by film scholar Marsha Kinder, he accompanied the film with the following statement: "I tried to illustrate as many of [the Vietnam War's] different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars" (13). In addition, at the Cannes Film Festival the year the film was released, he took a different rhetorical approach and described it as sufficiently embodying Vietnam in and of itself (Solomon 25). These statements do not necessarily preclude critiques of imperialism in Vietnam, though they do indicate that he intentionally made the film's presentation complex and multi-faceted. In a metatextual sense, this functions as a translation of the similar moral ambiguities in *Heart of Darkness* to the story's new setting in 1968, befitting the more intentional choices Coppola made in adaptation.

Going back to the critics who believed the film to be pro-war, their critiques tend to focus excessively on the pro-war veneer of *Apocalypse Now*, downplaying or ignoring the criticisms that lay underneath. For instance, Tomasulo argues that Willard's favorable opinion of Kurtz is meant to color the audience's views of him by proxy (150). This statement falters when one considers that one of Willard's earliest morally ambiguous actions – killing a wounded Vietnamese woman as the other soldiers attempt to stabilize her condition – comes across more as a signifier of his moral downfall and a parallel between him and Kurtz. While he rightly recognizes the multifaceted ambiguities in the film's portrayal of American imperialism in Vietnam, Tomasulo's assumption that the film criticizes the incompetency of the army's higher-ups rather than Kurtz's cruelty or the intent of the war itself (151) is deeply misguided. He

essentially misses the forest for the trees in his analysis, focusing excessively on specific facets of Coppola's narrative while ignoring others that put it in a much different context.

When it comes to criticism, both Conrad and Coppola's versions of the story have had their depictions of race extensively analyzed. This is hardly surprising: Western imperialism is inextricably tied to race (a result of the prejudice that fueled many nations' efforts to build an empire), so it plays a large role in the novella and film alike. *Heart of Darkness* has long been scrutinized for its depictions of African people as an alien "other", wholly separate from the European protagonists. While Conrad draws parallels between the two demographics that seem to upend the notion that Europeans are more civilized, proclaiming that "the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad 26) in light of their shared capacity for darkness, many scholars have found his efforts unconvincing in light of how frequently he paints them as "savages" in a dark and threatening land. Chinua Achebe is among the most famous of these critics; his seminal 1977 lecture claims that "the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry" (Achebe 2) is not only a common theme of *Heart of Darkness* but is something Conrad himself is terrified of.

Achebe is also deeply critical of Conrad's depiction of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, contending that they are shown as so backwards and threatening that it undermines any effort he puts towards criticizing imperialism (5). In this vein, he dismisses Marlow's horror at viewing mistreated slaves as "bleeding-heart sentiments" with little substance (Achebe 5). Achebe also counters those who argue that this unsavory perspective is deliberate, distanced from Conrad's actual views, and meant to reflect poorly on Marlow instead – he claims that Conrad "neglects to hint […] at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his character" (5). Understandably, part of the reason Achebe takes offense to this is because it

reflects common, longstanding ignorance towards Africa and its citizens, noting that its status as a classic of Western literature leaves it in a position to warp minds for generations to come (Achebe 9).

Achebe's article is one of the most important pieces of Conrad criticism ever made; naturally, many other critics have responded to it. Manocha provides an argument that complicates his claims by stating that Conrad drew upon the language used by contemporary writings about Africa in order to subvert them (34-37). He initially uses words like "darkness" and "light" in ways that underscore their emptiness in common imperialist rhetoric (Manocha 38), then conflates them such that they are "robbed of their moral significations" and cannot serve as "points of orientation for the ethical dilemmas that feature across Marlow's narrative" (Manocha 41) any longer. Manocha concludes this train of thought by noting that the "unresolved and dynamic tension" (41) this creates is responsible for Achebe's negative response to the novella's treatment of race. While it does not completely excuse Conrad's treatment of race in *Heart of Darkness*, it indicates that he was critical of imperialism and those who implicitly supported it – and that he was able to play on contemporary audiences' understanding of race in order to subvert them, a trait which Coppola would later play up in his adaptation.

Speaking of adaptation, *Apocalypse Now* effortlessly translates this racial tension to film, including the habit of othering Vietnamese natives by characterizing them as America's completely anonymous enemy. Solomon argues that the very fabric of the film accentuates the distance between the viewers and the non-white characters: the film never wavers from the viewpoint of the characters in America's army, meaning that any opportunity to humanize their enemies is lost (27). The issue with this claim is that the film's impersonal tone is not exclusive to the Vietnamese characters – as explained earlier, it affects nearly the entire cast because of the

lack of an anchor for the audience to directly relate to. Coppola plays up and then subverts the conventions of traditional war films, including their tendency towards nationalism and clearly defined heroes and villains across country lines – his criticisms of American imperialism and subjugation of Vietnamese natives are given a deceptively glamorous veneer. Furthermore, Willard's journey implies that race is irrelevant under a lens that is more focused on the broader theme of humanity's shared capacity for darkness – reinforced by the prevalence of both natives and American soldiers in Kurtz's cult.

In fact, Kurtz is a symbol of the logical extreme of imperialism in both stories – the leader of an irrational, disturbing cult that exposes just how hollow the common justifications of colonization really are. To begin with, the simple fact that he has a cult recalls the religious fervor that was traditionally frequently used to justify imperialist efforts. While Conrad's novella makes this aspect more pertinent, since it criticizes European colonization that was commonly motivated by a desire to spread Christianity, Coppola still plays on it by using Kurtz's baldness to visually draw parallels to the Buddha (Kinder 17). On the flip side, it also parodies this drive by switching out the ostensibly noble goal of proselytizing in unfamiliar lands to making the land's people subservient to the messenger instead. Naturally, this analogy then insinuates that traditional colonization was, at its core, driven not by morality but by a selfish desire to take over (and mine the land for goods, in the original novella's case).

