THE EVIL OF MODERNITY: JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S *APOCALYPSE NOW*

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Cywilizator, oszalały Kurtz,	One of the civilizers, a madman named Kurtz,
Miał kość słoniową ze śladami krwi,	A gatherer of ivory stained with blood,
Na memoriale o światłach kultury	Scribbed in the margin of his report
Pisał "ohyda" a więc już wstępował	On the Light of Culture "The horror." And climbed
W dwudziesty wiek.	Into the twentieth century.

Czesław Miłosz, A *Poetical Treatise*, 1956

After December 13, 1981 the front pages of world press showed a photograph of a tank in front of the Moskwa Cinema in gray wintertime Warsaw. A huge inscription on the building announced: "Apocalypse Now." It was the beginning of martial law in Poland.

Apocalypse Now by Francis Ford Coppola, is a film adaptation of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, which has inspired many artists and still continues to do so. For Czesław Miłosz it presented a prophetic vision of the 20th c.: the time of world wars, genocides and totalitarianisms. The Zeitgeist from Miłosz's A *Poetical Treatise* is wearing a necklace made of cut off heads resembling those stuck on the palisade in Kurtz's camp. For T.S. Eliot, whose 1925 poem *The Hollow Men* appears in Coppola's film, Conrad's work portends a crisis of humankind by stigmatising the "fragility of the base on which modern people built their dilapidating ark, namely language."[1] The literary critic Juan Asensio points out another example of a work directly inspired by Conrad's novella: *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* by George Steiner, whose depiction of Hitler shows a corruptive voice similar to Kurtz. The

[1] Juan Asensio. "Dissection du cadavre de la littérature." *Stalker*, 4 (http://stalker.hautetfort.com/); cf. *Idem*, "Monsieur Ouine et Cœur des ténèbres." *Etudes bernanosiennes*, no. 23, Lettres modernes. Minard, 2004.

anthropological crisis of modernity – the crisis of post-Darwinian and post-Nietzschean era marked by inner emptiness – is visible simultaneously in the works of many authors, such as Robert Musil *(The Man Without Qualities)*, Marcel Proust, Hermann Broch, Georges Bernanos... Traces of Conrad have also been indicated in the ethnological work of another Polish émigré, Bronisław Malinowski.[2]

When Coppola adapted *Heart of Darkness* to the screen in 1979, he transposed the late 19th c. colonial reality into the imperial reality of the 1960s. This new time frame already contained the experiences of Auschwitz and Kolyma and was contemporaneous with the genocide orchestrated by Pol Pot (1975–1979). The crimes of the "Khmer Rouge" leader were still not widely known at that time and the film, in a way, foreshadowed them – as it may have the present situation in Iraq. Coppola opposed the US involvement in the war in Vietnam and exposed the cruelty of the war, conducted comfortably from a distance. But already then Coppola also posed a question which, after September 11, 2001, has become our own – the question concerning the Evil of Modernity. The question is new, since for a long time, despite *shoah* and the communist genocide, Western democracies tended to think that evil was external: evil was projected at non-democratic, totalitarian or dictatorial states – perceived as being at stark contrast with democracy within which all problems were supposedly solved solely by dialog and negotiation. This allowed for a certain tolerance of evil in the name of individual freedom. However, today the examples of paedophilia and terrorist attacks make it clear that some problems are nonnegotiable and that evil exists everywhere within every human being, as it has been long indicated by (among others) Leszek Kołakowski and Paul Ricoeur.

The anthropological crisis of modernity has also disrupted the Enlightenment myth of Reason and Progress, which has lead to "metaphysical horror" – as proposed by Kołakowski.[3] To paraphrase the author, this horror consists in a collapse of ontology when one Nothingness saves another one from its nullity: if the Absolute, just like time – its enemy, defeated but still alive – does not yield to a conceptual reduction to anything, then its name, if it does have any name, is Nothingness.[4] This reveals the other side of metaphysical horror: if God is the Absolute, there is no good and evil and *a fortiori* there is no difference between them.[5] Yet, it is the awareness of good and evil that makes being part of a community possible, it is also the condition for my

[2] James Clifford. "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski." *Reconsructing Individualism*: *Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*. T.C. Heller, M. Sosna, D.E. Wellbery eds. Stanford Univ. Press 1986, 140–162; "O etnograficznej autokreacji: Conrad i Malinowski." Transl. Michał Krupa. *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*. Ed. R. Nycz, Kraków: Baran and Suszczyński, 1997, 236–268; Ian Watt. *Conrad in the Nineteeth Century* (1980), *Conrad w wieku dziewiętnastym*. Transl. Maria Boduszyńska-Borowikowa, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1984; Z. Mitosek, "Kto zrozumie dzikich?" *Poznanie (w) powieści*. Kraków: Universitas, 2003, 96.

