

Between Texts and Images:

From Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

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Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was reputed as not liable to adaptation for a very long time, more precisely from 1939, when Orson Welles tried and then gave up the project to produce and direct *Citizen Kane* instead,¹ until 1979, when Francis Ford Coppola released his widely acclaimed *Apocalypse Now*, which was immediately hailed by the critics as a very successful adaptation from Conrad, although the writer is never once quoted in the credits. Yet we could be surprised by this reluctance in directors to tackle Conrad's text as a possible scenario, since *Heart of Darkness* is also often quoted as one of the first and most exemplary cases of impressionistic writing, i.e. a text which heavily relies on images, however confused or uneasily rendered in graphic terms, so that the central position of images in the novella ought to have been an argument towards its adaptation, despite the relatively complex quality of the writing itself. On the other hand, Coppola's very free adaptation of the novella is also relatively unsettling or disturbing for the viewer since the director not only neglects to quote the text as an explicit source of his work² but also introduces *new* literary references that are

¹ On that aborted project by Welles, see Seymour Chatman, "2 ½ Versions of *Heart of Darkness*", Gene M. Moore (ed.), *Conrad on Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207-23.

² Although Coppola's wife Eleanor does so in her narration about the shooting of the movie in the documentary entitled *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (directed by Fax

very far indeed from Conrad. As a result, the imagistic in Conrad is as enhanced as the literary—and, as we shall see—the textual elements in Coppola, but both dimensions seem at first sight not to meet: Coppola’s *textual* elements do not adapt Conrad, and Conrad’s *images* seem absent from the movie. This problematic relationship between words and images in both works accounts for their hybrid nature in so far as they both stand at the crossroads of two different media, and yet again their hybridity differs in nature since it is not duplicated from novella to film. Cinema is *per se* a hybrid form, since a filmic text functions thanks to several “matters of expression” (in Hjelmslev’s words), whereas a novel is a text made of only one “matter of expression”—the written text—, but the specific way this hybridity is dealt with in Coppola, and the explicit presence of images in Conrad, making the text hybrid, call for a deeper analysis of this surprising parallel. Looking for the motivations for that situation—for the similarity and contrasts in the way hybridity is played out in both works—we shall first focus on the value and reassessment of textuality versus imagery in Conrad, so as to show that the writer is building up a whole aesthetic imagery that includes the graphic element in its literary quality. Then, we shall move on to an examination of Coppola’s movie and try to see how the director reshapes Conrad’s message according to his own perspective on images as linked to post-modern spectacle and absurdity and eventually tries to devise a new relationship to images that would include both ironic distance (so as to avoid the manipulation by images exemplified in the military context of the movie) and re-appropriation by the spectator of an imagistic meaning.

Bahr and George Hickenlooper, 1991). I take up this observation from Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, “The Hollow Heart of Hollywood: *Apocalypse Now* and the New Sound Space”, *Conrad on Film*, 151-75.

Conrad's text and images

Textuality in *Heart of Darkness* simply does not prove reliable in every respect. Whether we have to do with books (metatexts, autonomous in their nature) or letters (which we could consider as metanarratives, addressed to a reader and therefore not existing entirely outside any production/reception context), there are many examples of that quality. When he is going up the Congo river in search of Kurtz, a trading agent gone wild in the company of natives in colonial Belgian Congo, Marlow, Conrad's second-level narrator, finds a book bearing on some finer points of seamanship and written by a Towson or Tower (he is unsure of the name) and feels he has come upon "something unmistakably real" (p. 189)³ through that discovery, especially because he reads through it "an honest concern for the right way of going to work" contrasting sharply with the devious, "unsound" methods wielded by the whites in command he has met so far. Yet, something puzzles Marlow immediately after he has opened it: he reads in it annotations which he believes to be cipher. He will later learn that these were made by a Russian who owned the book, so that the secret thought to be enclosed in the writing turns out to be a hollow one—it was merely Cyrillic writing. Similarly, Marlow is entrusted by Kurtz with the letters the latter wrote epitomizing his "thought" and meant for his Intended in Brussels but when he is about to deliver these documents to her Marlow reveals: "I was not even sure whether he [Kurtz] had given me the right bundle" (p. 248). Another, telling clue lies in the fact that Marlow bowdlerizes Kurtz's report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs" before giving it over to a representative of the Belgian trade company that

