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# *Apocalypse Now*, Vietnam and the Rhetoric of Influence

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## *Abstract*

Readings of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) often confront the difficulty of having to privilege either its aesthetic context (considering, for instance, its relation to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1899] or to the history of cinema) or its value as a representation of the Vietnam War. In this paper, I will argue that viewing the film as a meditation on the nature and rhetoric of influence allows us to bridge this gap and provides us with valuable insights into both the film's aesthetic precursors and the circumstances of its historical setting. **Keywords:** *Apocalypse Now*; Vietnam; Rhetoric; Influence.

## *Resumo*

As leituras do filme *Apocalypse Now* (1979) de Francis Ford Coppola são muitas vezes marcadas pelo imperativo de escolher entre uma abordagem ao seu contexto estético (referindo, por exemplo, a relação do filme com a obra *Heart of Darkness* [1899], de Conrad, ou com a história do cinema) e uma análise do seu valor enquanto representação da Guerra do Vietname. Neste ensaio, irei defender que uma aproximação ao filme enquanto meditação sobre a natureza e a retórica da influência permite preencher esta lacuna e realçar aspetos fundamentais quer acerca dos precursores estéticos da obra, quer sobre as circunstâncias específicas do seu contexto histórico. **Palavras-chave:** *Apocalypse Now*; Vietname; Retórica; Influência.

**S**ince its release in 1979, the film *Apocalypse Now* has pulled film critics and cultural historians in distinct, and distinctly difficult to reconcile, directions, in an analytical tug-of-war that has little to do with disciplinary boundaries. One of these directions lies in the film's relationship to the Vietnam War, with questions ranging in nature from the specific to the general: What does the film tell us about the experience of Vietnam? How does it position itself ideologically with respect to the war? How indicative of general tendencies within American culture at large is Coppola's film? The other tendency points back toward the film's literary precursor, again with varying degrees of specificity: How closely does Coppola follow Conrad's narrative? How similar are the characters of Willard and Marlow? To what extent do late 20th century Cold War politics mirror, or diverge from, the colonial practices of the late 19th century? Though these questions, addressed individually, have provoked a variety of interesting responses, it strikes me that the film's relationship to both the historical phenomenon of Vietnam and to Conrad's novella is best approached by placing it in the context of a much more deeply-rooted set of political and cultural discourses

on the nature of influence, which attempt to respond to an array of concrete political, ethical and cultural questions. As we will see, the etymology of influence offers us a glimpse of the word's curious and compelling history, extending far beyond Conrad's troubling portrayal of European civilization's repression of, and surrender to, the shadowy forces at play along its equally shadowy boundaries, both geographical and ideological, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). But it is perhaps even more striking to consider how large a role these same ideo-etymological shimmerings played in shaping the American projection of, and reaction to, the events that unfolded in Southeast Asia (and other parts of the globe) starting in the late 1940s. Indeed, to a large extent, the US involvement in Vietnam, during both its early covert form (prior to 1964) and its later large-scale phase, can be traced back to the persistence and efficacy of public discourses on the nature and imagery of influence.

One of the key moments in the public molding of the situation in Vietnam prior to the war was the press conference delivered by Dwight D. Eisenhower on 7 April 1954. When questioned about the strategic importance of Indochina, Eisenhower discussed both the specific value of its raw materials and the potential "loss" of its people to another Communist dictatorship before turning to its wider implications:

Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences. (Eisenhower, 1960: 382-83)

Eisenhower's now famous domino theory was an offshoot of Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson's policy of containment—namely, to keep communism geographically circumscribed by providing assistance to any country it threatened—a policy that resulted in the channeling of US financial aid to Turkey and Greece in 1947. Common to Eisenhower's domino theory and Truman's containment policy are two interrelated elements: 1) a sense of American democracy as occupying a relatively delicate position within the balance of ideological powers; and 2) a deep-seated belief in the ultimately determining nature of ideologies (communist or free-market) on diverse national contexts, such that nations might be compared to homogeneous blocks, which would fall to one side or the other in response to an external impact. On a practical level, both of these elements fostered sufficient fear of communism among the general public to minimize resistance to costly military intervention on foreign soil. Another practical consequence of this vision, however, was the blatant disregard for aspects of cultural contexts that escaped the binary logic of cold war ideologies. An underestimation of,

and subsequent inability to deal with, local resistance to US forces in Vietnam was a hugely debilitating psychological aspect of the war for these same forces, and may lie at the root of the highly publicized US atrocities committed there, best exemplified by the My Lai massacre.