[3] L. Kołakowski. *Jeśli Boga nie ma... Horror metaphysicus*. Transl. M. Panufnik, Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 1999 (the original title: *Metaphysical Horror*, 1988).

[4] *Ibidem*, 236–237.

[5] *Ibidem*, 265.

constant self-confirmation of being myself.[6] In other words, the nihilistic crisis leads to an absolute loneliness with only Darwinian "natural selection" and Nietzschean "will to power" at one's disposal. Hence the feeling that one exists only by crushing, dominating, murder.

The analysis of the main strands of Conrad's novella and their comparison with Coppola's film adaptation will show us two stages in the perception of the metaphysical Evil of modernity. Although evil is strictly linked with the political, economical and social context of an era, Cezary Wodziński speaks of an epiphany of Evil.[7] In the final analysis, everything takes place within consciousness. Let us not forget that the end of the 19th c. also marks the dawn of psychoanalysis, thus the discovery of the subconscious, which is as important for self-awareness as rationality. Furthermore, it is also the time when Marxism – opposing the dominant social discourse and the socio-economical *praxis* – becomes more widespread. It is all these conflicts and tensions that have been captured by Conrad, and – on a different scale – by Coppola.

Below, we will first analyse the semantic structure of *Heart of Darkness* and then of *Apocalypse Now* in order to compare their modes of addressing the subject of Evil. These observations will be followed by a delineation of contemporary attempts at solving the ontological and ethical difficulties hinted at above.

1. MIRROR REFLECTIONS AND SHIFTS IN CONSCIOUSNESS

There is an astounding number of contradictory interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*. It is true that the narrative is not clear: the plot is not always easy to grasp, both narrators have separate, although not opposing, points of view; what we frequently deal with instead of facts are allusions giving rise only to impressions and intuitions. The key to this problem seems to be the symbolic technique of screen-images (to be discussed later), which, so to speak, condense the meaning of events – this meaning being more important than the events themselves. It is exactly the mode of interpretation that is in the centre of the narrative:

> 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.[8]

[6] *Ibidem*, 270.

[7] "Epifania zła. Partytura." I *cóż po filozofie... Eseje*. Warszawa: IFS PAN, 1992, 129–145.

[8] Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*, *Au cœur des ténèbres*. Bilingual edition, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, 30–32. All quotations from *Heart of Darkness* will come from this edition.

The story told by Marlow, who grew up on child stories full of heroes and dreamed of adventures but later experienced the cruel and absurd reality of colonial conquest, is put as if in parentheses by another narrator, which makes Marlow one of two protagonists. The other one is the mythical Kurtz, regarded as an ingenious trader, who, as a young man, dreamed of bringing progress and enlightenment to "barbaric" peoples, and at the same time of developing ivory trade. Eventually, he stretched his mercantile logic to its limits, not by acting differently from others, but by acting more radically. Following his own methods, he obtained more ivory more easily than his colleagues and competitors. At first his methods are not known, but gradually we learn that they involve murder and an ideology of profit at all cost. Kurtz not only uses violence but also plays the role of a demigod before African cannibalistic tribes, being treated like a king-shaman, an absolute lord of life and death of the "brutes."

Heart of Darkness has a triptych-like structure: the first part is the dream of adventure, the second – the journey to the wild land, the third – the discovery of the laws of darkness, such as fascination with absolute power and the temptation of primitive instincts. The clash of civilisations ends with a verdict passed by Kurtz, the protagonist proper, on himself. The epilogue emphasizes the impossibility of translating two distinct worlds into one another – the European and the African world – since Marlow feels compelled to lie to the idealised Intended, not to destroy her perception of Kurtz and thus of the world. Telling the story brings *catharsis* to Marlow who needs to free himself from his moral burden.[9] But the two realities remain untranslatable, as if beyond language, without a common denominator – it is only possible to realise their co-existence.

It can be said that the subject of Conrad's novella is not so much facts but social discourse – or its relativisation (in a sense: its deconstruction). In fact, there are two discourses in the text, both of which are based on a contradictory colonial *praxis*. The first one is the discourse of a colonial state, represented mainly by women: Marlow's aunt and, to some extent, the Intended, but also by young Kurtz. This discourse advocates the need to enlighten and civilise "savages," to teach them the law of developed countries. However, it is ridiculed by acts such as the French navy shooting at the jungle for no apparent reason or punishing black people for crimes committed by the colonisers themselves. The second discourse is of a Judeo-Christian origin: an ethical reflex prevents Marlow from telling the truth to the Intended, it triumphs also in the final self-examination of Kurtz who evaluates his life as "horror." But there is also a third discourse to be seen, although not explicitly: the discourse of the *praxis* of colonial conquest, with its slogans of effectiveness, success and profit at all cost. The three discourses are mutually contradictory, which exposes the vacuity of the civilisation which proclaims itself to be Christian and of colonisation which pretends to be benevolent, rigorous, dedicated to work and honest (the book-keeper of the company is the best example here).