³ The edition used here is Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. Cedric Watts (Aylesbury: Oxford University Press, 1996).

employed Kurtz, thus pointing again to the process of loss involved in the communication of and by texts: before handing the manuscript, he tears off the postscriptum that was so outrageous (p. 243) and which concluded the altruistic pamphlet on the civilizing mission of the whites in Africa by these ominous words: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (p. 208). Those are only a few among many examples of the unreliability of texts, upon which Marlow himself lays a heavy stress in front of his audience gathered on the *Nellie*, a cruising yawl on the Thames. Not only texts but the very essence of language seems altered by this bias which, in the imperialistic context, is primarily political and meant to justify what Marlow ironically calls “these high and just proceedings” (p. 155) connected to the cause of civilization. Thus, when he witnesses the attack on a camp of natives, he comments on his interlocutor: “he called them enemies!”, then comments again a bit further down (p. 154): “these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies”. Likewise, when the Russian he meets at Kurtz’s camp tries to justify the barbaric practices of his idol, who displays the heads of dead enemies on poles surrounding his house, Marlow again questions the validity of the language that is used:

I had no idea of the conditions, he said: these heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks. (p. 222)

A fit way for Marlow to epitomize the nature of his experience during this travel by steamer up river is then given on p. 168: “It was as unreal as everything else”. Not only textuality but the very process of writing seems to partake of the political defacement of reality wrought by imperialism, which appears through the reference to maps as inscribing the settlers’ presence onto native soil,⁴ this inscription being a corollary of the tearing away of bits of land from Africa as the main image for that ruthless domination exerted by whites.⁵ This unreality constitutes a dead-end for classical narrativity and then urges the text at large towards the search for other ways of expression outside textuality as such.⁶

A first move in that direction lies in the use of a frame narrative by an anonymous speaker that contains the narration by Marlow of his travel up the river. This containment works as a distancing from the explicit content of Marlow’s narrative and enables the anonymous narrator to keep at bay, while being a witness of, Marlow’s confrontation with darkness. A fit example of that strategy is the way he repeatedly wavers between fascination for this story and sudden reminders of the enunciative situation meant to re-establish the distance between story and narration. Repeatedly, he and other listeners bring back Marlow,

⁴ Marlow expresses his love for maps on p. 142 in the novella.

⁵ “To tear the treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (p. 177).

⁶ To put it in other words, we could quote those used by John Hillis Miller about the “indirection”—hence the impossibility to attribute a stable meaning—characteristic of another novel by Conrad, very much similar to *Heart of Darkness* as far as Marlow’s narration is concerned: “Thematically and structurally *Lord Jim* is an example of this absence of origin, center, end.” See John Hillis Miller, “The Interpretation of *Lord Jim*”, *Harvard English Studies* 1 (1970): 213.

the second level narrator, to the reality of civilization counteracting his relatively mimetic discourse on whites gone native:

“Try to be civil, Marlow,” growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself. (p. 184)⁷

Similarly, the evolution of the richly connoted term of darkness shows this process of containment through the frame of oral narration: at the close of Marlow’s narrative, darkness is no longer qualified as “impenetrable” as at the beginning but simply “immense.” Thus, orality and the enunciative situation work a splitting of experiences between narrative development inside the framing device and the gist of Marlow’s experience in Congo that is allowed a better expression through that distance.

In fact, the split is not such a tight one since overlapping and cross-references do occur between both narratives—that of the frame narrator and that of Marlow. For instance, we find the same *personae* on the *Nellie* anchored on the Thames and among the people Marlow meets in Africa: a Director of Company, and an Accountant (the Lawyer present on the *Nellie*, though, is significantly absent in Congo since law seems absent there too). Then, the topic of tobacco used by Marlow as an incentive in his story-telling and by the Russian he meets in Kurtz’s camp also works at bringing together seemingly separate parts of the whole novella (see pp. 204 and 230). And the episode of the black helmsman killed by a spear in

⁷ Other examples, though less relevant in our perspective, appear on pp. 173, 187, 204 and 206. This list is not exhaustive.

