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"HEART OF DARKNESS" AND „APOCALYPSE NOW” – SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT ADAPTATION

This paper was inspired by a review of *Apocalypse Now*. In it the film is labelled "the unofficial screen version of *Heart of Darkness*".¹ This is not by far the first case when Coppola's film is discussed in connection with Conrad's novella², however it is representative of a common view concerning the relationship between these two works. Whenever such a connection is made the film is treated as a modern, weaker version of Conrad's masterpiece and its value is depreciated. Such an approach raises the question whether it is fair to the film's director and whether the film is indeed an adaptation of the novella. The issue of adaptation shall be discussed in view of possibilities of transmutations of dissimilar semiotic systems as understood by Hopfinger and the approaches to adaptation presented by Hopfinger, Helman and Hendrykowski.

The language of fiction and film are two separate semiotic systems. From the technical point of view, it is impossible to fully transmute one system of signs into another due to the fact that each system uses different material and is structured differently. Motion pictures cannot be fully translated into verbal utterances.³ Similarly, written language cannot be fully represented by pictures and sounds without any change of meaning. Even though research has been done to find parallels between the natural language with its alphabet, grammar and hierarchical structure and the language of film with its shots, scenes, phrases and editing respectively, it is concluded that regardless of analogies the exact transmutation of one system into another is impossible.⁴

¹ K. J. Zarębski: *Czas Apokalipsy*, Gazeta Telewizyjna (2001) 22: 11.

² The two most critical studies of both works seem to be: Pinsker's *Heart of Darkness through Contemporary Eyes, or What's Wrong with Apocalypse Now* and Watson's *Willard as Narrator (A Critique and an Immodest Proposal)*.

³ See: A. Helman: *O dziele filmowym. Materiał–technika–budowa*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie 1981.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31–55; B. Lewicki: *Wprowadzenie do wiedzy o filmie*: Wrocław, Ossolineum 1964, p. 105–149 discussing the film as a semiotic system.

The language of film is generally much more concrete than the written word. Expressions such as those used by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*: "inconclusive experience", "something ominous in the atmosphere", "a queer feeling", cannot be fully presented through sounds and pictures. On the other hand, even seemingly concrete descriptions, for example of the kind: he saw someone get into the dwelling, cannot be presented by the filmmaker without any changes. The film director has to make some decisions concerning "the someone" and "the dwelling" (appearance, movement, sex). The film image becomes very detailed and provides more information than the verbal utterance. The filmmaker has no choice but to provide all the information at once, while the writer may gradually provide certain elements that finally build up the whole. The writer, then, can use the written word in two ways: to provide and emphasise necessary details, or to eliminate what is unnecessary. The language of film also enables one to draw attention to minute detail, through a close-up technique, for example. It is more difficult in a film, however, to avoid unnecessary information that has no immediate bearing on the film. But it is normally the director's decision what to include in the shot. So when Conrad makes his narrators speak about "abominable terrors" or "unspeakable rites" he actually provides a fertile field for the reader's imagination. It is the reader who is to visualise the indescribable. In contrast, Coppola decides to show the unspeakable rites with all details and leaves nothing to the viewer's imagination.

Intersemiotic transmutation may be understood as the translation of meanings of a message expressed in one semiotic system, in such a way that the meanings of the translated message in another semiotic system are identical.⁵ This can be achieved through the use of the most appropriate signs of the other semiotic system and the best combination of them. As far as two distinct semiotic systems are concerned there can be three levels of such translation.⁶ The first level embraces the constructive elements of two systems; in the case of literature – signs of natural language, in the case of film – moving phono-photographs. This level is untranslatable, as it is the basis for the distinctiveness of the two systems. The second level embraces the constructive element and its meaning. It pertains to the meanings directly connected with the attributes of the constructive elements of literature and film. This level is partly translatable, as it is only partly possible to translate the meanings directly contained in words and pictures. The third level embraces culturally conditioned meanings, that is the meanings that are indirectly connected with the constructive element and are not necessarily connected with one semiotic system only. This level is translatable because culturally conditioned meanings can be expressed in different systems

⁵ See: M. Hopfinger: *Adaptacje filmowe utworów literackich. Problemy teorii i interpretacji*. Wrocław, Ossolineum 1974.