[9] Cf. Z. Mitosek, *op.cit*.

Putting aside this conflict of discourses, we can detect another trace of reality in the novella, namely human interaction. The novella can also be said to be structured like a play of mirror reflections, which is reminiscent of Shakespeare, Conrad's favourite author. Already at the level of the plot several reality planes illuminate one another: the conquest of Britain by Romans, the conquest of Congo by Europeans, and the situation of the ship bound for darkness where the story takes place:

> Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was bared by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.[10]

But the most important play of mirrors is that between the two main characters of the novella, Marlow and Kurtz. Some critics see in them the figures of (spiritual) Father and Son[11] or doppelgängers.[12] There are many arguments for and against these propositions, but we will limit ourselves only to the obvious relationship between the two characters. Marlow is fascinated by the successful, superhuman figure of Kurtz, living beyond good and evil and – in comparison with other characters – representing a kind of greatness. Kurtz, in turn, clearly changes after confrontation with Marlow. Why?

Before we start to answer this absolutely fundamental question, let us have a closer look at the two protagonists' interaction. Marlow discovers a new dimension of reality because of Kurtz; on the other hand, Kurtz discovers himself as he really is thanks to Marlow's perception. An inner change in both of them follows: Kurtz discerns the genuine nature of reality (and of himself) before he dies, and Marlow leaves the company filled with disgust. The discourse of civilisation in which Marlow, influenced by his aunt, believed at first becomes contradicted by the practice of colonisation tantamount to murder, pillage and regression to the level of archaic magic and dreams of omnipotence – exactly the dreams of Kurtz, the child of a German father and a French mother, in a word, of a European:

> Kurtz discoursed. A voice! A voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. [...] But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession

[10] Conrad, 332.

[11] There are some arguments to support this thesis in the light of Lacan's psychoanalysis. As Cl. Maisonnat points out, where the name-father, the foundation of the law, is gone, it is replaced by the image of an idol. See Cl. Maisonnat, "'Truth stripped of its cloak of time' ou enigme de la littéralité dans *Heart of Darkness*." J. Paccaud-Huguet, *op.cit.*, 83.

[12] As V. Pauly notices, Kurtz looks like Marlow's doppelgänger: they are both exceptional and atypical. Kurtz and Marlow are joined by an obvious bond which doubles – on the opposite pole – what it joins by a parallelism between the frame story and the inner story – the metropolis and the colony. V. Pauly. "Les mots d'ordre du jour et le secret des ténèbres." J. Paccaud-Huguet, *op.cit.*, 75.

> of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power.[13]

Only the ethical discourse is not discredited, however, it is placed as if in between parentheses, since it is based on a lie.

Now we can go back to Kurtz's metamorphosis, to his "salvation," which for unclear reasons is not obvious to all critics, although there is a range of passages which testify to it. The word salvation has been put in inverted commas because it does not refer to the salvation of the soul in Christianity – the sense is not religious, since we remain in the nihilistic era of the crisis of civilisation defined by the works of Darwin and Nietzsche, as it was signalled in the introduction. The humankind with a clear moral centre is gone – what is left are "hollow men," to use T.S. Eliot's metaphor. Thus "salvation" must perforce acquire a different character. Perhaps this is what Conrad's work is primarily about. Let us examine a few excerpts from the text.

At a certain moment Marlow morally forces Kurtz to account for his actions:

> "You will be lost," I said – "utterly lost." One gets sometimes such a flash of inspiration, you know. I did say the right thing [...]. I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. [...] I had [...] to invoke him – himself – his own elated and incredible degradation. [...] If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. [...] I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.[14]

In the end, influenced by Marlow's words, Kurtz, who is terminally ill, decides to return to the civilised world. Even though he dies on his way there, on the boat, in his last gesture he carries out a kind of self-examination by whispering the famous words: "The horror! The horror!" How should we translate them? In Polish there are two versions of the exclamation: "Groza!" (terror) and "Ohyda!" (hideousness). Another option could be the word from the Apocalypse, "obrzydliwość" (abomination), but it is too long. In any case, what is important here is a kind of final reckoning and not only individual, but embracing the whole of civilisation. Congo in the 19th c. was what Auschwitz or Kolyma were for the 20th c. This kind of salvation consisted in a clear realisation of the true nature of reality. The truth is salvation. Not transcendent Truth, but the – metaphysical in spite of all – truth of an individual, a lucidity of ethical perception shared by a community, taken over by a collectivity – this is the purpose of Marlow's story. Discerning the epiphany of Evil, indicated by Wodziński, introduces clarity of vision into the opacity of the world.