It is clear, in any case, both that the nature of political influence was one of the questions that framed the making of US policy on Southeast Asia and that, to be intelligible and persuasive to policy-makers and the voting public alike, such influence had to be given a concrete form: Eisenhower's mechanical metaphor of the domino effect, certainly, but also more insidious viral or bacteriological metaphors, as expressed in concern over the *spread* of communism. The organic metaphors allow for the possibility of the progressive undermining of a body from within, and it is important to remember that Eisenhower's 1954 news conference came during the intensified efforts of Joseph McCarthy to expose communists on US soil.

Like the historical phenomenon that functioned as its backdrop, *Apocalypse Now* is the culmination of a sustained meditation on the nature of influence: on the range of different forms influence may assume, as well as on influence's deeply, perhaps inextricably, entangled negative and positive strains. In some respects, Coppola's film outflanks the actual historical phenomenon of the war by subsuming it within a more general parable of influence. But the film does more than merely use the war as a setting: it actively engages the question of the nature of the war by including within its own reflective process aspects of the rhetorical framing of the war as well as figurative representations of some of its most influential episodes. Rather than trying to grasp the film in terms of its fidelity to the war, then, we should attempt to identify the processes by which it inscribes within itself the question of Vietnam, conceived as a series of overlapping layers of discourses on the truth and strategic use of influence.

### *1. Stars and strains*

Any recourse to the concept of "influence" within the context of the human sciences leads rather immediately to three apparent obstacles: 1) its recurrent and wide-ranging usage in a variety of contemporary languages and vernaculars (which makes the task of its definition and delimitation troublesome); 2) its entanglement with the domain of rhetoric, where it forms an uneasy pairing with the term "persuasion"; and 3) its conceptual formalization within the highly influential theory of intersubjective poetic relationships put forth by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). It can easily be seen that the risks involved in deploying the concept stem from the complex overlapping of multiple discursive contexts, each of which bears its own, often obscure, conceptual complicities. There is something fitting in this predicament, however, as any attempt to mobilize the concept for a

specific use enacts the struggle to free oneself from the play of invisible forces the word itself evokes.

Etymologically, the word "influence" comes from the Latin *inflūere*, whose morphological elements, taken together, point to a semantic value similar to that expressed by the word "influx," though different associations followed the word as it resurfaced in various European languages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The word is generally considered to have found its modern point of entry through the French language (c1240), where it found itself coupled to the astrological sense, from the late Latin *influxus stellarum*, that would govern its usage for the next several hundred years. The OED registers the consolidation of this meaning, in English, in the fourteenth century, and describes it as "[t]he supposed flowing or streaming from the stars or heavens of an ethereal fluid acting upon the character and destiny of men, and affecting sub lunacy things generally" (1933, vol. V). Later entries suggest the waning of stars as the literal origin of influence but reinforce the invisibility of its operations, such as the meaning that began to circulate in the late sixteenth century: "[t]he exertion of action of which the operation is unseen or insensible (or perceptible only in its effects), by one person or thing upon another." The stars gradually lost their position in the firmament of influence, replaced by other more worldly entities—tides, winds, seasons, individuals, groups, and even ideas—but the general picture of influence remained the same, and continues to shape our understanding of the word today. Nevertheless, perhaps the most visible mark the word's history seems to have left on our contemporary linguistic patrimony harkens back to the epidemic that shook Italy in 1743, which forged a link between influenza and a highly contagious disease of invisible transmission.

In turn, the word "persuasion" can be traced back to the Latin word *persuadere*, which, as its original grammatical form suggests, designated more of an act than a state or condition. The OED records its appearance in English in the 14th century, since which time it has deviated little from its primary meaning: "The action, or an act, of persuading or seeking to persuade; the presenting of inducements or winning arguments; the addressing of reasonings, appeals, or entreaties to a person in order to induce him to do or believe something" (*ibid.*, vol. VII).

