

**Roberts, Andrew and Easingwood, Peter**

**“Beyond the male romance: repetition as failure and success in *Apocalypse Now*.”**

**Originally Published in *Critical Survey* v. 9 no1 (1997) p. 19-35.**

The question posed by Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* is a very Conradian one: what does this experience mean?(FN1) A part of Conrad's achievement as a writer was to introduce epistemological and existential questions into narratives of adventure. In this way Conrad transformed the nineteenth-century masculine romance of exploration, conquest, war and heroism into a modernist form capable of raising profound philosophical and political issues.(FN2) While Coppola's film is not a version of *Heart of Darkness* so much as a radical reworking of Conrad's novella in the context of the Vietnam War, Conrad's text played a crucial part both in the initial idea of the film and in the problematic final stages of its production when the director, tormented by the inability to find a satisfactory ending, returned again and again to Conrad's text. In this paper we want to suggest that the concern with the problem of meaning which Coppola derives from Conrad initially led the director astray, in a search for existential meaning in a situation where only a politicised account could be ethically responsive. Eventually, however, Conrad's sense of meaning as above all problematic and elusive helped Coppola to introduce into his film a questioning of its own processes which rescued it from some of the simplistic or ideologically blind features of many Vietnam war films. In particular, it led the film to engage fruitfully if uncertainly with the issues raised by the very project of the representation of war: the complicity of the spectator, the problem of the aestheticisation of violence, the problem of communicability itself. In making this argument we draw on the miasma of inter-texts which surrounds *Apocalypse Now* like a Conradian 'misty halo :(FN3) these include, not only *Heart of Darkness* itself, but Eleanor Coppola's film *Hearts of Darkness* and her book *Notes on the Making of Apocalypse Now*, as well as *Dispatches*, the documentary narrative about Vietnam by Michael Herr, who wrote the voice-over narrative for Coppola's film.(FN4).

The consequences of Coppola's debt to Conrad are ambivalent. The concern with the problem of meaning is the weakness of *Apocalypse Now* as well as its strength because this concern leads the film back to masculine romance, with important ideological consequences. While these problems are to some extent shared by Conrad and Coppola, they are exacerbated in the latter's case by his different historical location. Conrad was taking a contemporary form (the nineteenth-century masculine romance) replete with ideological coercive force and reworking it in a spirit of philosophical scepticism, so that, for example, Marlow's journey up the Congo becomes one of problematic self-discovery rather than of imperial or personal triumph. With historical hindsight, we can see the ideological blindnesses which accompanied Conrad's philosophical and political insights: blindness, for example, to certain structures of race and gender informing the project of white male self-exploration. Nevertheless, in the context of the dominant discourses of his day, Conrad's work succeeds in genuinely questioning both political and philosophical assumptions. Coppola, in returning to Conrad, discovers ideas which, by the 1970s, had been incorporated into the dominant ideology of the culture within which Coppola was working. This is particularly so of the idea of an internal journey of self-discovery: an idea which served to unsettle the image of the nineteenth-century male hero, but which has become part of the standard baggage of the late twentieth-century hero. Self-questioning of this sort (what is my true nature? what is the meaning of my experience?) is no longer a threat to the male hero of the imperial adventure, but a means by which he validates his credentials.

The concern with meaning which Coppola derives from Conrad includes a rhetoric of the unsayable and a concern with the complicity of the spectator of violence with those who enact it. Marlow's fascination with Kurtz implies such a complicity, although it is characteristic of Conrad's obliqueness of method and his tendency to shift from the literal to the symbolic that Marlow does not actually witness Kurtz's violence, but only sees its aftermath and imagines its nature. The rhetoric of the unsayable has a strategic value in narratives of war, as demonstrated most familiarly in Chapter Twenty-Seven of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: 'There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. (FN5) There is far more to this than the idea of maintaining a decent reticence. The narrator certainly distances himself from the dishonesty of conventional accounts of military action. But by virtue of this stance, he associates himself instead with a different kind of warrior mystique which has its own more restricted code. In Eleanor Coppola's *Notes On the Making of Apocalypse Now*, she records that 'Barlow just looked up "apocalypse" in the dictionary. One of the definitions was, "revelation of hidden knowledge." (Notes, 214). The warrior mystique, as a professional code, is always distinguished by its rites of initiation and sacrifice. War becomes a source of hidden knowledge only available to the initiate. That members of this initiate are normally exclusively male is not insignificant in terms of the links between *Apocalypse Now* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