Before we look for general conclusions, let us refer to a few other quotations confirming Marlow's certainty of Kurtz's metamorphosis, a secular variety of salvation:

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[13] Conrad, 294–296.

[14] *Ibidem*, 284–288.

> [the man] who had pronounced a judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth.[15]
>
> He had summed up – he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth [...].[16]
>
> It was an affirmation, a moral victory [...].[17]
>
> It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, [...] which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the *salvation* of another soul.[18]

Marlow, as if by providing a mirror reflection of Kurtz's monstrous greatness, makes him realise who he had truly become, which would have been impossible without the criterion of good and evil, to refer again to Kołakowski's words from the introduction. Later, as if taking over the burden of Kurtz's conscience on himself, Marlow becomes almost incurably ill. But there is no Saviour, it is people who save one another. Thus Marlow, by passing the story on to other sailors, in turn, burdens them with the horror of reality. Then, the final image of infinite darkness at the horizon of the ocean compels *us*, the readers, to take the problem upon ourselves. This can be compared to the mechanism of secular priesthood in which – after the Nietzschean death of God – all people of good will take part. It may also presage the "interhuman church," which Gombrowicz and Miłosz wrote about much later. Yet at present we remain still on the brink of the discovery of the relativisation of values.

Indeed, a true Copernican shift in symbolism takes place here. The Enlightenment patronises plunder and genocide – admittedly, two ancient human instincts. The only positive value is connected with the fog, with opacity – just as in the Bible where a cloud or fog mark the presence of the Primeval.

But what lies in the centre is the word "darkness" which we will return to later. The symbols connected with darkness are fog, "whitewashed tombs" (Brussels – the capital of the colonial power), woman in two forms: a personification of the wild jungle and the embodiment of the ethical discourse, the spiritual Intended, and, finally, the river, the route of a terrifying initiation, the revelation of human unconsciousness and human primitive instincts. But since the subject of the novella is not so much reality as the possibility of realising reality and expressing it – the double, mirror-like narrative enables objectification of facts through their perception. Since then it is not the truth about reality, but the possibility of representing it that is crucial. What is sought is not the kernel of the nut but the nutshell, the uncertain, subjective, evanescent intuitive halo of sense reflected like misty light from the surface of the moon.

The logocentrism of the discourse of civilisation is over, long live the subjectivist discourse of hollow men. Because only they will remain! Such is the final image of

[15] *Ibidem*, 302.

[16] *Ibidem*, 304.

[17] *Ibidem*, 306.

[18] *Ibidem*, 316, italics mine.

the crisis of reality – an ontological and nihilistic crisis linked with the collapse of the centre, from now on – on equal terms with the periphery.

2. THE BROKEN MIRROR

Coppola's film begins with the main character waiting for a new mission in a hotel room in Saigon. He is completely shattered – morally and physically. He is drinking heavily and is falling apart as he states himself in voice over. Presumably in order to pull himself somewhat together he performs a few aikido-style martial exercises. In a sudden gesture he breaks the mirror and thus his own reflection, as if he was the enemy. Indeed, he is his own worst foe.

The film, just like Conrad's novella, has two beginnings.[19] The first one has an oneiric quality to match the psychological state of Captain Willard. The second one is realistic – it shows the Captain being sent on a mission. The first scene merges into the other through the image of an electric fan gradually replaced by the movement of helicopter blades, then another image is further superimposed on the latter, showing a paradisiacal-looking jungle being bombarded with napalm. Angels in the film wear military uniforms and are always accompanied by the monotonous mechanical sound of the blades of great flying fortresses.

Like in the novella, in the film there are two protagonists. But unlike Marlow, Captain Willard, a former CIA agent, is not motivated by a dream of adventure, but by a military order. Consciousness is not an object of desire for him, but a lifebelt. It does not have any actual influence on his actions, but provides distance indispensable for enduring the nightmare in which others drown knowing nothing.

As for Kurtz (Marlon Brando – we will come back to this performance later), he is by no means dying, unlike in the original, but as his aide, the photojournalist (the counterpart to Conrad's Russian) puts it, if his intelligence is clear, it is his soul that is ill (in the novella, a similar statement comes from Marlow). At any rate physically, Kurtz is doing well: he is massive, frightening, he can cut off a soldier's head in just one swift movement of his arm.

The story takes place during the war in Vietnam. Captain Willard is ordered to put an end to the leadership of a Colonel Kurtz, an excellent serviceman, who has reached Cambodia with his unit reinforced by the locals and is held there in almost god-like veneration, at the same time using "unhealthy" military methods. He appears to be mad – as if the whole context of war was, *au contraire* – sane.