Despite the general contemporary consensus that "persuasion" and "influence" are roughly synonymous, as most dictionaries readily suggest, a sensitive handler of these words can detect subtle differences in the way each frames the relationships among the subject, object, means, and effect of the act it evokes, differences the etymology of the two words helps to clarify. "Persuasion" indicates a locutionary act based on a relationship of transparency between the interlocutors involved, a quality ensured by the visibility of its medium (language), which allows for the bracketing of the subject's particularity: persuasion is held to be an effect of arguments or

words and not of a person.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, "influence" denotes a relationship characterized by the invisibility of its means, figured, in its etymology, by the mysterious "etherial fluid" emitted by the stars. We can thus consider "persuasion" and "influence" to be not just wayward synonyms of each other but also as different (and differentiating) translations of the rhetorical act itself, images of rhetoric equivalent to the terms "white rhetoric" (*rhétorique blanche*) and "dark rhetoric" (*rhétorique noir*) as defined by Michel Meyer (1993: 41-47).

## 2. Willard under the influence

The powerful opening sequence of the film is a masterful framing of its concerns in terms of influence, whatever formal difficulties it might entail for the narrative as a whole. Willard first appears to the spectator already under the influence: disoriented (conveyed by the inversion of the camera), his eyes restless and unable to focus, his pupils constricted. But what is the nature and cause of his condition? Through a series of overlaid images, the sequence exposes a range of possible causes, revealed simultaneously: is it a drug-induced stupor (the half-empty bottle of Cognac), Willard's half-awakened but now repressed primitive instincts (the jungle), the violence of war (the napalm explosions or the .45 pistol under Willard's pillow), or a more generalized condition of madness (Jim Morrison crooning "All the children are insane")? Coppola's use of dissolves allows these different elements to be laid virtually side-by-side, a juxtaposition which serves to open the question of influence, rather than constituting some statement about the necessity of their confluence. Perhaps these elements did all play a part in the experience of the war; but which, if any of these, is the master term of the narrative about to unfold? Willard's initial disorientation must be read both as the result of some (as yet unclear) influence and as a sign of his lack of clarity, a sign which, as the narrative progresses, becomes gradually transformed into the source of his motivation. Kurtz possesses clarity (we are told)<sup>2</sup>, and it is this clarity that Willard will seek to acquire for himself.

One of the key elements in the opening sequence for setting up Willard's later transformation is a slow, panning shot of his motionless hand. The hand becomes a metonym for the paralysis that besets Willard due to his own moral, emotional and perceptual disorientation. Later, with Willard under the

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<sup>1</sup> According to this view, to say that person X was persuaded by person Y (certainly not an infrequent formulation) is to employ a metonymy, in which the name of the person in question (person Y, in this case) is taken to represent his or her language or arguments.

<sup>2</sup> As the photographer, played by Dennis Hopper, tells Willard, "[t]he man is clear in his mind, but his soul is mad" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 178).

direct influence of Kurtz, we will witness the reawakening of this hand, in a gesture that prefigures Willard's final action towards Kurtz, as well as symbolizing the latter's victory *as a source of influence*. What type of clarity does this entail for Willard? Not a clarity of the intellect, though Michael Herr's narration (working here against the rhetorical thrust of the film's images) attempts to salvage some semblance of this: rather it is a clarity of the will that Kurtz preaches to Willard—"[p]erfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure" (Milius and Coppola: 2000, 187). If, as I have suggested, Willard's journey is a quest for the clarity that would reveal the nature of his own initial condition, then his quest has failed. The clarity he receives instead is a rhetorical *trompe l'oeil*: in the name of freedom ("Freedoms from the opinions of others. Even the opinions of yourself" [176]) Kurtz reduces the range of Willard's potential influences until he alone remains, an influence all the more effective for masquerading as its absence. Rather than a reenactment of the Fisher King myth, as Coppola takes pains to suggest, Willard's assassination of Kurtz means the triumph of the latter's rhetoric. Indeed, the two characters are so different that it is hard to grasp how Coppola believed that such a symbolic passing of the torch might come across as formally satisfying. In the end, of course, Willard does not remain with Kurtz's Montagnard army but rather initiates a slow, drifting return down the Nung River in the company of the tribally initiated Lance and in the direction of some undisclosed fate.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. "Charlie don't surf!"

