

Narration in *Apocalypse Now*

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In this paper, I'll try to “unscrew” the film means of the narration in Francis Ford Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979), partly in comparison to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). As a movie I'll use the long (202 min.) “Redux” version released in 2002, because I find it more pleasant in the pace and probably more close to the original intentions of filmmaker, which are in terms of duration always limited by restraints of distributors — Coppola himself stated, that he prefers the longer one.

Not only the fact, that Coppola (and John Milius, who written the screenplay together with him) transposes the novel criticising colonialism into the period of Vietnam War, gives the story more general message. It's also Conrad, who starts his narration in England by imagining the Romans conquering the “dark” Europe.

“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” [...] Sandbanks, marshes, savages — precious little to eat fit for a civilised man, nothing

but Thames water to drink. No Falerian wine here, no going ashore [...] — cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death.

As if the Odysseus-like journey of Marlow (in the book, or the corresponding character of cpt. Willard in the movie) was also a journey into the history of civilisation, finding the roots of the darkness. Neither of them won't find any answer, they only gaze with amazement. Both of them are witness to something crazy, unbelievable and primordial. Despite the fact, they are cynical, they have an active role, but comparable only to chesspieces in hands of higher powers (see below).

Conrad is using "framed narrative" for his book. The reference point and place is a ship on river Thames, where Marlow is telling his story to his fellows. Probably one of them is the actual narrator of the book, we don't know his name nor personality, he is giving us only Marlow's speech and description of surrounding environment, which is more and more dark in the dusk, as the story is. Sometimes, when Marlow is quoting someone, who is quoting someone else, we get parenthesis of three direct speeches (and Conrad runs out of arsenal of quotation marks). As the tale naturally flows, sometimes Marlow is not following the chronological order, which is creating also certain portion of tension.

Coppola is not using such complicated structure of narration. The story is almost linear (not taking into the account the initial

flashforwards of the war in Willard's room and some flashbacks of the lunch conversation with the officers later on), we early discover, that Willard himself is the narrator of the story (first person in the voiceover — although it's not the voice of the same actor).

Such is also a probable aim of the first sequence — to get as much as possible into the main character and prepare the audience to read the film through his eyes (literally — we have a lot of time to see his eyes here, superimposed with the slowed-down explosions of war). I'm quite not able to figure out, what makes this scene so powerful. Maybe it's the relative simplicity of the initial shots. Maybe it's the music by The Doors, appropriate and inappropriate at the same time. Maybe it's just the semantical reading of Willard's head upside down ("I don't live in the normal world anymore" or "I don't understand at all"). Diabolic editor and sound designer Walter Murch establishes here also a powerful device of helicopter sound (it's the first sound we hear even before the picture appears), on the edge of reality and inner world of character (balanced also by usage of sound distortion effects), where it means... probably "the horror". (We can hear the sound again as a mean of gradation in the scene of the lunch with officers. It may be real there, it may be not, we don't know. And notice, that helicopters are associated almost with all the scenes of "institutional" absurdity or horror — Killgore, Playboy bunnies...)

Maybe the strength of first scene is also a result of Coppola's usage of Stanislavsky's method: the director stated¹ that the actor Martin Sheen has got into such state during shooting of this scene, that they affraided him even attacking the crew. He broken the mirror and injured his arm, which was real as well.

Nevertheles the initial scene is telling us, that we're going to watch personal story. And later on we hear also the reason: "There is no way to tell his [col. Kurtz] story without telling my own. And if his story is realy an confession, then so is mine." It catches our attention and don't leave us. And it also let us idetificate with the main character. The whole film sticks to his perspective, and I even noticed, that in a few scenes, where Willard is not preset, I start to be a little anxious.

We follow also another identification. Willard's concentrated (and drunk) moments on the boat, reading Kurtz's documenta-tion. As he goes through all the absurd moments of war, he un-derstands Kurtz more and more. Sometimes the editor even as-sembles close-ups of Willard's eyes with the voice-over of Kurtz.

As Conrad is literally overloadig the text with various syn-onymes of darkness, Willard's boat is gradually entering the darkness of jungle.