⁶ Ibidem.

of signs. In this view of intersemiotic transmutation, expressing literature through the language of film is only partly possible.

Interpreting words or even sentences as a sequence of pictures and sounds is meaningless and useless. Some situations or objects may be expressed both through the written word and motion pictures. A jungle described by a writer may be filmed in such a way that the screen version will perfectly fit the original. However, it would be much more difficult, and at times impossible, to imitate a particular writer's style of writing through the use of the camera. The trees may look the same, but the feeling about the two jungles may not be. Conrad's descriptions, especially those pertaining to the jungle are very powerful and eerie. They provide a special quality of gloominess and even terror. The first description of the jungle sets up the framework which suggests that Marlow's experience in the jungle is to be of a very strange, almost mystical, kind:

"There it is before you – smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering. Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist".⁷

The choice of verbs, the colours, the simile, the metaphor create a very vivid image in which there are hidden hints suggesting the mystery and the profundity of what is to happen. Coppola's jungle only once becomes so sinister (when Willard and Chef leave the boat and walk through the forest when a tiger suddenly attacks them). When shown from the perspective of the boat, the jungle resembles a holiday advertisement.

Adaptation is a particular kind of translation of one work into another. Since in the case of film and fiction such translation is only partly possible due to the limitations of intersemiotic transmutation, adaptation is rather the interpretation of a work of fiction through the language of film.⁸ Consequently, adaptation is a film which presents an interpretation of the work of fiction as understood by the film director. This means that there may exist several adaptations of the same work, and each of them may be different, as each is a vision and understanding of the novel by a particular director. Helman's view of adaptation differs from the one presented above. She believes that adaptation is not a translation at all because different kinds of art are untranslatable; yet she admits that there is some link between the original novel and the film based on it.⁹ This link embraces the themes present both in a film and in a book. She stresses that adaptation imprisons the work of fiction and puts it into a frame of "the here and now" and thus

⁷ J. Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd. 1983, p. 40.

⁸ Such an understanding of adaptation is presented in Hopfinger's work (1974).

⁹ See: A. Helman: *Adaptacje filmowe dzieł literackich jako świadectwa lektury tekstu*. Kino (1985) 4: 17–21.

takes its universality away. Undeniably each adaptation limits the work of fiction to one interpretation – that of a film director's. The reader re-reading the same novel may interpret it differently, may pay attention to different details and themes, may experience the work in various new ways. The possibilities of interpretation seen by one reader are vast, especially if one deals with very symbolic works, such as *Heart of Darkness*. Adaptation of a particular novel provides only one screen proposal. Obviously the viewer can still interpret the film in various ways, but it is the interpretation of the work which has already been interpreted by a vast range of people: director, actors, cameramen. Adaptation is also conditioned not only by the director's perspective, but also by the expectations of the audience for whom the film is made.

Adaptation is a complex problem also from a technical point of view. A film based on a novel has various limitations in comparison to the original. One of the most important is time. A full-time film usually does not last longer than two hours and within this period of time the film must show what happens in the novel sometimes over the span of many years. Consequently the film director must decide what to include in his film, and what episodes may be left out. Hendrykowski emphasises that the plot and the main characters are normally treated as the basic material for adaptation, which means that all other components of the novel, such as the author's digressions, minor characters, writer's style, tone and mood are practically eliminated.¹⁰

One of the advantages of adaptation is that the language of film may be in some cases much more expressive than the written word. The unity of picture, sound and music shown on a huge screen, when the audience sits in complete darkness may touch much deeper than a written description. Because a movie viewer is enclosed in a room, surrounded by darkness, all his senses are concentrated on the screen and speakers, and thus the observation of the movie by the viewer is very attentive. The portion of the motion picture consciously perceived by the viewer together with the previously selected material by the director help the viewer decipher and interpret the work. Besides, some adaptations are great works of art of filmmaking and should be appreciated as such, not only in comparison to the original stories.