A contemporary instance of the use of the unsayable as part of the writer's strategy occurs near the beginning of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. The situation arises from Herr's encounter with a '4th Division Lurp (the Lurps are 'long-range recon patrollers) whose story is accorded classic status:

'Didn't you ever meet a reporter before? I asked him.

'Tits on a bull, he said. 'Nothing personal.

But what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:

'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.

I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone dumb as I was. (*Dispatches*, 13-14).

The point of this single-pointed story is that its point is absent. This is a story about the incommunicable nature of an experience. Herr has no news to report yet from this latest heart of darkness but the significant silence of the Lurp represents a critical stage in his initiation into the theatre of war. The anecdote illustrates the war correspondent's perennial problem of gaining access to the truth and is thus specifically about the experience of war. However, it also resembles a modernist epiphany of the unsayable, as found in stories such as *Heart of Darkness* or Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*, which are as much about the absence of meaning as its discovery; or about the discovery of its absence, a form of inverse transcendence. Herr's anecdote also foregrounds the issue of his own role as reporter and in so doing problematises the experience of Vietnam for his American readers, introducing the idea of the complicity of the spectator. Herr implies (in a comment highly relevant to Marlow's sense of identification and complicity with Kurtz) that the issue has a universal application: 'I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it (*Dispatches*, 24). Nevertheless there is also the suggestion that Vietnam represents a unique challenge, as what John Milius terms a 'psychedelic war or a 'rock-and-roll war (*Hearts*).

In *Apocalypse Now* the issue of meaning is elaborately introduced and then deferred. Various scenes and incidents pose the question of interpretation and understanding, including Willard's disorientation in the early scenes (as memories and the present are superimposed in his mind) and his obsessional study of Kurtz's file in an attempt to understand the man he is sent to kill. The rhetoric of the unsayable extends onto the wide screen. Hemingway's 'the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything is highly ironical in relation to the word 'Vietnam which has indeed come to mean anything and nothing: in American and to some extent Western European usage it has become both an empty signifier and a signifier full to excess. It has stopped meaning a place and started meaning an experience: specifically an American experience, but also an incommunicable experience. This might be one reason why *Heart of Darkness* seemed an appropriate basis for a Vietnam war film, since Conrad's 'heart and Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!" (112) share this quality of evoking a transcendent absence of meaning. Edward Said's comment on Conrad's style identifies its evocation of the unsayable: 'Is not this exactly a major fact of Conrad's style, this elaborate strategy for the controlled play of meaning in language, this scenic design for utterances delivering and withholding "original" truths?' (FN6).

Coppola himself exemplifies such a play of meaning in his use of the word 'Vietnam,' when, at the start of *Hearts of Darkness*, he claims that 'my film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It's what it was really like' (Hearts). What could 'Vietnam' mean in that sentence? Is it perhaps phatic (there to produce a frisson, to evoke a communal trauma) rather than referential? Indeed, what does 'is' mean in that sentence? How could a film be a country (or indeed a war)? The obvious answer would be, only if that country has been reduced, in this particular discourse, to a mobile signifier of the unsayable.

