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## FROM HEART OF DARKNESS TO APOCALYPSE NOW

*Maria Helena de Paiva Correia*

To Maria Irene Ramalho, a great scholar, a generous colleague, and a reliable friend.

**Resumo:** O artigo faz uma leitura de *Heart of Darkness* em função do conceito Freudiano do “Inquietante” (aquilo que deve permanecer escondido e em segredo) e de *Apocalypse Now* em termos da noção bíblica do Apocalipse como revelação, discutindo este e outros paradoxos aparentes na adaptação de Coppola do romance de Conrad. O artigo conclui que o filme ilumina o romance e que o uso do belo em diversas formas de arte pode estar ao serviço da revelação do mal indizível.

**Palavras-chave:** *Heart of Darkness*; *Apocalypse Now*; o “Inquietante”.

**Abstract:** The article produces a reading of *Heart of Darkness* in terms of Freud’s concept of “the Uncanny” (i.e. what should remain secret and hidden) and of *Apocalypse Now* in terms

of the Bible's notion of Apocalypse as Revelation (i.e. what is brought to light). The article discusses this and other apparent paradoxes in Coppola's adaptation of Conrad's famous novel to conclude that the film illuminates the book and that diverse art forms can disclose unspeakable evil by means of outstanding beauty.

**Keywords:** *Heart of Darkness*; *Apocalypse Now*; "the Uncanny".

The accepted English translation of Freud's German expression *unheimlich* is uncanny (217). Yet, according to Sigmund Freud's essay, the word *heimlich* (familiar, in English) covers two different concepts: something familiar, agreeable, but also that which is concealed and kept out of sight. Further on, the author reminds us that Schelling points out that the antonymous word, *unheimlich* conveys the meaning of what should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.

The situation Marlow experiences in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is thoroughly uncanny in the sense of being frightening, unfamiliar. Far from Europe, far from his daily routine, facing an unknown environment, a dire colonial situation, confronted with the overwhelming evil epitomised by Kurtz, the narrator falls short of self-destruction and realises he has witnessed the worst a human creature is capable of enduring. He will never be the same again. Darkness is going to haunt him forever.

As a matter of fact, the Marlow who once ventured into this peculiar journey is already symbolically dead. The character who tells the story where he plays his part is someone else, a sort of survivor who vaguely hints at what he may have been before. These

hints allow us to understand his “horror”, though the word is uttered by Kurtz. The agony he experienced turned out to be both a source of a new self-consciousness and a newly created consciousness of other human beings in weird circumstances. The title conveys a powerful metaphor of the Uncanny by way of the Western Christian tradition: it is the core, the inside of a region completely devoid of either light or compassion. In other words, it is hell.

Inspired writing does convey a sense of pleasure to the reader, who feels grateful for having received such a gift. At the same time, however, he is heartbroken as he realises how far and how hard evil threatens mankind, while concurrently an ethical understanding of the narrative takes shape where a reappraisal of human values is disclosed. This astonishing breakthrough helps to keep the mysterious evil half hidden though unequivocally present everywhere. If clearly displayed, the evil might have become less fearful, prone to be explained. This way, it remains deeply ingrained, unspeakable, kept in the innermost spaces of one’s soul.

It is possible, however, to transmit a similar feeling by means of image and sound, using cinema, not the written word. Francis Ford Coppola managed to achieve such a deed with his remarkable film *Apocalypse Now*.

The film is unmistakably based on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; it shares Kurtz’s name and character, notwithstanding the fact that no acknowledgement to that effect was made public by the director. The scene changes from colonial Africa to the Vietnam War, a war in a country with a dreadful colonial past. The narrator is now an American, Captain Benjamin L. Willard, instead of a European civilian. The reality to be reckoned with is still the Uncanny. The Western Christian tradition is maintained, though another title is used. A descent into hell can be witnessed, while a reappraisal of human values takes place. It is a “Revelation”.

The *Apocalypse* in the Gospel according to St. John is also known as *The Book of Revelation* in the English tradition of Bible translation<sup>1</sup>. This other name – Revelation – has the advantage of retaining the etymological meaning of the word Apocalypse. In this sense, what in Conrad was recognised as an irretrievable darkness appears in the film as something suddenly brought into full light. Moreover, it comes to light “Now,” not once upon a time, that is, not out of time, or somewhere in the past in an unidentified place. “Now” is the Vietnam wartime where American soldiers are killing and being killed. The antithesis is striking.

How to deal with what seems to have a similarity of purpose but two apparently antithetical titles? In the first case, as I have suggested, there is *The Inner Darkness*; in the second, *Revelation Now*. Is this to be explained by the change from writing to image and sound? Is it the result of a loss of mystery on behalf of spectacle? The answer is no. There is spectacle, yes, in the use of some breath-taking images which are pervasive in modern war pictures. But many scenes convey the effect of a growing darkness, particularly dense when we catch a glimpse of Kurtz and his environment. Colours give way to an ever-present dark green forest, mirrored

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<sup>1</sup> See Dictionary.com Unabridged. Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2015.

a·poc·a·lypse

*noun*

1. (*initial capital letter*) revelation (def. 4).
2. any of a class of Jewish or Christian writings that appeared from about 200 b.c. to a.d. 350 and were assumed to make revelations of the ultimate divine purpose.
3. a prophetic revelation, especially concerning a cataclysm in which the forces of good permanently triumph over the forces of evil.
4. any revelation or prophecy.
5. any universal or widespread destruction or disaster: *the apocalypse of nuclear war*.