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The question as to whether *Apocalypse Now* is an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* is an important one, as it gives direction for the interpretation and criticism of the film. Many times Coppola has been accused of not being faithful to the original story – supposedly *Heart of Darkness* – and of emasculating the novella. *Apocalypse Now* was not the first film inspired by Conrad's various works. Mazierska divides all the film adaptations of Conrad's works into three categories.¹¹ The first one includes the films in which

¹⁰ See: M. Hendrykowski: *Powinowactwa z wyboru*. Kino (1979) 7: 25–28.

¹¹ E. Mazierska: *Joseph Conrad i kino*. Twórczość (1991) 11–12: 175–178.

the directors followed the plot very closely, but ignored the spirit of the works. Hitchcock's *Secret Agent* follows neither the spirit nor the plot closely and thus belongs to the second category. The third category – in which the director does not actually follow the plot closely, but is faithful to the spirit of Conrad's work, contains only one film – *Apocalypse Now*.¹² Mazierska sees a victory in such an approach, but at the same time points to the difference between the respective plots, and hence contradicts Hendrykowski's view of adaptation. The lack of faithfulness is significant for the interpretation of the film. The very title of the film suggests that it is to be regarded as an independent work of art, only loosely connected with *Heart of Darkness*. Coppola did not title the film after Conrad's work. Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* are not mentioned as the basis for the film and are not mentioned in the film's credits (this is probably the reason why Zarebski labels it "unofficial"). On the contrary – the screenplay is based on the original story by Milius. It is a story about the Vietnam War, that Coppola believed would make a good film because of its battle scenes, helicopters, adventure, fast action.¹³ *Apocalypse Now*, then, is a film about the Vietnam War, and *Heart of Darkness* is a novella about the colonial Congo. In the traditional meaning of adaptation, as an interpretation and translation of a work of fiction from the written language into the movie language, it would be difficult to treat *Apocalypse Now* as a film version of *Heart of Darkness* (according to Hendrykowski's and Hopfinger's approaches, yet Helman's approach provides a basis for treating the film as the screen version of Conrad's novella as she talks about themes and ideas).

Undeniably these two works of art have much in common. Coppola admits that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* inspired him while making *Apocalypse Now*.¹⁴ Both works question morality, the problem of good and evil, the duality of the human soul. Not only do both artists raise similar moral dilemmas, but Coppola also follows some of Conrad's themes, employs similar characters, and directly quotes some passages from the novella. The characters apparently most obviously parallel include Marlow and Willard, Kurtz and Colonel Kurtz, Russian harlequin and American journalist. The scenes taken directly from the novella comprise the approach of the boat towards Kurtz's dwelling, the arrow attack, and the helmsman's death. And finally Colonel Kurtz utters the famous words first produced by Conrad's

¹² This opinion, however, is problematic. Conrad uses an oblique approach in rendering his philosophical tale. His wilderness is ominous and sinister. The film can be divided into two parts: scenes that deal directly with the Vietnam War and bring *Apocalypse Now* to the genre of action movies. At this level its spirit completely differs from the novella and the mood is rather close to a narcotic hallucination. The second part – dealing directly with Kurtz – changes the film into a metaphysical tale or a psychological movie. Yet Coppola, by explicitly showing what Conrad hides, removes his film from the spirit of the novella.

¹³ See: F.F. Coppola: *The Interview*. Film na Świecie (1980) 2/3: 6–21.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

Kurtz: "The horror! The horror!". Yet, even those similarities do not make Coppola's film an adaptation of Conrad's work, as there are certain important discrepancies in the seemingly parallel situations and characters.