Michael Herr's contribution to *Apocalypse Now*, the writing of the voice-over commentary, is one of the most distinctive features of the film. An example of its subtlety is Willard's characterisation of Chef: 'the machinist, the one they called Chef, was from New Orleans. He was wrapped too tight for Vietnam. pause Probably wrapped too tight for New Orleans. Beneath the surface of tough wise-cracking here, Herr is gesturing towards key problematics of Conrad's text and Coppola's film. 'He was wrapped too tight for Vietnam one takes at first to imply that he was too highly strung to cope with the tension of Vietnam (the need for discipline and control in the face of fear). But then the laid-back associations of New Orleans suggest a new reading: he was too highly strung to cope with the relaxation of Vietnam (lack of discipline, loss of control). This latter reading is supported by the mood on the boat at the time (the crew are sunbathing, cleaning their teeth, dancing along to the Rolling Stones, later water-skiing behind the boat). This ambiguity feeds into the theme of control and loss of control. Which of these afflicts Kurtz (who has acquired great power but is allegedly 'mad )? Which afflicted the American forces in Vietnam: did they have too much power or too little control? The description is also a two-sentence summary of Conrad's elaborate cultural relativisation of the 'heart of darkness by means of parallels between the Congo and London. Chef has to face something he can't handle in Vietnam, but perhaps that was true in New Orleans, just as the horror Kurtz 'discovers in Africa is, Conrad implies, already there at his heart and the heart of so-called 'civilisation .

The making of *Apocalypse Now* depends crucially on the rhetoric of the unsayable in *Heart of Darkness*. The symbolic journey upriver into the heart of darkness seems to promise a disclosure that is variously characterised in the novella as an open secret, as a matter of professional recognition, as a conspiracy of silence, and as a personal confession. In the film and in Conrad's text, Kurtz's dying exclamation clinches the strange transaction between himself and the narrator. The scene confirms the uncanny effect of recognition between Kurtz and

Marlow/Willard and reveals this to the reader/audience as a moment of insight, but also a moment of failure of insight, of absence of meaning. The interest of the whole narrative then depends on how the reader/audience interprets the latent significance of that scene. The film becomes most ambitious in its adaptation of the text in the closing section, where the issues of audience-response become most challenging. For the reader of Conrad's text, an implication of Kurtz's statement may be the necessary admission of one's own fascination with the unspecified horror and therefore of one's own degree of involvement and guilt. The psychological twist which Conrad introduces into the story transforms mere confusion about what is happening into unavoidable complicity. Ultimately the heart of darkness, as a symbolic setting, implicates Marlow, and the reader as well, in the realisation of the horror which the dying Kurtz can barely articulate. As with the code of the warrior, however, it is worth noting the gendered nature of this process. Since Marlow explicitly excludes women as 'out of touch with truth (28), a woman reader, while not necessarily exempt from this sense of complicity, is likely to have a more oblique relationship to it. The female characters of *Heart of Darkness* are central to the plot but marginal to the existential knowledge that the plot reveals. Marlow's aunt gets him the job; the two knitting women symbolise a sense of fatefulness; both the African woman and Kurtz's 'Intended are, in different ways, closely identified with Kurtz's 'horror'. (FN7) Eleanor Coppola's role in the making of *Apocalypse Now* is interesting in this respect. At some points she seems to suspect exclusion, as when she suggests that her husband may have asked her to make *Hearts of Darkness* in order to keep her busy: that (to adopt the routinely sexist language of the Lurp) she is, as a documentary observer, merely the redundant 'tits on the bull of her husband's masculine romance of self-assertion, self-discovery, trial and initiation. Yet she also (in *Notes*) expresses the sense of the production team as her ideal community, and closely identifies herself with the processes of self-transformation which she detects in Coppola and others during the film making.