Marlow's steamboat duplicates the story of Fresleven, a Danish trading agent who was killed in the same fashion, as it was told earlier to Marlow by the company (p. 144). This strategy corresponds to the creation of a new, indirect representation process signified by the frame narrator quite explicitly and famously:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (p. 138)

Meaning then lies outside, in the narrative links between several enunciations. This paves the way to the whole allusive, imagistic representational process staged by Conrad to circumvent the dead-end of direct representation by textuality.

How does this strategy produce an imagistic treatment of textuality? It seems clear that Conrad's aesthetic programme dismisses narrative clarity in Marlow's discourse to relocate it in the setting of a shared experience based on the oral discourse. This shared experience is made to be felt through the inscription of images that connect both narrative levels in the novella and thus enact the circuitous, indirect communication presented by the frame narrator through the "kernel" metaphor. That images are chosen for that function can be explained by

their relative disconnection from the plot and by their greater adaptability to both scenes of the narrative at large. For instance the image of *bodies* connects the mostly silent presence of listeners aboard the *Nellie* and the “unspeakable” ordeal gone through by Marlow as he witnesses a reality he fails to encompass. Thus, the river is mainly described as an enigma and a body:

Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. (p. 150)

We had just floundered and flopped round a bend, when I saw an islet, a mere grassy hummock of bright green, in the middle of the stream. It was the only thing of the kind; but as we opened the reach more, I perceived it was the head of a long sandbank, or rather of a chain of shallow patches stretching down the middle of the river. They were discoloured, just awash, and the whole lot was seen just under the water, exactly as a man’s backbone is seen running down the middle of his back under the skin. (p. 198)

The recurring use of light and darkness symbolism also connects both narratives through a common visual reference: Marlow talks about the darkness of human hearts just as the sun goes down over the Thames. Images appear as valuable from the viewpoint of representation only inasmuch as they intertwine both narratives, not when they try to depict the situation directly, as it happens for instance with the brickmaker’s painting, so overladen with potential symbolical meanings as to become indeterminate and meaningless:

Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister. (p. 169)

This picture could be a representation of justice as blindfolded (pointing to impartiality) but is debunked by the “sinister” aspect of its face, belying the illuminative value of the symbol.⁸

Thus, the imagistic strategy put forward by Conrad revolves around a new aim which is “to make you see,” as he puts it himself famously in his Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, but this “you” has to emerge from a bond—what the frame narrator calls “the bond of the sea” (p. 135)—allowing representation to acquire a definite validity. That bond is the image as connecting the two narrative levels. For example the alternation of darkness and light epitomizes the meaning of Marlow’s experience in Africa, and establishes a parallel with the intermittent signs of attention given by the audience on the *Nellie*. The meeting with the Russian is a case in point here, since the shift from light to darkness that occurs during that scene, and which is presented as a negative epiphany, is also related to the actual situation of the frame narrative which unfolds in the dusk:

⁸ I am indebted for that interpretation to Cedric Watts’ note on this passage in our edition of the novella (p. 270-271).

I looked around and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this *blazing* sky, appear to me so hopeless and so *dark*, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness. (p. 217, my italics)

Noticeably, the Russian also constitutes an important thematic link between both narrative levels for his discourse is described by Marlow in terms that very much recall the way Marlow himself is considered by the frame narrator—and maybe by the reader too.⁹ This impressionistic, imagistic value of Conrad's textual strategy relying on a shared perception is then further exemplified through the use of what Ian Watt calls "delayed decoding,"¹⁰ which lies in the understanding of a diegetic element or situation only after a delay (e.g. when Marlow looks at the skulls surrounding Kurtz's camp and fails to understand immediately they are skulls, seeing them first as knobs of wood—see pp. 220-221). This device is a reference to the necessary *distance* acted out on the *Nellie* properly to resituate and contextualise—and textualise, too—the meaning of experience, in an epitome of Conrad's imagistic treatment of textuality and writing.

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

⁹ See p. 219: "There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale that was not so much told as suggested to me in desolate exclamations, completed by shrugs, in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs." Does that not correspond to Marlow's digressive narration, too?

¹⁰ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980). The notion of delayed decoding appears on pp. 175-79 and 270-72.