Heart of Darkness was not the material on which Millius based his story. He did not interpret the novella and then write his version of it. What he produced was an independent story about totally different times, situations, and people. Coppola introduced many changes to the original story. Actually, he combined Millius's story with some of the ideas taken from *Heart of Darkness* to produce the screenplay. At the beginning these were only the motifs of the boat journey up the river and a mysterious character at the end of it. And then, gradually, *Heart of Darkness* made more and more of a strong impact both on the director and on the film. As Coppola admits, he did not even take the original screenplay with him to the location, but he did take *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁵ Then, while making the film, he shot the scenes and characters that were not included in the screenplay. One such was the character of Russian harlequin that Coppola changed into the journalist, which became the turning point in his work. Basically, Coppola realised that he could no longer use the screenplay as such. The film developed on location, the director being strongly influenced by *Heart of Darkness*. Yet even that moment cannot be treated as the point when Coppola decided to adapt the novella. That was never his intention. He drew heavily from *Heart of Darkness* as if from a source of ideas and inspiration. He used some of the themes to fit his own vision of the world, humanity and civilisation, and most importantly – the war.

It can be suggested that Conrad's work confused Coppola to such an extent that he started creating his film on the spot. Till the very end he was not sure what the ending of the film should be like. Actually, he made two different endings which only shows how unsure he was as to the final shape of his work and its meaning. He was haunted by two distinct phenomena: *Heart of Darkness* and the Vietnam War, or war as such. Both of them are equally present in the film, with the structural emphasis on Conrad's work and semantic emphasis on war absent from the novella. The film, then, is not a traditional adaptation in a sense that it does not utilise Conrad's written material and transmute it into the language of film to produce the same effects and meanings.

It is also arguable whether it is an interpretation of Conrad's work as seen through contemporary eyes and set in the contemporary world. Apart from some details and the construction of the plot, what the two works share is the vision of a human being situated in such a place and time that his inner instincts become the most vital forces running his life. Both works show a person in an extreme situation, in which he becomes a God-like creature who can do whatever he wishes to do. This context is used both in the novella and in the film to show the human dichotomy and what happens

¹⁵ Ibidem.

to a person when he lacks any restraints. However, duality of the human soul is a universal literary theme, which not surprisingly made its way into the art of filmmaking. Kurtz is not the first literary character who is given absolute freedom. Thus the parallelism of the main theme does not necessarily settle the question of adaptation.

The first level of meaning of the novella concerning a trip to the Congo is partly based on autobiographical material. At the corresponding level the film is a narrative concerning the Vietnam War, yet devoid of the influence of autobiographical material. Coppola did not even visit Vietnam. His film was shot in Cambodia. He did not experience the horror of the war himself (main theme) in the way Conrad experienced the touch of the African jungle and the exploitation of the Congo (corresponding main theme). While Conrad's fictional world is deeply rooted in his personal experience, Coppola's world is almost entirely a vision of his imagination.

If works of art are treated as certain messages, *Heart of Darkness* is anti-colonial and at times even anti-racial, while *Apocalypse Now* is strongly anti-war in its meaning. It may be argued that through their manifests both works show various negative workings of civilisation, an approach that would link them together. Yet Conrad concentrates on the inhumanity of human behaviour, while Coppola on the madness and stupidity of it.

Both works share a theme that can be broadly called "Kurtz". Conrad uses Kurtz to deal with the fall of a man destroyed by the clash of his European (civilised) origins and African reality. Colonel Kurtz represents a similar clash – between the American (civilised) and Asian reality. Both characters serve as a means of discussing the nature of evil and the lack of societal and human restraints and the effect of it. The crossing point of these two creations is their alienation in an extreme situation. But Coppola uses Kurtz mainly to show the effect of the war aggression upon the human being, its madness and cruelty. While Coppola's Kurtz deliberately refuses to obey any conventions and distances himself from civilised ways, Conrad's Kurtz seems to have been absorbed by the jungle irrespective of his conscious decisions.