If we momentarily reverse our conventional habits of reading, we might be able to grasp *Apocalypse Now* as a film in which a compelling but internally flawed mythic treatment of the question of influence provides a thematic backdrop for the figurative representation of certain key elements in a particular historical configuration: elements that belong both to the sphere of rhetoric—that is, to the domain of historical argument—and to the syntax of historical situations themselves. From such an altered perspective, Martin Sheen's incarnation of a passive, understated Willard (much maligned by critics in the wake of the film's 1979 release) gains a new significance, functioning as a sounding board for the events and discourses he experiences, a function most strikingly displayed during the French plantation scene. As a result, Coppola was free to explore the internal dynamics of each individual sequence without excessive concern for its narrative function, lending a strongly episodic feel to the overall structure of the film.

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<sup>3</sup> From Willard's conversation with Roxanne at the French plantation as well as from his voice-over just prior to the assassination of Kurtz, we are to gather that this fate excludes a return either to the army or to the territorial US.

But such liberty yielded some truly noteworthy sequences, which, in addition to the intrinsic interest of their staging as such, engage the historical record and reactivate the film's leitmotif of influence in revealing ways. The most spectacular of these sequences is the Air Cavalry raid on Vin Drin Dop, led by the unforgettable Colonel William Kilgore and set to the sounds of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." As his name suggests (an early version of the script calls him "William Kharnage" (Cowie, 2001: 39), Kilgore is no more than a cultural stereotype dropped into the peasant villages of Vietnam. Modeled on the cinematic persona of John Wayne, as Cowie notes, Kilgore swaggers across the screen with a bravado that is at once tragic, comic, and strangely hypnotic. As Willard tells us, "[h]e was one of those guys that had that weird light around him. You just knew he wasn't going to get so much as a scratch out here" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 30). Though clothed in a naturalistic rhetoric, Willard's remark reminds us that Kilgore's imperviousness to harm can be traced back to the fact that he is merely a cartoon character. Cultural stereotypes might lead you into battle, but they are unlikely to die beside you in the trenches. Nevertheless, the power of such stereotypes is very real, and it is the incommensurability between cause and effect that Coppola's sequence ably draws to the fore, though as Michael Herr (author of the film's narration) suggests in his influential account of the war, *Dispatches*, the line between truth and stereotype may not always be so easy to tell:

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. (Herr, 2002: 61)

Kilgore also allows Coppola to underscore a psychological aspect of the war that matches up neatly with the film's reflection on influence. Besides his imperviousness to bullets, Kilgore is blissfully ignorant of the people and culture he sweeps over in his helicopter: "What's the name of that goddamn village, Vin Drin Dop or Lop? Damn gook names all sound the same" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 31). Rather he and his Air Cavalry unit transport US culture everywhere they go, as exemplified by the impromptu beach party Kilgore throws for his men: "They choppered in the T-bones and the beer ... and turned the L.Z. into a beach party. The more they tried to make it just like home, the more they made everybody miss it" (30). The wholesale importation of US culture finds an echo in the USO sequence of the film, but, more significantly, both can be viewed as figurative expressions of this genuine historical tendency, perhaps best embodied by the transformation of China Beach into a recreational facility for American troops: "It was a place where [G.I.s] could go swimming or surfing, get drunk, get stoned, get laid, get straight, groove in the scivvie houses, rent sailboats, or just sleep on the



beach” (Herr, 2002: 163). After the USO sequence, Willard reminds us of the particularly American character of this tendency: “Charlie didn’t get much USO. He was dug in too deep or moving too fast. His idea of great R and R was cold rice, and a little rat meat. He had only two ways home—death, or victory” (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 80). The view of Vietnam as mere empty beaches or jungles ready to be cleared for the implantation of American culture (but what does this say about the idea of culture as expressed by this vision?) coincides with the ideological emptying of national and local contexts in Eisenhower’s domino theory. In this view, context—like its grander notion, culture—is mere foliage, to be ploughed away by the heavy machinery of ideology.