Of course, the whole film proves this supposition wrong. As in the paradox of a liar swearing on the lies of others, the behaviour of American soldiers is directed by

[19] Cf. Jakob Lothe. "The Problem of Narrative Beginnings: Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now." J. Paccaud-Huguet ed., Joseph Conrad 2: *Heart of Darkness, une leçon de ténèbres*. Paris-Cæn, Lettres modernes Minard, 2002, 35–58.

the madness of their superiors. In Conrad's novella, black people were accused of committing crimes which in reality were perpetrated by whites – here, Vietnamese women and children are treated as savages and their villages are bombarded with napalm because they dare to defend themselves. A whole town is burnt to the ground in order to let American soldiers enjoy their surfing.

But there is no need to focus on individual facts. The film's narrative, just as in the original, builds a double discourse contrasted with *praxis*. First of all, there is the war discourse with effectiveness as its main criterion. Like in the novella, Kurtz is a champion in this discipline. Secondly, there is the humanist discourse, enabling a justification for the massacres – it helps soldiers survive psychologically. Let us mention two obvious examples of this. The first one is the scene where a dying Viet Cong soldier, with his entrails virtually flowing out of his stomach, is begging for a drop of water but is refused it by the South Vietnamese; in the name of chivalric respect for the enemy's courage an American Lieutenant Colonel offers him water, but – too involved in a conversation – spills it. Thus a theoretical humanitarian principle is nullified by not being carried out in concrete reality. Another scene shows a water patrol stopping a barge with civilians on board. Due to a woman's sudden movement the soldiers shoot all the passengers – as it turns out needlessly, the woman was only trying to hide a little dog. Realising their mistake, the soldiers now want to transport the dying woman to a hospital... The commotion is completely futile and merely a show, meant not so much to help another human being but to assuage a guilty conscience. In this situation, pressured by his duty to fulfil the mission, Captain Willard finally shoots the woman so that the soldiers have no other choice but to move on. From now on he will be treated like a cruel brute, although it was he who did everything possible to avoid the incident in the first place.

In the same vein, both the discourse of war and the humanitarian discourse become devalued by the practice of barbaric murders perpetrated to the soundtrack of Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" (the Valkyries being pagan deities of war and portents of death) booming out of helicopter loudspeakers.[20] In this context, Kurtz's crimes seem almost "natural" – they are merely the ultimate consequence of the logic of efficiency. This is exactly how Kurtz sees it: the absolute moral power of the Vietnamese, who were able to cut off the arms of hundreds of children because they had been vaccinated by Americans – can be opposed only by equivalent rigour, otherwise the war will be lost. He adds that in American army using swearwords is forbidden – but not killing.

The Kurtz performed by Marlon Brando reminds one of Stalin rather than Hitler. He possesses the Soviet leader's kind of intuition which tells him whom to kill at a given moment. There are children playing in his camp – but between the corpses of hanged, tortured, quartered people.

[20] In Wagner's opera, the Valkyries are a group of virgin-warriors riding winged horses, whose task is to transport fallen heroes to Valhalla, the major god Odin's hall. In the beliefs of ancient Germans, they were probably the spirits of death.

The presence of the jungle in the film is more visible than in the novella, among other things because of war paint covering faces, revealing savagery also in the contemporary man. The actualisation of tribal rituals is marked three times in the film with three mud baths. The bathers are: one of Willard's soldiers, Kurtz before he beheads a soldier, and Willard when he is preparing for the ritual killing of Kurtz. Three times, after bathing in the mud, soldiers paint their faces in war colours.

Apart from the French episode – symbolising the colonial dream of a fatherland outside the borders of one's own country – the rest leaves no room for speculation: the discrepancy between the discourse and practice of Americans can lead only to their downfall. Kurtz's execution won't change anything. The film offers no hope. Existential choices are dictated by the logic of an imperial state, even if the general sending Willard on a mission displayed in this way some kind of wisdom: in the battle between rationality and irrationality it is the latter that wins. But what is rationality here? A methodical, calmly organised slaughter. Is this the legacy of the Enlightenment?

From among the structural features of Conrad's novella discussed above – the double narrative, the dialogic mirror-like plot leading to a transformation of the main characters, Kurtz's "salvation" – what is left in the film, apart from the double beginning, is only the motif of initiation: of the river and sailing to its source, towards the primeval, towards primitive instincts, or – as some say – towards the Father.[21] At the end, Coppola introduces a highly ritualised murder – which caused him many problems with deciding on the ending. Should Willard take over Kurtz's role? Should he run away? The answer was not clear, especially in the atmosphere of madness which, as the director admitted himself, overcame also the filming crew:

> My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It's what it was really like – it was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like 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.[22]

The insanity of the jungle had an impact also on American and world consciousness. Coppola's film, which won the Palme d'Or for best film, leaves the viewers with no hope when it comes to the image of humankind today and in the future. In this sense, the film is much more pessimistic than Conrad's novella. The broken mirror from the opening scene illustrates the powerlessness of all our ideas about reality when confronted with primitive human instincts. As a civilisation we have found ourselves on the other side of the mirror – on the side of madness, functionality – supposed to lead to complete control over the world, but in effect leading to its destruction.