In adapting Conrad's psychological development to the cinema and projecting the horror onto the screen with such spectacular flair, Coppola achieves a double effect. His approach both encourages the audience to enjoy the production values of one of the most expensive war films ever made and yet at the same time invites them to reflect critically on the general cultural process, including filmmaking, which perpetuates the mystique of war and masks it as an aesthetic experience. The latter is very evidently the intention when Coppola himself appears, during a battle, as a filmmaker, urging the American soldiers not to look at the camera. The film explores a situation of collective guilt to which Herr, from his experience in Vietnam, is the most useful guide: 'I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did (*Dispatches*, 24). In the course of the film the question of responsibility is persistently raised ('Who is in command here? Willard unavailingly asks the GIs at Do Long Bridge) and the issue of collective guilt is brought into focus in the scene of the final meeting between Willard and Kurtz. This is literally the most obscure passage in the film. The killing of the caribou at the moment of Kurtz's assassination clearly indicates a scapegoat ritual. The allusion to *The Golden Bough* in the closing scenes confirms this as a feature of the symbolic code. Traditionally, the scapegoat ceremony signified the expulsion of evils from a society and was often preceded by a period of license: in the film, this period reaches a climax as Willard and Kurtz meet. The film audience must acknowledge Willard's ruthless dedication to his mission: this is the point of the massacre scene on the boat. Willard is marked out from the rest by his aloofness from the general chaos. But this attitude is precisely mirrored in the deadly logic of the argument which Kurtz produces. Willard's admiration for Kurtz is evident and so is Kurtz's acquiescence in his own killing. The ending of the film leaves open at least two conflicting conclusions. Either Kurtz is a scapegoat in the traditional sense and his death can be seen as a necessary sacrifice and a step towards sanity; or he is merely a scapegoat in the more popular sense and the purpose of his

assassination is to conceal the incompetence and dishonesty of others in the management of the war. In leaving this unresolved interpretative dilemma, Coppola as director hands over to the audience part of the problem of making sense of the narrative. As Garrett Stewart points out, scapegoating 'substitutes a single victim for all the members of the community but 'here we have two communities, the American military establishment and the Cambodian natives .(FN8) This might seem to simplify matters, implying that what is ritualistic practice for the Cambodians is convenient disposal for the American military, but such a conclusion would merely repeat, in however self-critical a form, the racist opposition of sophisticated West versus 'primitive 'natives who believe in ritual. Furthermore, as Stewart points out, 'it is only after Willard realises how far beyond the pale Kurtz has slipped in his programmatic depravity that he can murder Kurtz not as his officer's duty but as a ritualistic performance (Stewart, 470). Masculine identity and the code of authority are also at issue in the interpretation of the ending: the allusions to *The Golden Bough* might encourage us to see a patriarchal inheritance of priestly power, passed from Kurtz to Willard by the ritual slaughter of the former. Although the released ending to the film, in which Willard lays down his weapon and the Cambodians follows suit (as opposed to a previous version which ended with them acclaiming him as their new leader) seems to imply an abrogation of this inheritance by Willard, the psychological implications remains ambiguous. Yet another alternative ending, alluded to by George Lucas in *Hearts of Darkness*, involved a large-scale battle with the Vietcong, followed by Kurtz shooting down an American helicopter. This ending, which was in Lucas's original script, would have involved a return to male heroic romance, analogous to the much-criticised endings to *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*.(FN9) However, Coppola rejected this ending as failing to answer the moral issues and as being too gung-ho and macho; instead he planned to take the script and 'mate it with *Heart of Darkness* and whatever happened to me in the jungle (*Hearts*).

Thus Coppola has adopted Conrad's modernist ambiguity and even undecidability in a way that frees his film from, say, the simplistic Manicheanism of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. The limitations of Coppola's film arise from the ideological implications of the assumption that war has a personal and existential meaning which can be worked out in symbolic terms: that you can make sense of it within a narrative of personal crisis and self-development.(FN10) This assumption introduces a teleological thrust which, for all Coppola's explicit rejection of the 'macho', aligns the narrative with masculine romance: the quest of the hero for truth. Coppola's adoption of this form serves to contain and domesticate all the spectacular violence and absurdity of the action. If war is a romance then it has both an end and a purpose, achievable within the consciousness of the hero, however tortured his journey may be. Since Kurtz becomes the object of Willard's quest, he figures rather as the light at the end of the tunnel (that turns out to be an approaching train) so notoriously beloved of U.S. military spokesman during the Vietnam war. To assume that war has such a meaning and purpose is to go some way towards justifying it. Furthermore, the masculine quest-romance format universalises the film's implications and thus loses sight of the political specificity of the Vietnam war; in this respect Coppola's decision to abandon a scene at a French-owned plantation, with its specific reference to the history of colonialism in Vietnam, represents a weakening of the film's political purchase. More specifically, the idea that the meaning of war can be personal and existential feeds directly into the ideology that privileges the white American self over the demonised racial Other.

Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness* makes this apparent through its focus on the idea of a journey into the self. The idea of a journey into self has long been a commonplace of *Heart of Darkness* criticism and it is also a standard and by now cliched conception of the art-work in Western culture.(FN11) This emphasis on the self is usually, though not always, depoliticising. In the case of *Heart of Darkness* criticism, accounts of the novella which read it as a journey of self-discovery on the part of Marlow are open to the objection that they replicate the colonial ideology

in which Marlow remains partly enmeshed. That is to say by treating Africa, African peoples and African geography all as symbols of the inner self, unconscious or 'dark side of a white European male, these accounts replicate the colonial appropriation of the Other as mirror and site of projected fears and desires. Of course, such an interpretative approach can be repoliticised in precisely these terms: for example, by analysing Marlow's sense of self-discovery in critical relationship to the ideologies of gender and 'race which it evokes without fully confronting. The impression given by *Hearts of Darkness* is that both the Coppolas bought into the 'journey into the self idea in a big way. The principal theme of *Hearts of Darkness* is that the process of making *Apocalypse Now* was also a process of self-discovery for all concerned. Eleanor Coppola proclaims at the start of *Hearts of Darkness* (subtitled 'A Filmmaker's Apocalypse'): 'The film Francis is making is a metaphor for the journey into self. He had made that journey and is still making it. It's scary to watch someone who you love go into the centre of himself and confront his fears ... You have to die a little to come out the other side. Later she reflects on her own involvement in such a process:

Francis is in a place within himself. A place he never intended to reach. A place of conflict. And he can't go back down the river because the journey has changed him. I was watching from the point of view of the observer, not realising I was on the journey too. Now I can't go back to the way I was. Neither can Francis. Neither can Willard.

Martin Sheen, describing the filming of the opening scene of *Apocalypse Now*, of Willard in his Saigon bedroom, comments that 'It had to do with facing my worst enemy, myself.'

As an approach to the representation of the Vietnam war, this view is politically unilluminating. Kim Worthy notes that in *Hearts of Darkness*, like most American Vietnam war films, 'the U.S. experience of Vietnam is ... the central lesson of that war , and she goes on to quote Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe: 'As soon as we ... talk about Vietnam -- the culture, peoples, their history -- as our war, then even the issue of political responsibility for that war is simplified and historically contained. (FN12) To treat the Vietnam war as the occasion for American self-discovery tends to replicate both a denial of the humanity of the Vietnamese people and one of the founding assumptions of the war: that alleged American interests – whether self-interest or interest in the self -- are a sufficient justification for the use of force on non-Americans. One response to Eleanor Coppola's remark that 'It's scary to watch someone who love go into the centre of himself and confront his fears ... You have to die a little to come out the other side would be that it is less scary than watching someone you love burnt alive by napalm and that many Vietnamese and indeed Americans had to die more than 'a little . In this sense Coppola's claim that 'My film *is* Vietnam' is simply crass, and all the more so in using the familiar metonymy in which an entire country becomes merely the signifier of the experience of others; alongside this goes his apparent lack of reflection on the significance of the historical irony that the helicopters he is using for shooting the film in the Philippines are also, in between shoots, attacking Philippine rebel forces.