#### 4. *The Quiet American*

There are yet two other major sequences in the film that attempt to reconstruct (or reconfigure) the historical circumstances of the Vietnam War. The first of these, the sampan massacre, was not initially scripted, but rather grew out of a dialogue between the director and his actors (Cowie, 2001: 96). The consensus that emerged from this dialogue centered on the roughly temporal coincidence between Willard’s fictional journey up the Nung and the unfortunately non fictional My Lai massacre of 1968. On March 16 three platoons of American soldiers closed in on what was thought to be the village of My Lai (actually Son My) in an attempt to unearth a Viet Cong presence in the Quang Ngai Province of South Vietnam. Though no enemy presence was detected, firing commenced, and a wave of violence swept through the troops. Three hours later, 504 innocent civilians had been slain, though for up to a year after the incident official military reports listed these casualties at around 20. One US soldier was wounded during the massacre: he had accidentally shot himself in the foot.<sup>4</sup>

The momentary insanity that affects the crew of the PBR as it searches a river sampan for hidden arms is a figurative reenactment of the My Lai massacre. Clean opens fire with his M60 machinegun on the occupants of the sampan as the female occupant tries to prevent Chef from reaching a box hidden in the back. The occupants slain, Chef opens the box to reveal a puppy, an emblem of innocence and the moral bridge between the two boats. During the actual My Lai massacre, however, the innocence was far more one-sided. More at the root of the action by US soldiers was paranoia—tiredness and paranoia, and tiredness *of* paranoia. After all, the Viet Cong *were* a presence in South Vietnam, one the South Vietnamese peasantry seemed at best to pay no particular attention to and at worst to actively encourage. The

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<sup>4</sup> The best study of the My Lai incident continues to be Seymour Hersch’s *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970).

reality on the ground was a far cry from the gaping ideological divide that US politicians had drawn up at home.

The historical naivety of American attitudes towards Indochina is a central concern of the French plantation sequence, which did not make it into the original 1979 release. The argument presented at the time was that it hurt the scope and pacing of the film.<sup>5</sup> This is a legitimate point, if the intention was to market the film as an action adventure yarn, which was no doubt the case at the time. United Artists had begun to panic at the film's budgetary excesses, and Coppola himself was wracked with enough self-doubt not to mind its interference. In any case, recognizing the virtues of the sequence, Coppola had it restored to the picture once financial considerations had been overcome.

Formally, the main function of the sequence is to contrast the measured European reflection on the war and its colonialist context with the frantic, psychedelic, and acephalous thrashings about of Americans in the jungle: opium is the drug of choice here, not LSD. Though the French attitudes towards the conflict are themselves contradictory and easily inflamed, the dominant element of the sequence is the soothing interior of their old colonial plantation. At least there is no confusion about what they are fighting to protect. While Willard dines quietly with his French hosts, he receives a history lesson that covers such crucial points as Roosevelt's favoring of national independence in the region (as opposed to European colonialist rule), the US military's inability to learn from French mistakes (the case of Dien Bien Phu), and, perhaps most significantly, the clever dismantling of the State Department's domino theory rhetoric. Though the first two of these are presented straightforwardly (if not neutrally) in the form of expressed opinions, Coppola drives home this last point by an effort of juxtaposition: he evokes the theory itself, placing it in the mouth of an American politician in Saigon (as relayed to us by Christian Demarais), and has Hubert Demarais unmask its underlying blindness to anything but ideology: "The Vietnamese are very intelligent. You never know what they think. The Russian ones who help them, 'Come and give us their money, we are all Communists. Chinese, come and give us guns. We're all brothers.' They hate the Chinese! Maybe they hate the American less than the Russian and the Chinese. If tomorrow the Vietnamese are Communists, they will be Vietnamese Communists. And this is something that you never understood, you American" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 146-47). The emphasis naturally falls on the word Vietnamese, but even this word may mislead us into projecting something like a homogeneous national identity over the multiple allegiances of the country's overwhelmingly peasant population, as Jeff Stein succinctly but powerfully states:

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<sup>5</sup> As Coppola noted recently, the impulse behind the original suppression of the sequence was the desire to make the film more "containable" (Cowie, 2001: 111).