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[21] Christian Zimmer, among others, discusses this motif as an archetype in *Le Monde diplomatique*. Manière de voir, 88.

[22] Coppola during a press conference at Cannes Film Festival, in May 1979: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalypse_Now and http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=7264 (accessed on 13.07.2008).

Coppola's film is an apocalypse in the colloquial sense, since in the Bible even the most horrific disasters are followed by the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

3. SYMBOLS, ARCHETYPES, SCREEN-IMAGES

The double – as if mirror – transformation of both protagonists of *Heart of Darkness* has no matching reflection in the film: Kurtz knows everything from the start, senses everything, the clarity of his thought seems diabolic, as in the scene where he beheads a soldier who was just going to call for an air raid to burn the camp with napalm. It has already been mentioned that he resembles Stalin who spent sleepless nights trying to telepathically intercept hostile thoughts and to send his enemies to their death. Additionally, Kurtz takes advantage of local people's beliefs – indeed, in Cambodia he is treated like a tribal chief, the symbolic Father, using psychological projections, thus wielding absolute controlling power over his subjects. This is precisely how the unlimited power of Pol Pot has been explained.

In the film, Kurtz does not evolve and so there is no "salvation" after the acquisition of clear consciousness, since from the very beginning "his intelligence is clear, it is his soul that is ill." As a result, Coppola's Kurtz awaits death as a delivery from suffering, because he realises the extent of his crimes. On the other hand – just as in the novel – Willard, in the process of his initiation-like journey up the river, becomes increasingly aware of the terror and hideousness – in this case: of war. He will also repeat Kurtz's last words, which he pronounces twice, as in the novella: "The horror! The horror" It is exactly this discovery, of the terror and horror of war and the world, that is the goal of Willard's initiation.

As it has been mentioned earlier, Coppola for a long time did not know how to end *Apocalypse Now*. At first he considered Willard's replacing Kurtz in the jungle. And, in fact, in the film, Kurtz does speak about the plans he has for Willard. However, after the celebration of Kurtz's execution (by decapitation – parallel to the ritual sacrifice of an ox carried out by the Cambodians), Willard unmistakably leaves, although he is now received by the locals as a new chief. The sacrifice is made – as it has also been mentioned – after Willard's mud bath, as if it was a way of absorbing earth's power. The regression to the state of savagery is thus ritually intertwined with the plot.

The war paint in the film corresponds with the concept of "darkness" in the novella. There are at least three meanings of the word "darkness:" the jungle, wilderness contrasted with civilisation, and the inner shadows of the human soul, in other words: moral Evil. The word "darkness" appears twenty-five times in the novella, including five times in the phrase "heart of darkness" and three in "darkness of heart." There are also the two phrases: "the threshold of an eternal darkness" and "the stream of darkness" – bringing to mind a living, flowing force flooding everything like the waters

of primordial chaos. The last words of the novella are "the heart of an immense darkness."

The contrast between the Enlightenment and civilisation on one side and the darkness of the black continent on the other becomes obviously deconstructed owing to the savagery and stupidity of the colonisers. Similarly questioned is the ethical discourse represented by (among others) the Intended, who thanks to her naïve trust, however, provides a kind of moral opening, which is absent in the film. But the basic difference between the book and the film lies in the book's structure of a double narrative and in its final return to the initial narrative situation: the vision of the world has now changed, darkness shrouds the horizon, but Marlow has been heard, has been able to express and objectify his inner experiences. He even managed to – in part ironically – show Kurtz's greatness, since despite his crimes at least he realised the logic of his situation without lying to himself like others. In this way the hierarchy of values is reversed: clear ethical consciousness is worth more than a hypocritical pseudo-moral discourse.

There is no such shift in the film, just as there is no *catharsis*. What is more, the significant symbolism of fog, dust, opacity has been transposed in the film. In the novella, the images are as if black-and-white. For example the fog surrounding the journey up the river corresponds with the obscurity of the situation, with danger and the unknown. It evokes the archetypal biblical "fog," which was the sign of God's presence during Moses' procession through the desert. In the film, however, the fog and dust are colourful, often yellow or red – illuminated by napalm fire. Notably, cosmic darkness and infernal fire are two different things. The warm colours and the symbolism of fire in the film create a different image of the world – what we are seeing is no longer just a revelation of its nature, we are given a conclusion about the world's diabolic character, a judgement. In Conrad's writing there is no such judgement – there is only an effort to understand reality.