We are suggesting, however, that *Apocalypse Now* is a much more politically astute film than some of the comments of its makers would lead one to expect, and that the reason for this success lies in the very ideas of re-enactment and identification which the quoted comments evoke. Coppola's agonies over the ending suggest that he came up against the problem we have noted: that to explain the meaning of Willard's experience would be to impose a teleological shape on the war (as Herr notably does not in *Dispatches*): 'the questions that story kept putting me I couldn't answer. Yet I knew that I had constructed the film in such a way that to not answer would be to fail. It is significant that the way Coppola finally managed to create an ending was by returning to Conrad ('my choice was to make it much more back to *Heart of Darkness*, he says in

*Hearts*), and through the use of improvisation: a giving-up of directorial control. The result is that Coppola places himself at a lower epistemological level than his diegetic level (as the 'auteur') would lead one to expect: that, while exact homologies between film and text are impossible, there is a sense in which Coppola places himself in the role, not of Conrad, but of Marlow. Eleanor Coppola similarly seems to occupy this role in her film: as Kim Worthy notes, 'Eleanor Coppola is the film's narrator, its Marlow (Worthy, 27). While Marlow is the knowing subject of a journey of self-discovery, he is the unknowing subject of an enactment of ideologies of gender and colonialism: in reading *Heart of Darkness* in these terms we are reading what Marlow fails to realise about his experiences, as much as what he does realise. By the same token, it seems that Coppola worked with his film crew, writers and actors in such a way that his own failure to understand acquired creative value. A key instance of this would be the massacre of the Vietnamese civilians on the boat. We learn from *Hearts of Darkness* that this incident was requested and invented by the actors playing the crew of the U.S. patrol boat, and that they felt the incident was necessary to the development of their 'characters as they conceived them (though they also saw it in terms of the Mai Lai massacre). Again the overt focus as articulated by the participants in the film-making is on the self and on American not Vietnamese experience. Yet it is perhaps this incident which most clearly differentiates *Apocalypse Now* from gung-ho Vietnam movies. While the helicopter attack on the village earlier in the film evokes (and perhaps undermines through excess) the filmic rhetoric of war as excitement, power, success, the boat incident signals a radical alienation from this mood: war as mess, mistake, pointless destruction of life.

The discursive and political space occupied by *Apocalypse Now* may be analysed in terms of modes of repetition. The key distinction of modes would be that made by Deleuze in *Logique du sens* and developed by Hillis Miller in *Fiction and Repetition*. Miller translates Deleuze as follows:

Let us consider two formulations: 'only that which resembles itself differs,' 'only differences resemble one another' 'seul ce qui se ressemble differe,' 'seules les differences se ressemblent.' It is a question of two readings of the world in the sense that one asks us think of difference on the basis of preestablished similitude or identity, while the other invites us on the contrary to think of similitude and even identity as the product of a fundamental disparity 'd'une disparite de fond.' The first exactly defines the world of copies or of representations; it establishes the world as icon. The second, against the first, defines the world of simulacra. It present the world itself as phantasm.(FN13).

As Miller glosses this, the first, 'Platonic mode of repetition is 'grounded in a solid and archetypal model which is untouched by the effects of repetition, whereas the second, "Nietzschean mode 'posits a world based on difference in which repetitions are 'ungrounded doublings, ghostly in their lack of paradigm or archetype (Miller, 6). Coppola, in claiming 'my film is not about Vietnam, it is Vietnam, is laying rhetorical claim to the Platonic mode of repetition. In *Hearts of Darkness* he claims that 'the way we made the film was very much the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle. There were too many of us. We had access to too much money; too much equipment; and little by little we went insane. Thus he claims a reenactment of the essence of the 'Vietnam experience with the differences (film not war, Phillipines not Vietnam) subsumed in a 'pre-established similitude or identity. This aspiration is also apparent in John Milius's gleeful account of an early plan actually to shoot the film in Vietnam. It is an aspiration which crucially denies the status of the film as sign, or text composed of signs. For the sign, in Derrida's account, is necessarily inhabited by two modes of repetition which, if not fully homologous with those of Deleuze, point to the same unsettling of sameness by difference. The following is Kevin Hart's account of the Derridean sign:

it is a structural characteristic of the sign that it can always be repeated; and ... what we mean by 'sign' is that it is what it is in the absence of its animating presence ... Since it always functions in the absence of a presence, the sign has no self-presence by which its intelligible content can withstand the accidents of empirical differences.(FN14).