Even though Kurtz provides one of the strongest links between the two works, this character, his environment and some key episodes concerning him are very much changed in the film. Congolese Kurtz is a dying man, whose physical deterioration mirrors the corruption of his soul. Colonel Kurtz, however, is portrayed as a very big man physically. His posture, movements and gestures give an impression of health and strength. These physical features emphasise his absolute power and cruelty. While Conrad's Kurtz is not strong enough to walk by himself and can only crawl in the grass in his attempt to escape from the whites and re-unite himself with the wilderness, the colonel is fully in charge of the events that happen on his territory. While Conrad's Kurtz is aware of the fatal state of his health, he still has no power to change it. He realises that he is dying, but his death is not what he wishes for, quite contrary to the colonel. Coppola's Kurtz is tired

of life. Being fully aware of Willard's intentions, not only does he allow his assassin-to-be to live, but also allows himself to be killed by him. It seems that the colonel is hollow inside and burnt out by his war experience but because he is not able to commit suicide he awaits a man like Willard to take this burden from him.

The difference in the physical shape and the state of health of the two Kurtzes amounts to a very different manner of their deaths and the meaning connected with them. Conrad's dying Kurtz is torn away from the grip of the wilderness by the civilisation represented by Marlow. Even though he tries to return to the savage way of life and tribal adoration that he has become a part of, he is "rescued" by Marlow. Marlow attempts to save Kurtz from becoming evil to the core and offers him a death in a more civilised environment – on the boat – rather than in the heart of darkness. Kurtz is taken away by force from the ones who would readily give their lives for him, just to die among those who feel only awe and contempt towards him. Yet this humiliation is a blessing for him. The quiet moments on the boat and the conversation with Marlow save his corrupt soul. So, it is Marlow's intervention, and not Kurtz's will that allows the later to recognise the horrors that he was capable of.

In comparison, the manner of Colonel Kurtz's death is totally different. Nobody is to save him from himself. The only outsider – Willard – comes with a very specific purpose, as an angel of death, whom Kurtz awaits. He welcomes his murderer, but before he lets Willard fulfil his mission, the colonel tries to open his soul before Willard in the attempt to explain his reasons for creating his evil kingdom. He feels that he can talk to his equal. A killer meets a killer. Until the very end, he is in control and he is the one who decides about the time of his execution. The only unknown is the manner of his death. He is slaughtered by Willard like an animal, which is emphasised by the parallel scene of the ritual slaughtering of the caribou performed by Kurtz's followers. His death is his personal decision and wish to end the surrounding madness.

Both works also share the theme of a boat journey up the river in search of Kurtz, which is most widely recognised as the factor determining the issue of adaptation. Captain Willard, the narrator of *Apocalypse Now*, is regarded as a film version of Marlow, one of the main narrators of *Heart of Darkness*. And since such comparison is made Willard is generally considered as a merely hollow image of Marlow¹⁶. Such a comparison is superficial. Both Marlow and Willard share something: they are first person narrators of their stories¹⁷. They also both participate in the boat journeys towards their

¹⁶ See: Watson: *Willard as Narrator (A Critique and an Immodest Proposal)*. Conradiana (1981)1: 35–40.

¹⁷ This statement is a generalisation, because in both works the narrative structure is complex. In *Heart of Darkness* there are two main narrators (the unnamed objective first person narrator and Marlow) and two secondary first person narrators (Russian and

respective Kurtzs, and comment on what they witness on the way. Here however, the parallelism between these characters ends. First of all, their motivation differs. Marlow travels to provide Kurtz with help, while Willard's mission is to kill Kurtz. For Marlow (who comes to Africa as an inexperienced young man) the journey is a self-discovery. He experiences two sides of his soul. As a result Marlow becomes a different person – richer in his knowledge of what a human being is capable of. His return to civilised ways marks his own alienation caused by his knowledge: "I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people [...] They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew".¹⁸

Willard can hardly undergo similar epiphanies. In place of a philosophical Marlow, Coppola presents Willard – a man who could not have changed as much as Marlow as a result of his journey towards Kurtz. When he begins his journey he is a professional soldier – a professional killer, already tainted by war and its evils. The horrors of war are by no means a novelty for him, which is clearly emphasised in the opening scene, when he is haunted by the war images. His mission to destroy Kurtz is not the first mission of this kind. The question asked by the colonel: "Are you a murderer?" is to remind Willard who he is when he is just about to judge Kurtz and his deeds.