Essentially, the most important thing is the epistemological conditions of gaining knowledge about the world in which the "hard" sense, similar to the kernel of a nut, the logocentric sense, is no longer looked for. What is sought, after the death of God (in the film symbolised by a ruined church), is contextual and, so to speak, syntagmatic sense – reached by placing an event in a sequence of facts or people. Sense lies in the misty halo surrounding objects and events, not in facts themselves – as the narrator puts it, describing Marlow's story. It is precisely the collective recognition of sense and humanisation of inhuman reality that makes for the cathartic power of narrative. As we have already noticed, this cathartic dimension is absent in the film. Also lacking is the moral opening brought by the figures of women who play significant symbolic roles by representing two civilisations: European – personified by the Intended and African – embodied in the wild woman. The women in the film are either prostitutes or show-girls, except the French woman, Aurora Clement, who is emblematic neither for Americans nor for Asians.

Let us now try to schematically sum up the basic differences between Conrad's novella and Coppola's film:

HEART OF DARKNESS	APOCALYPSE NOW
– Double realisation of their identity and condition: Marlow and Kurtz	– Kurtz possesses self-awareness, Willard undergoes "initiation"
– Kurtz's natural death (illness)	– Kurtz's death by execution (ritualistic sacrifice)
– Excusing humanitarian discourse parallel to colonial *praxis*	– The *praxis* of war > excusing discourse
– Colonial greed	– The logic of war destruction + military parades
– Colonial stupidity (random shooting at the jungle)	– Stupidity of war and imperial arrogance (napalm bombardment before surfing)
– Marlow: sailor-philosopher	– Willard: intelligent CIA agent*
– Sense created by symbolic screen-images	– Varied symbols, story told in episodes
– Shattered modern consciousness vs. primitive instinct	– Clear consciousness, but ill soul (American technical skill + infernal situation)
– Grayness, opacity, darkness	– Warm colours, fire
– Kurtz: seductive Hitler-style voice	– Kurtz: the great Stalin-like leader
– Double narrative	– Double beginning: subjective and objective
– The Intended / The wild woman	– The memory of a son (family and succession as values)

The novella leads us beyond the visible, towards the misty halo of sense; the film as if limits itself to the images loaded with infernal connotations. Of course, there are many images also in the text, but they are specially constructed as screen-images. This term is analogous to Freudian "screen memory" – a concept formulated after Freud's noticing that his patients' dreams contained seemingly meaningless sequences of scenes, which, however, corresponded with very strong emotions. The founder of psychoanalysis concluded that the reason for this was a kind of projection of very significant psychological senses onto these ostensibly banal memories which served as screens for large areas of psychological life. It appears that analogous phenomena can be found in every culture – how else could we explain the fact that a hastily painted picture showing sunflowers became a point of reference all over the world, similarly to a certain half-smile of a rather plain woman captured five centuries ago?

* Initially, this role was offered to Steve McQueen, who would surely have given the character a different profile from that created by Martin Sheen – more of a cowboy than a CIA agent and a soldier.

Thus I have been using the term screen-image for a long time to describe this kind of phenomena.

The purposefully devised technique of screen-images in Conrad's writing refers not to realistic and chronological depiction of a sequence of events but to Conrad's crystallisation of the plot and its meaning to a few sequences of screen-images, in which the context, associations, sense and intuitions connected with a given scene are reflected. And so the skulls around Kurtz's home not only speak for themselves, but also indicate another meaning, for example the haughty smile of a dried-up skull prefigures Kurtz's pathetic end and expresses a kind of mocking revenge on him. Yet, thanks to Marlow's perception, Kurtz will be morally "saved" by clearly realising the truth about his life. Marlow, in turn, will be saved by telling his story. This possibility of "salvation" – even such as this one, imperfect, modern, secular – is not to be found in Coppola's film adaptation.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: SACRIFICIAL CRISIS

Did Francis Ford Coppola read René Girard's books before making his film?[23] It is certain that the idea of presenting Kurtz's execution as a sacrificial ritual, which turns him into a scapegoat, perfectly matches the French-American philosopher's anthropological theories. The basis of his theory is the triangle of desire composed of: *the subject*, another subject called *the model*, and *the object of desire* of the first subject which is not the object itself but the model's desire. According to Girard, it is always the other's desire that we desire; this breeds mimetic rivalry that inevitably, via an increasing mimetic similarity, leads to a sacrificial crisis in which it is necessary to kill someone – to sacrifice someone – in order to relieve the tension and put an end to the rivalry. Thus the scapegoat becomes Evil and this is why it must be sacrificed. But paradoxically, as the very term indicates, enabling a solution to the crisis and bringing back peace, the scapegoat becomes sacred, turns into a hero.