Origin:

1125-75; Middle English < Late Latin *apocalypsis* < Greek *apokálypsis* revelation, equivalent to *apokalýp (tein)* to uncover, reveal (*apo-* apo- + *kalýptein* to cover, conceal) + *-sis* -sis.

by the river, where men in green camouflage uniforms, carrying dark guns, look like shadows. Francis Ford Coppola's original 1979 theatrical release ended with a fading out to black and no credits. Later on the director elected a different ending which turned out to be misunderstood by the audience. Therefore, he chose to put credits on a black screen. As far as *Apocalypse Now: Redux* is concerned, the credits are presented on a black background while ambient music and jungle sounds are heard. Conrad's heart of darkness is definitely there.

Let's take notice, however, of another unforgettable sequence of scenes in the picture. Helicopters fly among flames while the powerful sound of Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* leads to an operatic effect. The helicopters, as well as the flames they seem to ride, convey the meaning of violent warfare. The music recalls *The Valkyrie*, the second opera in the Wagnerian tetralogy, *The Nibelung's Ring*, where flashes of lighting herald in mythic women warriors, and fire surrounds the protagonist Brünnhilde. The word valkyrie literally means "chooser of the slain"<sup>2</sup>. Images and sound produce a peculiar revelation of warfare where modernity, as shown by means of the reel news, is present through helicopters flying among flames in the Vietnam War, while the same helicopters turn into mythic valkyries riding among flames in order to choose the slain. The representation of death is thus reinforced, but the scene can also be enjoyed as a culturally constructed image of beauty. The music and the connections this particular piece of music carry with it make all the difference. These unforgettable scenes of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* prevail as a modern, fiery revelation

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<sup>2</sup> See Dictionary.com Unabridged. Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2015.

Origin: Old Norse valkyrja, chooser of the slain (cognate with Old English wælcyrrie witch), equivalent to val (r) the slain in battle, slaughter (cognate with Old English wæl) + kyrja chooser (cognate with Old English cyrie); akin to choose.

of the Uncanny. War is uncanny and so are the valkyries, though helicopters *stricto sensu* are not. The scenes themselves are uncanny, unspeakable and full of mystery. Death and destruction are the worst evil, the heart of darkness. Darkness may, nevertheless, be conveyed by means of light, at least metaphorically, just as evil may be presented by means of revelation leading to the disclosure of its evidence.

Revelation Now, the expression I am using to express the meaning of the title of Francis Ford Coppola's renowned movie forces the audience to acknowledge that war is the utmost evil, an uncanny experience. It has nothing, or at least very little to do with glory, honour, duty. It lets loose the heart of darkness, not only in one man, Kurtz, but in humankind. Suffering, fear, destruction and death surface everywhere. The overwhelming light that images display does not rely exclusively on image and fire, but on the symbolic construction of image, music and allusion. They carry mystery as well as mastery. Evil is present, though its deepest roots remain half hidden, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The audience is aware of the unsaid. These weird helicopters spread an unspeakable evil, far more terrifying than the usual violence in war films.

The mystery is not entirely revealed. The Revelation the audience is invited to share is that human beings cannot avoid the lasting effects caused by original sin, resulting from primordial Evil. Both the slain and the survivors are defeated. The horror is happening now, far away, in Asia; it is happening to the director's countrymen under conscription. It is also happening to their enemy, and to many civilians. The moral purpose of the film consists in this multiple Revelation.

The expression I chose to convey the meaning of Conrad's title was The Inner Darkness. As a title, *Heart of Darkness* particularly suits a book in which the action takes place in colonial Africa, an

uncanny place where, in Conrad's day, white human beings were considered to be the standard-bearers of civilization in the face of savage black people who engaged in witchcraft.<sup>3</sup> The white reader was nevertheless made aware that either savagery could be taken as a sort of infection prone to contaminate colonisers or that, far away, somewhere in Africa, an unequal war was being fought, where even civilised white human beings could easily be transformed into evil creatures whose heart turned darker than the skin of the colonised blacks they allegedly intended to civilise.

It is understandable that, for the contemporary reader, far from the place where historic events were then occurring, the first interpretation would prevail. Time makes us particularly aware of the second interpretation, since History revealed the true face of colonialism, and regrettably, Horror and the Uncanny keep haunting Africa in our own day. I believe that the latter interpretation is most probably the one that Conrad had in mind. Anyhow, he was able to make the audience acknowledge the horror of the darkest side of a human soul that happened to belong to a white man. He succeeded in making this revelation in an age where colonialism could not yet be condemned as an evil in itself, at least by its promoters.

When one puts side by side Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, the film illuminates the book and further revelations dramatically emerge. The revelation of how the uncanny can display what should have remained hidden, by means of simultaneously keeping its secrecy and unfolding its labyrinthine complexity; and last but not least, the revelation of

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<sup>3</sup> Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski (1857-1924), a.k.a Joseph Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* in 1899. He was appointed captain of a steamer on the Congo River in 1890. *Heart of Darkness* is based on the author's experiences in the Congo. Joseph Conrad always considered himself a Pole, though he was born a Russian citizen. He knew from personal experience what colonialism and immigration meant.

how diverse art forms can disclose unspeakable evil by means of outstanding beauty.

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