Storyline is leading us up on the river. Scenes with Ride of Valkyries, Killgore, Playboy bunnies etc. . . are usually most re-

¹in the "making of" documentary *Hearts of Darkness: The Filmmaker's Apocalypse*

mebered by people, who seen the film (Killgore's: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like. . . victory" is one of most famous film quotes). As Coppola said, he put violence, sex and humor, because he wanted people to see the film. On the other hand, those scenes are creating very powerful sense of absurdity, using contrast (innocent kids in white clothes leaving the school before helicopters' attack. . .). By set they are also telling us, that Vietnamese are mostly Christians (we see abandoned church) — so this war is not in the name of some religion or idea. If so, the idea is not held by the uncoordinated people in the field. It's also telling us (even through Kurtz's words in the end), why had Americans lost in Vietnam (and why they'll lose the war in Afghanistan or Iraq) — soldiers who are more interested in parties, fun and surfing must lose in the opposition of people fighting to save their homes, who had many relatives killed by the enemy.² The reality of Vietnam is largely inspired by Michael Herr's non-fiction *Dispatches*.

There are probably many political and cultural aspects of the film, I cannot decipher without knowledge of American culture. I suppose that songs like *Satisfaction*, *Susie Q* or the psychedelic guitar music heard in the shelter in flight of the bridge are usually associated with sort of rebellion or contraculture in USA, which is Coppola using as another contrast (or even judge-

²see the Frederick Wiseman's documentaries about US Army or *Short films from Iraq*, film assembled from "home videos" of US soldiers in Iraq

ment?). He also stretches the role of media in the Vietnam War using the absurd TV crew (self-ironically, the crew consists of his director of photography and himself shouting: "Don't look into the camera!" which makes Willard stay in silent shock) and transforming bizarre Kurtz's admirer, Pierrot-like Russian from Conrad's novel, into "freelance photographer". One scrap from newspaper received by mail by one of the sailor associates col. Kurtz with Charles Manson, leader of a commune "based on complete subordination to him", which members carried several murders in 1969.

As Willard goes into the wilderness, the chapters of civilisation absurdity are less numerous, the set is darker and darker. Last two interludes — french plantation and Playboy bunnies lost in a camp destroyed by typhoon — are in some sense means of leaving the world. Last "our" people holding the civilisation in wild jungle; and the senselessness of sexual carving (if I can offer a buddhist interpretation) or the final emptiness of icons of the cult of the body. The woman in french plantation pronounces important key to reading both Willard and Kurtz: "There are two of you. One who loves, and one who kills."

It's amazing, how accurate can Coppola follow the Conrad's novel. Even the man, who is killed by spear on the boat, is black (African slave in the original book, Afro-American soldier in the film). He adds only one important character: surfer Lance. Us-

ing psychedelic drugs³ he is gradually transforming himself to be a “savage”, he is even conducting some primordial ritual when burying his dead fellow into the river. Coppola is using afternoon contra-light in this scene as well as in all the scenes, where he wants to create some sense of serenity. And Lance’s “savagery” is also the probable reason why Kurtz’s people accept him without keeping him in “brainwashing cage”.

In my opinion, the most problematic is the end of the film. Director’s uncertainty is almost palpable. Coppola admitted, that the film is expected to answer the questions which he cannot answer at all. Marlon Brando, who starred collonel Kurtz, has not overcome all the difficulties of shoot in jungle. He asked a million dollars advance and came just for several weeks. Maybe it’s visible on some subliminal level. That’s probably why I couldn’t believe him his role. But on the other hand, it may fit the character of Kurtz. He is supposing himself to be some enlightened leader (we see some references to Buddha’s teaching as the “diamond bullet” of enlightenment or Kurtz not killing the mosquitos. Willard kills a mosquito in his hand without watching in the first scene. Kurtz has similar killing-machine reflexes, but he frees the mosquito then from his fist) and he is not enlightened at all, he is ruled by anger (Drop the bomb, exterminate them all). Or maybe it’s that artificial construction of his “teaching”,

³the actor Sam Bottoms admits he was using quite a lot of LSD, marihuana and amphetemines during the shoot (Stanislavsky?)

which makes me to take his character as unrealistic.

Anyhow, at the end, Willard is no more controlled by his personal will. He emerges from the waters of the river changed into a performer will of higher powers, almost as some mythological character, almost as in myth of The Golden Bough. He kills Kurtz in parallel editing with a ritual of killing the water-buffalo⁴ and symbolically drops his weapon. The savages, astonished, drop their weapons as well as it would suggest the start of peace — not only in the sense of end of war.

⁴the ceremony is based on real ritual performed by film extras in between of shoot, noticed by Coppola's wife