

ABOUT ADAPTING CONRAD'S PROSE TO FILM

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Abstract: On the example of *Apocalypse Now* by F. F. Coppola, *Heart of Darkness* by N. Roeg, *The Duellists* by R. Scott, *The Shadow Line* by A. Wajda, and *Secret Sharer* by P. Fudakowski, I would like to show that Joseph Conrad's prose is a cinematic trap for film directors. This being so, I attempt to answer the question as to why it is so difficult to make a film of something that is so cinematic, when it is being read, and why film adaptations that closely follow Conrad's narratives are less Conradian than films which are "merely" inspired by Conrad's works.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, film adaptation, semantic dominant, "The Secret Sharer," *Apocalypse Now*

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.

Joseph Conrad

SEDUCED BY THE WORD...

Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski undoubtedly achieved his intended goal which he had first formulated in the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*¹ This preface is in fact more than just another introduction to the author's maritime fiction, it constitutes Conrad's literary credo, his artistic manifesto. Not only does he explicitly state what art is, but he also clearly defines the role of an artist in human existence. Conrad says:

And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects

¹ See: Allan H. Simmons, "'Preface' to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'.*" in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, ed. O. Knowles and G. Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 290-291.

of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence.²

In Conrad's view, the artist, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth, however, he seeks it somewhere else than the aforementioned life-journey guides, not in facts or concepts but inside himself:

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and [there] he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body within a steel armour. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring—and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.³

Art is related to community, it allows people to unite in every situation: ranging from hopelessness to euphoria, from dreams to illusions, and even from earthly life to eternity. As Allan H. Simmons⁴ indicates, Conrad does not dwell on the definition of art itself, he goes on to describe what prose is and, while elaborating on its role and its place in human life, he draws our attention to the fact that prose:

Must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.⁵

² Joseph Conrad, "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Typhoon and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 11.

³ Conrad, "Preface" to *Narcissus*, pp. 11-12.

⁴ Simmons, "Preface," p. 291.

⁵ Conrad, "Preface" to *Narcissus*, p. 12.

Using the written word is to make a reader see, feel and hear whatever is described, thus Conrad expresses his dream about synaesthesia and therefrom his famous definition of the artist—writer's role which he attempted to live up to throughout his literary life: "[m]y task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything."⁶ A writer, a real word "virtuoso," can draw on banal, commonplace, old-fashioned and obsolete words in order to create a text which will be surprisingly fresh and true, at the same time touching us to the core, but also one which will enchant the time:

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a few to achieve.⁷

My article is above all about those "few," whose fascination with Conrad's words has led successfully to the creation of their own works which managed to arrest Conrad's world, his message conveyed in his short stories, novellas and novels, "for the space of a breath."

I intend to elucidate how it occurred that the "Preface" written in August 1897, which has been part of the novel now since its American edition in 1914,⁸ has become the key to understanding films which are either screenings or adaptations of Conrad's works.

Conrad has genuinely seduced film directors with his prose and, considering that film is the most impressionist art, film makers have discovered true synesthetic qualities in Conrad's words.⁹ Thus, they heard, felt and, most importantly, saw the world created by the writer and yearned to transfer it onto the screen in such a way, so as to "to render the highest kind of justice to [Conrad's] visible universe." What happened in many cases was that while being enchanted by the text and its film-like qualities they mistakenly assumed they had a ready to use screenplay which did not have to be transformed in any way. As a result, they fell into a trap of seeming banality of dialogues and narration impossible to film.¹⁰ It turned out that what constituted a clear asset in the text, became an insurmountable obstacle in films.

⁶ Conrad, "Preface" to *Narcissus*, p. 13.

⁷ Conrad, "Preface" to *Narcissus*, p. 14.

⁸ Simmons, "Preface" p. 291.

⁹ "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is Conrad's genuine impressionist manifesto. The writer who had always avoided being labelled as a representative of any "-isms" decided to express directly his attitude towards impressionism. Simmons presents Conrad's impressionism and all transformations of his attitude and views: Allan H. Simmons, "Impressionism," in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, pp. 166-167.

¹⁰ See: Gene. M. Moore, "Introduction," in *Conrad on Film*, ed. G. M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 2.