Hybridity in Conrad's writing could then refer to its imagistic quality as a reinvestment of textuality on the basis of shared perception. As this specific writing noticeably uses body images as a new way of inscription, a natural though complex link with Coppola's movie appears immediately. Coppola's treatment of bodies is primarily—meaning most obviously, maybe not most interestingly and deeply—dealt with from the angle of inscription, i.e. bodies as traces or bodies as blank spaces on which to write. The gradual mania of Lance Johnson's—one of Captain Willard's companions—for disguising and hiding his friends' dead bodies with camouflage, as well as Kurtz's image as a shadow superimposed on a dazzling background point to that ambivalent value of bodies as writing and/or writable. Does that mean that Coppola equates seeing or images with a cinematographic inscription? We shall see this topic of writing and images is more complex when we tackle it in detail.

A first element to put forward as to images is the global distrust Coppola shows to them—in the context of the movie—as the instrument of manipulation and spectacle used to cover up the reality of the Vietnam war.¹¹ Clearly enough, the way death is staged by Kilgore, for instance, with the impressive use of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* to terrify his enemies, is a way for Coppola to show how instrumental spectacular strategies are in the war. The episode of the USO show where Playmates come to entertain soldiers is also an example of this distrust for images and their manipulative quality—they are used here as an incentive for soldiers to bear the absurdity of this war. Spectacle appears as mostly fatal, as is shown

¹¹ An excellent interpretation of the movie is given from that perspective by Margot Norris, "Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 3, vol. 44 (1998): 730-66.

through the image of the roller coaster figure at Hau Phat, likening war to a fun fair. Eventually, we may think Coppola transposes Conrad's distrust for language to images and the political use of them. This appears clearly when Coppola shoots himself on the setting when Willard and his men get off their patrol boat to meet Kilgore and when he tells Willard: "Don't look at the camera, just go by like you're fighting" (**figure 1**). Definitely, images as spectacle are debunked and closely linked to the "purple haze" Lance Johnson spreads out of the boat as a proud sign of his drug addiction. Now, that reading of images is not so far away from Conrad as it would seem, since what is at stake here is not an imagistic drive as a means of distancing towards an unbearable reality but rather the direct adherence to those images themselves as the place and enactment of regressive behaviour such as aggressive sexuality and the mythic origins evoked by the Playmates' cowboys and Indians game during the USO show, not to mention the Civil War visual stereotypes evoked by Kilgore's outfit (**figure 2**). Beyond that debunking of images as spectacular there lies a criticism of the way Americans construe themselves in terms of myth and (un)reality.



Figure 1

Precisely, that question of the mythical quality of the movie (particularly regarding its ending) will provide us with a fit transition with the issue of texts in the adaptation. If images convey an illusory vision of identity and relationships at the core of the nation, can verbal expression provide a better guideline? It seems texts were used by Coppola much more self-consciously than they maybe are by Marlow (who occasionally quotes Shakespeare and the Bible, the staple food of every nineteenth-century writer), and it has been repeatedly remarked how the director introduces references to Jessie L. Weston and Sir James Frazer, together with a reading of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (extracted from *Poems 1909-25* [1925]) by Kurtz himself, as a clear indication of literary models. Maybe those indications are *too* clear and constitute in themselves, just like the spectacular drive evinced in the movie, traps for a naïve reader. Indeed, the Fisher King myth, which is the central element in Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and which deals with the regeneration of the old king through his own death by murder, is only too visible in the movie in what Kurtz expects from Willard, i.e. to take over from him the charge of "guiding" his people and providing the truth of his experience to his own son. But this is, again, too obvious, and many critics emphasized how Willard will *not* agree on that role ascribed to him by Kurtz. Thus, the textual reference is here again (i.e. as in Conrad) debunked, as Dennis Hopper, the photo-journalist playing the Russian's part in the movie, undermines any serious treatment of T.S. Eliot's poem through the disrespectful, ironical completion he gives to Kurtz's recitation: "This is the way the fucking world ends. Look at this fucking shit we're in, man. Not with a bang but with a whimper. And with a whimper I'm fucking splitting, Jack."