It is clear that, despite a great number of various contexts for the novella and the film, the ritual structure hidden behind the plot has the same nature, although it is brought to the fore only in Coppola's work. In both *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz stretches the logic of conquest – colonial and imperial, respectively – to its ultimate conclusion and he is sacrificed by his colleagues and co-workers who, in this way, try to remove the traces of his way of life – because it exposes the lies of the official discourse. At the same time, Kurtz represents the primitive part of every human being, the part that is suppressed into the subconscious. He becomes what Jung calls the Shadow archetype, meaning the evil side to us all that we prefer not to acknowledge. Yet becoming aware of one's own Shadow is *conditio sine qua non* of

[23] *Le Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* was published in 1961, *La Violence et le sacré* in 1972, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* in 1978.

any development of personality. Kurtz's death suits everyone, since it enables further legitimisation of the lie underlying civilisation and helps forget the primitive temptation leading to insanity.

Would it be possible, then, to condense the Evil in both the book and the film to the Original Sin? The task we have undertaken here is to define the image of Evil in both analysed works. Is it necessary to reduce everything to the biblical archetype and Saint Augustine's theories?

Perhaps the most important thing is to specify the Evil resulting from the discrepancy between the political discourse(s) and human *praxis*. And in this context it is of little importance whether the discourse concerns enlightenment supposedly brought by civilisation or whether it carries the humanitarian intent of allegedly bringing help, the kind of pretence that frequently accompanies massacres. What matters is the instinctive temptation, the desire to wield absolute power over others, the desire for ecstasy beyond any control and judgement. Conrad and Coppola speak about an illness of the soul, or about madness. But in this case, everyone is mad. Indeed, the song by the Doors, from the beginning of the film, says: "This is the end, [...] And all the children are insane." The film is a testimony to the Evil of the world and the madness of humankind. The novella goes further, since it shows how to rebuild dignity, how to expiate madness – via self-realisation of Evil, through a story and subsequent recognition of Evil in others, which creates a deep *ethical bond between people*. In this way all the values that are absent in the world without God can be found on the level of collectivity thanks to an ethical consensus. This builds horizontal transcendence – the values brought in by people thanks to the strength of their characters, and despite their weaknesses:

> True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; [...] I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry – much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory, paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquency thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal.[24]

Still, Maria Dąbrowska – an extremely influential critic in Polish reception of Conrad – attached less importance to Kurtz's self-judgement than to his lack of character. Kurtz reached the top, she said, and he failed the test, did not endure the power he had gained. He failed because, although he had principles, he lacked *moral restraint*. His principles existed only in his mind, but were not supported by his character – what is colloquially called the heart. Dąbrowska pointed out that Conrad himself wrote about Kurtz as having no restraint in satisfying his primitive desires, which led him to a high position among "the Satans of this land." The whisper of wilderness

[24] Conrad, 304–306.

resounded loudly inside Kurtz because he was hollow. And this whisper meant the victory of greed, cruelty, and the vain cult of himself.[25]

Only strength of character can prevent one from the fall due to Temptation. This becomes particularly clear in Conrad's *The Shadow Line*, another tale of initiation, where the protagonist – confronted with threatening elements, a disease and a catastrophe that seems inevitable – saves the ship and the crew only thanks to his heroic will, strength of character and human solidarity. This heroic model, clearly inherited from Polish romanticism, gives priority to action over discourse. Strength of character and ethical conduct precede discourse – in fact, they found it, at the same time changing the sequence of events and their meaning, ensuring human dignity. This kind of behaviour crosses the boundaries between cultures and customs. It reminds us that the word in the Bible usually translated as "the truth" literally means "that which lasts" and has the same root as "amen:" "let it be!"

The experience of the epiphany of Evil of our age, discussed by Cezary Wodziński – the Evil of Modernity, the Evil "beyond good and evil," the Evil that IS – has led to the search for meaning in the Face of Another Person (Levinas), in the Ethos preceding Logos, in the metaphysics of ethics (Wodziński). In this way we return to the pessimistic romantic model, in which the world is essentially evil and the only goodness can be introduced by human beings.[26] In Conrad's writing, a similar stance is realised not necessarily via strength of character – as Dąbrowska would have it – since his heroes have also their ineffable weaknesses, but also thanks to absolute intellectual honesty, leading to clear awareness of oneself and others, thanks to an essentially metaphysical self-examination, and, especially, to the story, which enables public recognition of this slef-judgement and, as a result, builds a new ethical bond between people. Today, this kind of opening, typical for Conrad and lacking in Coppola's work, appears to be more valid than ever.

Translated by Ewa Kowal

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[25] M. Dąbrowska. "Społeczne i religijne pierwiastki u Conrada" (1932). *Szkice o Conradzie*, Warszawa: PIW, 1959, 89–90.

[26] Cf. M. Zdziechowski. *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*. Vol. I–II, Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 1992; J. Krasicki. *Eschatologia i mesjanizm. Studium światopoglądu Mariana Zdziechowskiego*: Wrocław, 1994.

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