It would be rather hard to write about all the film directors who have faced some challenges with Conrad's prose, I will therefore focus on a few selected authors and their films.

The first of them is an influential film-maker (also a radio and theatre author), the author of three Conrad-based screenplays, none of which has ever made it all the way to the big screen—Orson Welles. This film director once said that “every Conrad story is a movie,”¹¹ as he was convinced that Conrad's stories are like ready-made movie scripts which do not require any or at least very little adaptation and that no other literary work could be made into film in such a direct way. However, paradoxically, the very same film director also said that no film based on Conrad's prose had ever been created so far, as no one had managed to film Conrad's text the way it was written.¹² Orson Welles had been planning to film *Heart of Darkness*, yet, having exceeded the film budget, he abandoned the project and instead he directed a movie *Citizen Kane* (1941). Despite being unable to make Conrad's film-like prose into a film, the words he uttered about this inability are extremely significant and, as I see it, they can be perceived as the key to a film director's success or failure.

The question that lies at the heart of this article is, in a word, this: How to make Conrad's text into a movie to reflect the way it was written? How to make a successful adaptation?¹³

WHAT CONSTITUTES A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION OF CONRAD'S PROSE?

Discussions on film adaptations many a time concentrate on the issue of fidelity to the literary predecessor, less frequently they concern the very essence of adaptation.

According to Marek Hendrykowski an adaptation is “an intersemiotic translation,”¹⁴ “which varies substantially from a plain language translation [...] by

¹¹ Moore, “Introduction,” p. 1.

¹² Moore, “Introduction,” p. 2.

¹³ I use the term “adaptation” in relation to all the films that have been inspired by Conrad's prose, no matter how faithful (or not) they remain towards the original piece, both “a screening” as well as a work which completely changes the context of the literary predecessor are its adaptations. According to Andrzej Kołodyński and Konrad J. Zarębski, “film adaptation is a variation on a given theme, whereas a screening is a faithful (in terms of its content and form) transfer of a literary work to the screen. These terms, then, should not be used interchangeably in the view of the critics.” See: *Słownik adaptacji filmowych* (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo Park, 2005). Other fans of the silver screen claim that “(every) screening is an adaptation but not every adaptation is a screening,” therefore, these terms cannot be used interchangeably (Gosiarella, *Słowniczek Filmowy: A jak Adaptacja i czym się różni od ekranizacji?*, <http://www.gosiarella.pl/2017/04/A-jak-Adaptacja.html#>). In the present article all the translations of Polish quotations are by Agnieszka Targońska.

¹⁴ See: Marek Hendrykowski, “Adaptacja jako przekład intersemiotyczny,” *Przestrzenie Teorii* 20 (2013), p. 183.

the choice of material [...], medium, [...] means of artistic expression.”¹⁵ He also pointed out that:

A film adaptation may be viewed as an unusual and intriguing case of a multi-system translation. Multi-system in its double meaning [...] due to a difference in semiotic systems (verbal language—the language of moving images), [...] because of the multicoding of the target language of an adaptation (as the language of moving images involves and uses many different subcodes in the process of communication).¹⁶

What especially draws a researcher's attention is “an editing aspect of adaptive operations,” in order to transfer a text into an image there must be a dynamic combination of subsequent elements; “moving images,” previously created by various adaptive operations.¹⁷ Film editing is the next stage of translating the written word into the language of images.

Adapting a literary text into a movie screenplay is in fact film editing. Whenever we juxtapose a film with its literary predecessor, drawing a comparison resulting from a homology of two (or more) multilinguistic structures; what appears to be particularly intriguing is the process of re-editing the original text and editing a new semantic structure from its elements created in the language of moving images. [...] Editing, that is the choice and the combination of moving images creating a whole new text equivalent to the original, constitutes the semiotic foundations and at the same time the essence of the process of adaptation.¹⁸

In my opinion, the category of semantic dominant¹⁹ defines the essence of a good or bad adaptation in the most relevant way, as it is not limited only to poetry translation but it is used in the translation of prose into the language of film. If we follow Stanisław Barańczak in assuming that “every outstanding literary text [and these are by all means Conrad's works] is a miniature model of the world and its every element literally” takes part in “the process of creating meanings,” then we shall find this semantic dominant, that is “the precedence of a given element of the work's structure which constitutes a more or less discernible key to the entirety of its meanings”²⁰—the key to a content of a given text. And here comes the magic of the cinema (as in the case of the magic of poetry), where all the elements creating a film add up to something more than merely a set, but in fact create a whole new value. Different techniques of film editing, adaptive operations may give desirable effects when a film

¹⁵ Hendrykowski, “Adaptacja,” pp. 175-176.