Similarly, the recitation of Baudelaire’s “L’Albatros” by the French children in the plantation scene added in the 2001 “Redux” version of the movie is a sign of the loss of any value of the literary reference in concrete terms—except an ironical value—since this reference serves only to highlight the idealistic, unpractical stubbornness which has the French cling to their position in this their former colony. And Hopper’s truncated, mumbled quotation of Kipling’s “If” when he first meets Willard is a subtle reference to the imperialist content of the poet’s writings while it sustains a self-ironical reading since the photo-journalist—and Kurtz—can hardly be termed justified, exemplary characters with respect to this virile myth of imperialism put forward by Kipling. Instead, Hopper’s hasty recitation, very much like the young boy’s recitation of Baudelaire in the French plantation, only enhances the irrelevance of these literary quotes designated as a way *not* to read the narrative correctly.



Figure 2

So do we face a dead-end here again, as regards the treatment of images and words? It would be excessive to dismiss *Apocalypse Now* as a literary movie on account of the

debunking of obvious textual references as we saw them, just as the treatment of images does *not* limit itself to this censure of manipulation and naïve self-construct in the movie. There are other ways for Coppola to inscribe the word/image relationship in this work, in directions that try, similarly to Conrad's movement, to circumvent the direct unreliability and death-bringing quality of both the textual and the visual elements. Those techniques have to do first with an *inscription* of ironical logic within images, thus creating a new kind of distanced written expression allied with images and not split from them. Then, we shall see how the reference to inscription going beyond written expression (and literary references) restores that association between texts and images—hence asserting the hybrid nature of the film consistently—not only in an ironical frame but also through a radically new relation between the scriptural and the visual.

How does irony, first, come as a link between texts and images and redeems them away from what Conrad called “utilitarian lies,” i.e. political, imperialistic manipulation? This conjunction through irony comes up first through a technique that is most typical of Coppola's style, i.e. juxtaposition, superimposition and dissolves. Thus, images tend to comment on each other and to draw their own value from their place in relation to each other. It has been remarked how the introductory sequence to the movie draws upon this technique, especially through a use of symbolical images of Willard as Buddha or through the repetition of sounds (such as the noise of the helicopters) that blur the time limits between beginning

and ending.¹² We literally do not know whether the outset of the movie is not in fact taking place after Willard's murder of Kurtz. But what interests us here is more directly connected to writing: the writing constitutes an ironical comment on the images each time we see an inscription superimposed on an element of reality: Kilgore calling his "chopper" "Death from above," or Lance labelling his cannon "God's country," or Clean labelling the shield placed in front of his machine gun "canned heat"—suggesting the phrase "canned meat." These inscriptions—except Kilgore's—work in an ironical way towards a debunking of what they seem to claim: Lance's reality revolves not around God but around a puppy, a dog¹³ that causes the killing in the sampan indirectly, while the phrase "canned heat" ironically describes the reality of the men as cannon fodder in that war (**figure 3**).



Figure 3

¹² See on that topic Jacob Lothe, "The Problem of Narrative Beginnings: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*," *Revue des Lettres Modernes: Histoire des Idées et des Littératures* (2002): 35-58.

¹³ For another interpretation of this play on words between God and dog, see p. 317 in Holger Bachmann, "Hollow Men in Vietnam: A Reading of the Concluding Sequence of *Apocalypse Now*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 4, vol. 34 (1998): 314-34.

This technique of superimposition is even more efficient when textuality shifts to orality as a comment on images. The episode of Clean's death takes place while the latter is listening to an audiotape sent by his mother and quite ironically he dies while his mother recommends he manages to "stay out of the way of the bullets." This ironical comment¹⁴ on the scene reinvests the oral narration with a pathetic but also critical value towards the reality of the scene, in contrast with the episode in Nha Trang where the tape played by the officers served only as a pretext for the already decided condemnation of Kurtz, to which Willard has no choice but to agree. A similar use of orality takes place in the scene in which Kurtz reads *Time Magazine* to Willard: by his drawling, subtly ironic intonation, his pauses and the way he looks at Willard, Marlon Brando manages to decontextualize the articles he reads and enigmatically leaves them for Willard to read as potential bearers of truth, though he will not say whether truth lies in their explicit meaning or in the *distanced* reading he made of them. Once again orality—and the staging of reading, not the overt reference to texts—reshapes those texts and makes them liable to reinterpretation. By contrast, texts alone or images alone are not liable to this process: a good example lies in the pictures made by the character performed by Dennis Hopper and which Kurtz does not value as informative but for which he threatens him with death. Just as the reference to ivory in Conrad (the original reason in the