I had been in Viet Nam long enough, and I spoke the language well enough, to know something about the society and its history. I soon learned that the political loyalties of most Viets were splintered along family, clan, religious, and multiple ideological faults. It had been foolhardy to try and fit Viet Nam into our Cold War box. It was impossible to define any Viet, with certainty, as "procommunist," "pro-Saigon," or "pro-U.S." (which, viewed from the perspective of Nguyen Van Thieu, might define such a person as a traitor), unless they were in uniform and armed. That, in a nutshell, was the whole problem of the war: defining who the enemy was. (1992)

### 5. *The Real Colonel Kurtz*

If the My Lai massacre was the turning point in the public view of the war, from within the military hierarchy a dramatic change was announced by the trial of Colonel Robert Rheault, charged with the summary execution of a high-ranking South Vietnamese official. Rheault claimed that the official in question was really a double agent working for the North, and that his assassination had been sanctioned by the CIA. Though evidence has since supported Rheault's allegation of CIA involvement, the Agency denied this at the time, and the army unit conducting the investigation was only too willing to take the CIA at its word—until, that is, it came time to provide testimony against Rheault and the seven other U. S. soldiers arrested for the murder of Thai Khac Chuyen. The CIA refused, and the charges against all eight soldiers were dropped (Stein, 1992).<sup>6</sup>

The historical irony of the episode is that Rheault's action did not strike his peers as in any way out of the ordinary. Illegal action in Vietnam had been the staple of US military involvement there since before such involvement had ever been publicly acknowledged. In effect, the incident captured a shift in the power struggle between conventional military forces and covert operations, a struggle in which Colonel Rheault found himself inextricably engaged:

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<sup>6</sup> For interesting accounts of the "Green Beret Affair" (as it came to be known) at the time of its surfacing, see the high-profile article by Frank McCullough published in *Life* on 14 November 1969 ("A believer in self-reliance and elitism," vol. 67, no. 20, pp. 36-38) and the piece by L. Fletcher Prouty ("Green Berets and the CIA") that appeared in the *New Republic* on 23 August 1969. The article by McCullough was particularly influential in helping shape the cinematic character of Kurtz, and is immediately preceded by a short, unsigned article entitled "The Fall of a 'Lost Soldier,'" whose reference to "*les soldats perdus*" of the French occupation of Indochina would be developed by Milius into the screenplay's French plantation sequence.

Although the American military commander in South Vietnam ought to be the dominant figure during a war there, it is in fact the American ambassador who has for years been the all-important arbiter or umpire between the regular military, and the CIA and its Special Forces. Henceforth things may be different. The sensational arrest of Colonel Rheault and some of his men seems bound to change things. General Abrams appears to have decided to slash abruptly through the tangled web of bureaucratic and Intelligence intrigue. If so, it can only be because he felt that the Special Forces, owing their real allegiance not to the Army but to the Central Intelligence Agency, had become a kind of cancer that was eating away the core of the regular military forces under his command. How many Army units in South Vietnam have fallen under the secret command of the CIA rather than of their rightful military chiefs? How many CIA operations are being carried out ostensibly as Army operations but with the Army virtually powerless to influence them? That story may never be known. (Prouty, 1969)

Both the Army and the CIA agreed, however, that no credit at all was given to the puppet South Vietnamese government, which not only lacked even minimal popular support but was also widely recognized for its incapacity to function institutionally on just about any level.<sup>7</sup> The change, then, was one of official rhetoric—or, rather, of the gap between public discourse and subtle rhetorical practices of covert operations. Despite the subtlety of these, the general message to combatants (and perhaps, on a less visible but equally unsettling level, to civilians as well) was simple: be prepared to live a double life.

Such moral hypocrisy tied in nicely with Conrad's emphasis on the hypocrisy of the European civilizing mission in the Belgian Congo. Naturally some changes were required. The point was no longer the epistemological gulf between the appearance of European ideas about the colonial effort and the reality of its practices. Since the only apparent alternative to judgment is sheer action, Conrad's structuring opposition gets boiled down in the film to Kurtz's feverish, mantra-like injunctions against the right to judge: "You have a right to kill me. You have a right to do that. But you have no right to judge me" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 186). Or, at the end of Kurtz's inoculation speech: "You have to have men who are moral, and at the same time, who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion. Without judgment. Without judgment. Because it's judgment that defeats us" (188). But it is Willard who, in an earlier reflection, effectively reiterates Marlow's abhorrence of lies in his striking denouncement of the

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the logistical difficulties faced by American troops in Vietnam, see Howard Zinn, "The Impossible Victory: Vietnam," in *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

false moral wrapping that so frequently covers the practices of war: "It was a way we had over here of living with ourselves. We'd cut them in half with a machine gun, and give them a Band-Aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of them, the more I hated liars" (120). Kurtz, like his real life counterpart, was the Band-Aid the US military, under considerable pressure at home, was prepared to deliver.