¹⁶ Hendrykowski, “Adaptacja,” pp. 177-178.

¹⁷ Hendrykowski lists seven such operations: substitution, reduction, addition, amplification, inversion, displaced accent and compression; see: Hendrykowski, “Adaptacja,” p. 179.

¹⁸ Hendrykowski, “Adaptacja,” p. 183.

¹⁹ The term “semantic dominant” was introduced into the Polish critical theory of translation by Stanisław Barańczak in “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest translologiczny albo: Tłumaczenie się z tego, że tłumaczy się wiersze również w celu wytłumaczenia innym tłumaczom, iż dla większości tłumaczeń wierszy nie ma wytłumaczenia” [A small but maximalist translological manifesto, or, explaining yourself that you translate poems also in order to explain to other translators that for the majority of translations there is no explanation], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 3 (1990), pp. 7-66.

²⁰ Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest,” pp. 35-36.

director finds the Conradian semantic dominant. Only a film director who can discover this key (when confronted with the variety of media which a literary text and a film naturally belong to), and find a way to transfer the entirety of meanings hidden in a prose text into the language of images, will be able to make a good film adaptation of Conrad's works.²¹

A DIFFICULT AND ELUSIVE GOAL, ATTAINABLE ONLY BY THE VERY FEW...

Andrzej Wajda, one of the most renowned Polish film directors, did not succeed in one of his film projects; a 1976 film version of *The Shadow Line* did not satisfy the director himself, nor did it cater to the taste of the majority of the audience. Somewhere on the way, wishing to preserve Conradian understatements and suggestions, Wajda lost the essence of Conrad. The writer never imposes his own judgements of the characters' actions on his readers, instead he prompts them to seek a relevant perspective, our independent evaluation of choices made by the protagonists. Wajda failed to construct his film story in such a manner so as to leave this choice to a viewer.

Michał Komar in his review published in the monthly *Kino* (Cinema) from 1976, listed all the mistakes the director had made:

The film cannot deal successfully with Conrad's work. It makes him seem a boring buffoon, [...] obsessed with the souls of men who are at very best unbalanced. Why has this happened? Perhaps—at least I suspect so—the **source of failure lies in trying to fit psychology where there is no room for it.** For example, *The Shadow Line* is viewed as describing the state of mind of a young man, who has found himself in an extremely difficult situation. Thus, the director looks for the meaning of the story and its driving force, in the relation between the hero's state of mind and the external situation (the ship, the disease plaguing the crew, the heat etc.). **And since it is impossible to keep on showing heat or windless silence, as the viewer will be bored stiff, the director tries to film it in a prettified way, inventing a couple of attractive balancing acts on the masthead. And this at the cost of ignoring essential issues and the problem of different attitudes to the predicament. Thus the whole undertaking becomes limited to technical skill,** satisfying the mere requirements of ordinary visual realism.²²

²¹ Another term which can be used while defining the essence of a good or bad adaptation is a semantic gesture created by Jan Mukařovský (both “Jakobson's poetic—and Mukařovský's aesthetic—function of language is that which focuses on the code itself, i.e., in a work of art [literary or other]”: ‘a work of art is a sign in which all constituent parts, all linguistic planes, both form and content, contribute to create meaning—they are thus all semiotic. They all interact to constitute the ‘semantic gesture,’” thus film directors having in mind an idea of a successful adaptation of Conrad's work should find a Conradian semantic dominant or a Conradian semantic gesture. See Jaroslav Špírk, “Czechoslovak Translation Studies: Depreciated Legacy or Inspiration for Today,” in *Going East: Discovering New and Alternative Traditions in Translation Studies*, ed. L. Schippel, C. Zwischenberger (Berlin: Frank and Timme, 2017), p. 80.

²² Michał Komar, review of *Smuga cieniał* [The Shadow Line], by Andrzej Wajda, *Kino*, no. 9 (1976), <http://www.wajda.pl/pl/film/film19.html>. Emphasis added.