¹⁴ A subtle reading of that sequence, not very far from ours, is given by Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, who focus on the relative disconnection of sound and images: "[...] the voice of the mother oscillates between the diegetic and the nondiegetic, freely fading in and out, modulated only according to considerations of emotional impact, maximum pathos, and ironic distancing." (*loc. cit.*, p. 167).

novel why Kurtz threatened the Russian), images endanger the truth and the word/image relationship that can help the truth—or some kind of truth—to surface up.

This conjunction of written expression and orality with images is then the first strategy chosen by Coppola to reinvest meaning—ironical meaning—in the representational process. Yet, beyond that ironical posture, we do find another device aimed at the same result, and this is the way texts are *represented* on the screen, and not simply included in the diegesis, whether as guidelines or ironical distanciation. The main example here is of course Kurtz's dossier, which Willard keeps reading all through his travel up the river, and through which he seems to get a better image—mentally speaking—of Kurtz. Yet that image is also a graphic one, since the dossier is rich with pictures of Kurtz, his family, and the persons he has assassinated. How does that new articulation between both mediums (images and words) work out? In front of a profusion of illusory, deceptive intertexts—such as the American Civil War reference in Kilgore's management of the war or the Charles Manson's murder case revealing the fascination with death recurring in Western civilization—Willard's information on Kurtz appears as “restricted,” i.e. not only confidential but also limited in scope. Willard has access only to what Kurtz did and not to his motives, but this limitation re-establishes a subjective dimension in the approach to Kurtz that enables Willard to project himself into this future meeting with the colonel, unlike the process experienced by the other soldiers who are deceived by the more global communication articulated by the spectacular in the movie. That this meeting with Kurtz through his dossier is a subjective, personal one is obvious enough when Willard destroys it, as he no longer needs it now he has internalized or integrated his

relation with Kurtz. Of course that also points to an affinity between both characters, which the movie keeps suggesting in various other ways, but the main conclusion to retain still revolves around a restricted, personal relation made possible, although not directly communicable, between Kurtz and Willard through the dossier as a compound of words and images.

This is achieved more particularly through the specific content of this dossier, which is shown to contain personal, professional and family pictures no doubt important for Kurtz himself, mixed with portraits of the people he assassinated or caused to be assassinated. We also get a letter to his son read by Willard's voice over (adumbrating the tragic audio-tape scene where Clean is killed) and finally a strange, blurred picture in which Kurtz appears as merely outlined against the light (**figure 4**). From a textual viewpoint, the elements shot in the dossier revolve around its secrecy and anyone's responsibility engaged in handling it and managing to keep it top secret. Now, all these written elements included in the frames point to other dossiers, though not explicitly presented as such—that of Willard himself and that of Richard Colby, an officer sent to retrieve Kurtz some time ago but gone mad in his company. The primary meaning of these sets of words and images is to highlight the intrusion of the military authority in the private lives of these soldiers, just as Willard's receiving a petition for divorce in the introductory sequence makes him all the more liable to "forget himself"¹⁵ in his search for Kurtz. Those dossiers are then first a sign of the totalitarian oppression exerted by the military by getting knowledge of and using private information on officers. Yet, this

¹⁵ These are the words through which, in Conrad's text, the Russian describes Kurtz's gradual moral degradation among the natives.

reading of Kurtz's dossier by Willard is also a way to show him what *they* know about him—and how he may one day find himself in Kurtz's or Colby's position, hence the textual image of the dossier creates a secret affinity between Kurtz and Willard on the basis of what "they" (the military) can do to me/us—remember Willard saying "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what *they* really had against Kurtz" (my italics). Kurtz's dossier is then subtly a means for Coppola to establish the Kurtz/Willard affinity on a verbal/visual element facing them with the reality of their position in the plot. Here again, the relevant association between words and images leads to a revelation that redeems the graphic away from the deceptive, spectacular quality and opens it up to a real informative value.