Thus to a large extent, Coppola's Kurtz emerged from the very real dilemma of Colonel Rheault, but it was a Rheault cloaked in the metaphysical ruminations of Conrad's anti-hero. The odd result is a victim of hypocritical military rhetoric who is also the victim of his own rhetoric, which equates authentic existence with an unquestioning commitment to pure action—an action whose ruthlessness is the sole measure of its "purity." It is no surprise, then, that Coppola should have struggled so hard to discover a resolution to Willard's encounter with Kurtz. In the end, Coppola falls back on the literary *topos* of infectious evil influence. As the PBR approaches Kurtz's compound, Lance howls like a wolf and Willard confesses: "He was close. He was real close. I couldn't see him yet, but I could feel him, as if the boat were being sucked up river and the water was flowing back into the jungle" (Milius and Coppola, 2000: 158). As the PBR drifts away again, Willard stares bleakly ahead while Lance gazes up at the rain, blinking, as if waking from his trance-like state.

### 6. *With a bang and a whimper*

In general terms, *Apocalypse Now* ought to be viewed as a film that gathers within itself a vast array of different genres and discourses, ranging from Conrad's novella to the press coverage of the "Green Beret Affair" and the innovative approach to the soundtrack, which (foreshadowing the age of MTV) threatens to break the film itself up into autonomous or semi-autonomous experiential units. It would be tempting to argue that the aesthetic coherence of the film lies in its miming of the essential non-unity of the Vietnam War, a reading of the war first suggested by Michael Herr's novel *Dispatches* (1977). Such an attempt would, however, encounter two substantial difficulties. First, to call Coppola's film a work about the Vietnam War is to yield to a rather immediate level of thematization. It would be as misleading, in my view, to consider the film an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. Either characterization, though not entirely false, would miss something specific (and troubling) working itself out on the screen. Second, however episodically structured, *Apocalypse Now* offers us a narrative account of Willard's experience, one whose opening sequence (as we have seen) already posits a state of experiential disorientation. As a narrative, the film should move toward a state of understanding, even if this understanding assumed a form of negative knowledge, as it did for Conrad's Marlow. But

Marlow's chastening nihilism—perhaps the final residual form of Western *hubris*—is beyond Willard's reach.

Coppola's desire to produce a film that was both historical document and mythic parable resulted in a work that has too many inconsistencies to be considered wholly successful. As suggested above, many of these surface in the vacillating character traits of Willard himself: is he the cynical, shell-shocked combat veteran we see at the film's beginning, the giddy prankster who steals Kilgore's surfboard, or the automaton-like performer of Kurtz's final request? The problem can at least in part be traced back to the fractured nature of the project. For most of the film, the journey towards Kurtz is largely a McGuffin, allowing Coppola to explore his understanding of the spectacular nature of the war through a loose, episodic structure – a structure whose experiential, if not moral, center is Willard, the camera-spectator.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Conrad's Marlow, Willard cannot *know* nothingness precisely because he *represents* it. This leads directly to a problem in the film's narrative structure, a problem the *topos* of influence serves to mask: the only way to motivate Willard's killing of Kurtz is to have Kurtz *infect* Willard with his own desire to be killed. Furthermore, unlike Conrad's Kurtz, Coppola's character is too psychologically fuzzy to represent anything more definite than the oscillation of extremes and the repudiation of tepid bourgeois morality. Thus, even though the narrative meaning of Kurtz's death is empty, its symbolic meaning points to the victory of rhetoric as influence.

Reading *Apocalypse Now* as a meditation on the nature of influence allows us to grasp the diverse narrative, discursive and symbolic threads woven into its structure as kindred, though not necessarily unified, materials. The heterogeneity of these materials certainly left its mark on the narrative coherence of Coppola's film, but this is not to suggest that the film did not go far enough in assimilating their differences. If assimilation can be likened to suppressing such differences, then perhaps it went too far, and it requires an act of reading against the grain of the film's formal solutions to throw these differences into relief. I wish to suggest, rather, that the presence of such differences is overdetermined by a long and ongoing reflection on the nature of influence, rhetoric, and persuasion that raises us out of the *trivia* of our disciplinary expectations and casts us into a complex matrix of interacting forces, where language, narrative, symbol, image, and history all conspire to determine our fate.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the absence of psychological transformation in Willard, see Hagen (1981).

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