The Shadow Line, a novel by Joseph Conrad, eluded the master with its apparent ease with which it can surrender itself to the magic of the silver screen, and most certainly with the palpable, "film-like" plot. As the very artist says, this Conradian text "has a clear, easy to follow plot, however, this prose cannot be so easily adapted into a film."²³

Wajda did not manage to make a successful film, however, having struggled with some difficulties related to the adaptation of *The Shadow Line*, he discovered the key to the prose of Conrad-Korzeniowski:

If you want to be faithful to a novel, which you are adapting for film purposes, you must deconstruct it completely and put the pieces back together again, so that it would be able to live on screen. When I think about adaptation, I recall what Hamlet said to his mother: "I must be cruel, only to be kind." I wasn't cruel enough to *The Shadow Line*, I pursued the mood, the understatement, the elusive nature of words. And so I created an inarticulate, elusive and uncommunicative film. [...] Over the years I have often thought about this film, trying to discover, if I could have found better solutions. Today, I would say: it is easier to make a film about Conrad with his style in mind than to film any of his novels.²⁴

In spite of the fact that the description is slightly enigmatic and not very specific, it gives other artists precious instructions. These were treated literally by Peter Fudakowski who was also deceived by the lightness and deceptive easiness of Conrad's short story "The Secret Sharer."

Before, I didn't realise how difficult a writer Conrad is for filmmakers. [...] His stories seduced me with the precision of their plots and with what they said about human condition, but only working on "The Secret Sharer" did I understand how difficult it is to translate this prose to the language of cinema.²⁵

In another interview the film-maker stated:

Adapting Conrad to a film is very complicated. "The Secret Sharer" is just a short story and for a long time it seemed to me that its adaptation might be easy. After two years of working over the screenplay, I realised how difficult it was but then there was no turning back. This literature is difficult but it is extremely rich. And the constant question: How to convey Conradian nuances and at the same time make an amusing and interesting film? For inspiration, I watched a lot of movies, but I also read a lot, for example, the diaries of Andrzej Wajda, who made *The Shadow Line*. Afterwards, he wrote an extensive analysis of his work with Conrad's prose and I remember one precious reflexion that whatever you add to Conrad, you end up throwing away at the editing stage. And this may be the most difficult part for a screenwriter: to add some elements to the story in such a way that there is no feeling that something has been added. Secondly, what you really need to do is to throw Conrad's work up in the air and reassemble it. We cannot take everything literally. I kept this advice from Andrzej Wajda in the back of my mind.²⁶

²³ Komar, review of *Smuga cienia*.

²⁴ Komar, review of *Smuga cienia*.

²⁵ Qtd. in Bartosz Staszczyszyn, "Peter Fudakowski," <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/peter-fudakowski>.

²⁶ Maria Krauss, "Rozmawiamy: Peter Fudakowski o swoim najnowszym filmie, miłości do polskich Tatr i presji związanej z otrzymaniem Oscara," interview with Peter Fudakowski, *Damosfera* (30.03.2015),

Thanks to Wajda's advice, Fudakowski succeeded in capturing the gist of Conrad's story, despite (or perhaps due to) departing from the original piece quite substantially by "modernizing" the text, adding a few motives and also changing the sex of one of the characters (attempting to avoid homosexual connotations, which most definitely were not intended by Conrad,²⁷ and which would have definitely occurred if a naked man had appeared before the young captain on board, as it is in the original text).

Interestingly, both Wajda and Fudakowski made the writer the main character of their movie. Joseph Conrad is a character present in both films, but each of the film directors portrays him differently. In *The Shadow Line* (in the prologue which was added to the film story) a hero, Conrad, talks about himself, about real Conrad-Korzeniowski, while browsing authentic photos of Conrad's family, an issue of *Wędrowiec* (The Wanderer) and reading his uncle's letters. Wajda firmly places his character in the writer's real life, leaving no doubt to viewers, whereas Fudakowski, making Conrad his hero, does it in a completely different way. Captain Konrad (or Kon La De, as the Chinese crew calls him) is a contemporary young man who resolutely rejects tradition and family bonds, wants to decide about himself, but at the same time he cannot cut himself off from his past (he takes his accordion and family photos everywhere).