Coppola's adaptive strategy in *Apocalypse Now* also involves repetition since adaptation is a form of repetition: doing it again differently, here in a different medium. Although the freedom of Coppola's adaptation might seem to point to a Nietzschean mode, there is a paradox: that very freedom means that the claim of connection and debt to Conrad's text depends on the assumption of an unchanging essence: the essence of Conrad's story which survives changes of scene, period, plot, character etc. Crucially, however, the locating of essence is both precluded by Marlow's technique as storyteller and something which eludes him in practice:

to Marlow 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. (*Heart of Darkness*, 18).

It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream -- making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation ... we live, as we dream -- alone. (50).

'As we dream': the (narrated) world as 'phantom' rather than 'icon.' Coppola's attempt to harness an essence of Conrad's text undoes itself from within through the paradox that the 'essential feature which he does succeed in carrying over into film is precisely that absence of stable essential meaning which Marlow's narrative dramatises. The meaning of *Apocalypse Now*, like that of *Heart of Darkness*, is finally dispersed, elusive and dream-like. As Hillis Miller writes: 'Each form of repetition calls up the other, by an inevitable compulsion. The second is not the negation or opposite of the first, but its 'counterpart', in a strange relation whereby the second is the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out (9). Platonic meaning depends on a God-like figure outside the text: the author or director as absolute controller of meaning. Coppola indulges this fantasy at one point in *Hearts of Darkness*, when he alludes to the power of the director, whom he sees (rather naively) as the last dictator in an increasingly democratic world. This sits oddly with the use of improvisation by the actors, a ceding of directorial control which it seems Marlon Brando found hard to accept. In this contradiction, however, Coppola was true to his fantasy of reenacting the 'Vietnam experience', in that he reproduces the sense of power and of powerlessness of a giant superpower military machine able to cause massive destruction yet unable to 'win'. In adopting Marlow's role, that of a narrator who discovers meaning (and its absence) as he goes along, Coppola allows for the operation of Nietzschean repetition both at the level of his personal consciousness and at the level of technique (via improvisation).

The modes of repetition are also highly relevant to the historical subject matter of the film: the Vietnam War. Karl Popper uses the term 'novelty' to describe an historicist conception of how an event recurring in the history of a given society may be differently conceived precisely because it is a repetition and therefore coloured by the collective memory of its previous occurrence.(FN15) Although Popper himself rejects such historicist conceptions, the concept fits very well certain discourses arising from the Vietnam War. During the war the concern not to 'repeat the mistakes of the French' was most memorably expressed by Lyndon Johnson's proclamation that he did not want 'any damn Dinbinfoo' (alluding to the French defeat at Dien



Bien Phu).(FN16) Subsequently the Vietnam War has become a spectre haunting American and European neo-colonial adventures: a recent British television programme about Somalia had a write-up which asked, rhetorically, how a mob of guerrillas could resist the might of a superpower (an old story, unless of course you've never heard it). The obvious quote is: those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it, but Michael Herr makes what he calls 'a little history joke : 'Those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it too (*Dispatches*, 203).