Willard does learn something more about the war – that it is far easier to obey someone else's orders than to take responsibility himself. He also learns how Americans fight this war. It seems naive to believe that faced with various extreme situations he suddenly undergoes a profound change. He was chosen for the mission because he himself was a well-trained part of the war killing machinery. Willard's fury, outrage, disgust, surprise, contempt shown on his face are directed to the viewers. He is to represent the viewers' feelings rather than his own, as if he was the viewers' consciousness and eyes. If his surprise were to be treated literally he would not be credible. As someone who knows more about war than an ordinary soldier he would be artificial in his surprise at what he witnesses. Everything that he witnesses on the way to Kurtz is meant to be noticed and understood by the film recipients rather than to enlighten him.

From the technical point of view, the use of off-set narration by Willard is the best way to mirror Marlow's subjective point of view and provide a cinematic analogue of Conrad's narrative technique. Yet instead of sensitive, philosophical Marlow, Coppola as his narrator uses a cynical assassin. Undeniably such a choice of the narrator of the film shifts the profundity of meanings of the two works. Since Marlow and Willard are two totally diffe-

Kurtz). The narrative structure develops on three levels. In *Apocalypse Now* the narration develops on two levels: events narrated by Willard by means of voice-over narration and three independent episodes in which his voice-over narration disappears and only his face is showed to make him a witness of the events.

¹⁸ Conrad J.: *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd. 1983, p. 113.

rent people their reactions are different. While Marlow is always unsure of whether his behaviour was moral or not, whether his final lie was justifiable, Willard is rather cynical about any kind of morality and to quote Watson again: "Willard (is) grunting in the terse amoral clichés of pulp detective fiction."¹⁹

Willard and Marlow are dissimilar in their sensitivity and the ability to live the experiences of their lives again. Marlow's talk is full of excitement and terror, which is indicated by the unsteady flow of his narration: by his flash-ahead and returns, as if the image of Kurtz was so important that it simply intruded upon the order of the narrated events. Willard, on the contrary, never gets excited. His tone of voice is always composed and his relation of the war experience flows smoothly from one event to another without any indication that his restless mind needs to mention immediately the nightmare connected with Kurtz.

In the context of the film a philosophical narrator would be artificial. The visual images are so expressive that any philosophical remark would spoil their impact. There is no time for philosophy during war. The reflection is left for the viewer who is to draw conclusions about what he witnesses on the screen. Coppola's crude and cruel narrator complies well with the overall structure of the film. Because he knows war, he can only observe his immature and amateurish colleagues with cold irony. And thus, even though far from Conrad's complex narrator, Willard plays well his role as a storyteller.

Consequently, *Apocalypse Now* cannot be easily labelled the adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. It is not an adaptation as understood by Hopfinger since it does not interpret Conrad's work through the language of film. Coppola introduces episodes absent from the novella (most notably three monumental episodes: the helicopter attack on the Viet Cong village, the USO show, DoLung bridge defence) and does not follow Conrad's plot closely, which does not comply with Hendrykowski's emphasis on the importance of main characters and plot for adaptation. It also does not fully comply with Helman's view, as despite some similarities of the themes and ideas there exists a profound shift of meanings between the two works. As shown, the two most significant characters: Marlow and Kurtz differ from their screen counterparts. Thus, *Apocalypse Now* should be treated as an independent work of art created within the strong influence of Conrad's masterpiece and incorporating several elements of the novella, yet not as its adaptation. The subject matter of the film, its historical context and time are anything like these in the novella. Conrad's mastery in *Heart of Darkness* allowed for the creation of a jewel among films. However, this can shed its light only when it is analysed and enjoyed as a separate work of art and should not be depreciated comparisons.

¹⁹ See: Watson, op. cit, p. 37.