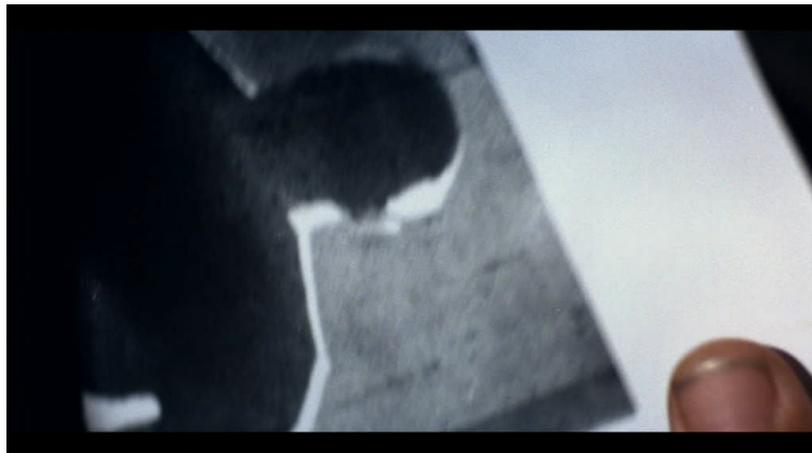


Figure 4

To end this essay in a less "inconclusive" fashion than the frame narrator accuses Marlow of being accustomed to,¹⁶ we could maybe take inspiration from Kurtz himself. When

¹⁶ See Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 141.

he shoots Kurtz's famous report on the suppression of savage customs,¹⁷ Coppola and his scriptwriters change the element of the post-scriptum as it appears in Conrad ("Exterminate all the brutes!", p. 208) to a phrase written in red *over* the text and reading "Exterminate them all. Drop the bomb" (**figure 5**). Apart from an obvious reference to the Cold War context still relevant in 1979, it seems that the *graphic* quality of that scene lies in the enactment of the word "exterminate" which takes up and develops—quite visibly owing to the hypertextual device introduced by Coppola in the movie—the very word used by the strange man with the loose tie in the Nha Trang Army Headquarters: "Terminate his command with extreme prejudice." By this resonance from one scene to another, Coppola once again uses the visual—the shot of Kurtz's report—as accessory to the verbal, making meaning complete and different. Here, this shift from "terminate" to "ex/terminate" points to the real "brutes" Kurtz may have in mind—not the Vietcong but the officers themselves. Through this constant interest for the word/image relationship and the subtle interaction he creates between them, Coppola does indeed appear as a very faithful adapter of Conrad's complex play between words and graphic symbols. This interaction in the film transposes—with many departures in context of course—the same concern for word/image relationships as those we examined in the novella as testifying to its hybrid nature. But the ways in which words and images are connected to fraud and illusion in Coppola, being much different from what they are in Conrad, again point to an essential evolution in the role and conception of such hybridity, and to the fundamental distrust of images grounded in the postmodern sensibility.

¹⁷ This title is turned into "The role of democracy in the underdeveloped world" in Coppola's movie, a clear reference to the neo-colonial justifications of the Vietnam War.

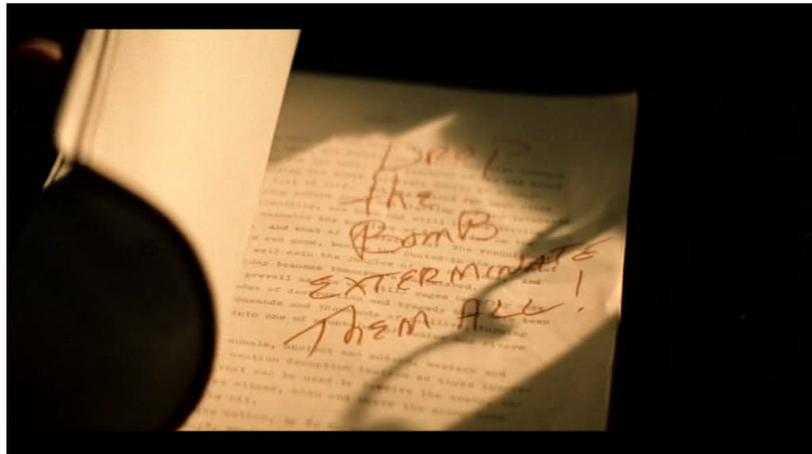


Figure 5