The account of repetition most fitting the generality of Vietnam War films would seem to be that of Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. On the way to adducing an instinctual 'compulsion to repeat, he examines trauma caused by war or accident: 'dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.(FN17) He goes on to consider childhood games and postulates a repetition of a passive situation in order to make it active: 'these efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not (Freud, 285). At the same time he suggests that 'the repetition carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort but none the less a direct one (286). He also adduces dramatic tragedy as an example of the pleasurable representation of painful experiences (287). Repetition of trauma; an attempt to affirm mastery; a pleasurable confrontation in art with what might be intolerable in life: all these would seem highly appropriate to the Vietnam War film as an American genre. The political weakness of the genre would seem to lie particularly in the game of mastery, serving as a diversion from question of the reasons, nature and morality of United States involvement in Vietnam to questions of military efficacy and the reinforcement of compensatory fantasies of military omnipotence. Coppola both makes these impulses explicit and subverts them. 'My film is not about Vietnam, it is Vietnam' is part of the fantasy of doing it again, only better, a fantasy uncannily shadowed by the use of Philippine helicopters. Repetition is part of the limitation of the film. Cliche (here the cliché of self discovery) is repetition that erodes meaning, hollows it out. That this is a common fate of the sign is implied by Derrida's analysis of difference within repetition and exemplified in Kurtz's last words, in the story told by the Lurp, in the use of 'Vietnam to mean everything and nothing. In repeating the structures of masculine romance and the cliché of a journey of self discovery Coppola might have sacrificed any political credibility that his film could claim. He saved it by failing: by taking his reenactment far enough to repeat the American failure in Vietnam he won past the fantasy of power to the realisation of despair. By reenactment (however much that reenactment is a fantasy, and indeed a morally dubious fantasy), Coppola, we suggest, made a triumph of his defeat. His very inability to create a clear ending opened up an aporia: a space for real uncertainty. Conrad's story is not free from the ideologies of his day, but it does face up to non-knowledge, to the failure of understanding. Coppola, for all the naiveté\* of certain of his pronouncements, offers us something of value because he too glimpsed the problem of his own complicity. He could not explain the meaning of 'Vietnam , but he could, by the dramatisation of his own uncertainties, reveal something of what is wrong with that line of questioning: that the American quest for 'meaning in Vietnam inevitably reconstructs the war as a scene of fatal fascination. The fact that Coppola and Herr show a high degree of self-consciousness in this enables them to acknowledge the fascination and perhaps even to begin to overcome it. (FN18).

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola, written by John Milius and Francis Coppola, narration by Michel Herr (Omni Zoetrope, 1979).
2. On Conrad's use of adventure romance, see Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995), 18.
4. *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, written and directed by Fax Bahr with George Hickenlooper; documentary footage directed by Eleanor Coppola (ZM Productions, 1992); Eleanor Coppola, *Notes: On the Making of Apocalypse Now* (1979; New York: Limelight, 1992); Michel Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; London: Pan, 1978). Further references will be given in the text as: Hearts, Notes, Dispatches.
5. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 144.
6. Edward Said, 'Conrad and Nietzsche', in *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. Norman Sherry (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), 70.
7. See Nina Pelikan Straus, 'The Exclusion on the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20,2 (Winter 1987), 123-137.
8. Garrett Stewart, 'Coppola's Conrad: the Repetitions of Complicity', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Spring 1981), 455-474.
9. On the ending of *Lord Jim*, see Padmini Mongia, "'Ghost of the Gothic': Spectral Women and Colonized Spaces in *Lord Jim*", in *Conrad and Gender*, ed. Andrew Michael Roberts (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), 1-15.
10. It is on this point that we diverge from Stewart's very useful article, which like ours sees the film in terms of repetition and complicity. He concludes by stressing the revelation of existential truth: "The 'confrontation' Willard lives and is willing to die for is disclosed as a long appalling stare at the true form, the human form, in that broken, distorting, but still functioning mirror with which the film so loadedly opens. Apocalypse, now or to come, means in its original sense, after all, not only Doomsday but Revelation (474). Our contention is that the film, through its successes and its failure, finally demonstrates the inadequacy, morally and politically, of seeing Vietnam as a mirror for the American male self.
11. For example Albert Guerard, in a chapter indicatively titled 'The Journey Within', in *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 33-48.
12. Kim Worthy, 'Hearts of Darkness: Making Art, Making History, Making "Vietnam"', *Cineaste*, 19,2/19,3 (December 1992), 24, quoting from Berg and Rowe's essay 'The Vietnam War and American Memory', in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*.

13. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 5-6, translating Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969), 302.
14. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.
15. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957; rev. edn London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1961), 9.
16. Quoted Dispatches, 88.
17. Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 11, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey and Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 282.
18. A novel recently translated into English serves powerfully to illustrate that there could be another side to the same story that in this case is missing: a North Vietnamese perspective. Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, trans. Frank Palmos and Thanh Hao (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993).