In *Heart of Darkness*, not only does Kurtz serve as a twisted parallel to the European lust for conquest, but his parallels to Marlow are played up in a few critical ways. As mentioned before, Marlow's childhood fascination with Africa as an X-factor is the beginning of a thread that runs throughout the plot and climaxes with Kurtz subjugating Africans for his own benefit. This development parallels the progression of the slave trade, beginning with the ostensibly

innocuous goal of exploring the unknown world and gradually declining into inhumane treatment of people with differently colored skin. This broad topic is filtered through Marlow's progressive understanding of this cruelty in the ivory trade on the Congo, helping it work on a less abstract and more personal level. As Lindskog puts it, Marlow fears the darkness that Kurtz represents because it illuminates "aspects of himself that he would have preferred to ignore" (45). Therefore, the links between the two characters illuminate the core of Conrad's message: no one is completely exempt from the darkness common in the human heart.

In adapting this plot thread to *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz's cult seems out of place when shifted to the context of the Vietnam War. While the conceit of Kurtz rounding up people and managing to beguile them into forming a cult centered on himself is already a rather far-fetched one, it makes slightly more sense in the context of an ivory trader getting lost and resorting to cut-throat tactics than it does an army member who has been traumatized by his time fighting for his country. More importantly, *Heart of Darkness* engages with the concept of outright slavery in its setting, meaning that Kurtz going mad and subjugating several Africans comes across much more clearly as a demented take on a concept frequently reiterated beforehand. Of course, it should be remembered that *Apocalypse Now* traffics in the absurd and the symbolic, which means that this plot point can be adapted without much trouble. Moreover, the cult's depiction bestows new meaning upon it as a parallel for the Vietnam War itself: an exercise in imperialism that soon spiraled out of control and became a grotesque mockery of its original intentions. While the film draws parallels between Willard and Kurtz more subtly than the source material, it makes up for it by emphasizing the symbolic value of the latter.

Case in point, Coppola emphasizes Kurtz's symbolic value as the ultimate end point of imperialism through the photojournalist that appears as one of his most fervent acolytes. This

character is a stinging attack on mass media's ability to amplify the spread of dangerous movements or ideologies. A previous scene where a cameraman attempts to make soldiers in an ongoing battle look more appealing for the news sets up this theme, but it only flourishes near the end of the film. The excessive number of cameras the journalist has around his neck is also a visual indication of his status as a symbol, figuratively keeping his enraptured lens on the cult at all times. In addition, he also adapts Conrad's implicit disdain for contemporary writers' distorted views of Africa in a nontraditional manner – instead of promoting the ideals that perpetuate imperialism, he promotes a symbol of imperialism at its most extreme instead. In short, he goes hand in hand with the film's absurdist depiction of the Vietnam War and extends Coppola's critique past American soldiers in the Vietnam War, encompassing their apologetics as well.

Heart of Darkness and *Apocalypse Now* are very complex works of literature and film, respectively. While they predominantly criticize forms of imperialism that were prevalent during their respective time periods, they also engage with much broader themes and subject matter in the process. In particular, Coppola's film responds to American imperialism, the overarching theme of madness and darkness, the sensationalism of violence in mass media, the audience's expectations (set by previous films in similar genres), and Conrad's novella all at once. This is part of why *Apocalypse Now* is often said to seem conflicted about whether it supports or opposes the war, among other basic components of its message. In the end, though, it preserves Conrad's message about the moral depths that humanity can descend to and proves his core themes to be timeless. In fact, this is part of why its critique of American imperialism comes across as so pointed, as it implicitly expresses frustration with how little has changed in the decades between the source text and the adaptation.

References

Achebe, C. (1975, February 18). *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*. Lecture presented in University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst. Retrieved December 2, 2020, from https://polonistyka.amu.edu.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/259954/Chinua-Achebe,-An-Image-of-Africa.-Racism-in-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness.pdf.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. "Narratological Parallels in Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and Francis Ford Coppola's 'Apocalypse Now.'" *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1992, pp. 181–187.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.

Coppola, Francis Ford, director. *Apocalypse Now*. Omni Zoetrope, 1979.

Gross, Seymour L. "A Further Note on the Function of the Frame in 'Heart of Darkness'.'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1957, pp. 167–170.

Hellmann, John. "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in *the Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*." *American Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1982, pp. 418–439, doi:10.2307/2712690.

Kinder, Marsha. "The Power of Adaptation in 'Apocalypse Now.'" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1979, pp. 12–20, doi:10.2307/1211972.

Lindskog, Annika J. "'It Was Very Quiet There': The Contaminating Soundscapes of 'Heart of Darkness.'" *The Conradian*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 44–60.

Manocha, Nisha. “The Readable Across ‘Heart of Darkness.’” *The Conradian*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 31–43.

Solomon, Keith. “The Spectacle of War and the Specter of ‘The Horror.’” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2007, pp. 22–31, doi:10.3200/jpft.35.1.22-31.

Tomasulo, Frank P. “The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Pro-War and Anti-War Film.” *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, edited by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1990, pp. 145–158.

Watson, Wallace. “Willard as Narrator: A Critique and an Immodest Proposal.” *Conradiana*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 35–40.