"The Secret Sharer," in Fudakowski's opinion, next to *The Shadow Line*, is Conrad's most personal story about his own youth. In the sources to both texts, there is a mention of Conrad's first command on the *Otago* (in 1888 in Siamese Bay). Fudakowski's young Konrad does not ponder over his life (as Wajda's hero did), does not make any recapitulations of what he has achieved in his life, but he dreams about money, adventures and women, like other young men, and attempts to forget his own past (he listens to music through his headphones, the music which is totally different to what is in his heart).

Fudakowski's characters (except for Konrad) are Chinese, as according to the film director "Conradian values are still up to date, especially in China. Such values may now be disappearing in the West: sacrifice, duty, family [...]. These are the values which both Conrad's story and our film present. [...] The crew of the Chinese ship is a family—their values and aspirations are family-related."²⁸

Placing his hero on board a contemporary ship, Fudakowski overlooked the real reason for Conrad's departure from Poland,²⁹ but instead he managed to create a portrait of a sensitive or even oversensitive young man who escapes from his own past

<http://www.damosfera.com/Rozmawiamy-Peter-Fudakowski-o-swoim-najnowszym-filmie-milosci-dopolskich-Tatr-i-presji-zwiazanej-z-otrzymaniem-OscaraR.html>.

²⁷ Various interpretations and readings of the story, including homosexual approach (which appeared at first as a parody), are presented very scrupulously in "The Secret Sharer," in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, pp. 336-338.

²⁸ Krauss, "Rozmawiamy."

²⁹ As a son of Polish exiles and a Russian subject he was liable to long military service in the tsarist army, he had also health problems and was a nuisance for his guardians. On the one hand, his departure (Konrad was seventeen at that time) protected him from military service. On the other, his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski hoped that work at sea would be good for his health and that he would have a chance to get a job as well.

and from the history of his own family, which ultimately he reconciles with. Perhaps, making Conrad's "Polishness" the core of his film, Fudakowski was also thinking about his own Polish roots, and while transferring this Conradian story to the contemporary times, he infused it with his own experience. Music plays an incredible role in *The Secret Sharer*: one of the music motives is "Kotysanka Leśna" (the forest lullaby) which was composed for the members of the resistance movement (1942-1943). This motive is understandable only for Polish viewers and indeed the clash of partisan's song with the view of a calm, blue sea creates a breathtaking impression. The music appears in the film, but only at the end the young captain starts to play this melody by himself, only when he becomes a real captain, not an appointed one, and when he completely embraces his past, mentally coming to terms with his father and his story.

It was my idea. I must admit that the music was extremely important to me and already included in the screenplay. I treated it as another hero. I used a song "Today I can't come to you" as part of the baggage which Konrad carries on board a ship. I mean both physical baggage but also emotional one. In a bag which the hero has with him, there is an accordion, the object belonging to Konrad's father. The father was a patriot who sacrificed a lot for Poland. Both in my story and in Joseph Conrad's real story. The problem is that from the son's perspective this sacrifice was in vain. Patriotism, sacrifice and duty—these notions do not matter to him. That is also why he escapes to the other end of the world, to China. Yet, he takes the baggage of his father-patriot. When he undergoes a transformation, which we have been talking about, he suddenly remembers all the values which in the past were crucial for his father and his country. They come back to him in a form of a song which Konrad can finally play.³⁰

Fudakowski claims that initially he included many quotations from Conrad but later he removed them, as they were too poetic and sounded artificial when uttered in the contemporary world.³¹ What was not possible to be achieved at the level of dialogues, the film director managed to achieve at the level of images. There are many such quotations from Conradian stories in the film: Fudakowski succeeded in portraying his characters as his mirror images, what Conrad described in his prose, he transferred literally onto the screen.

Fudakowski approached Conrad's story differently, as compared with the film adaptation of *The Shadow Line*. He followed Wajda's advice, which was to "throw Conrad's work up in the air and reassemble it." He approached "The Secret Sharer" as a pretext to tell a story about himself and his Polishness. Fudakowski made a film which abounds in direct references to its literary predecessor and at the same time departs largely from it. The film inspired by Conrad, stemming from his spirit and values, conveys the writer's message, and hopes that his conviction is possible and real—"the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspira-

³⁰ Michał Kaczoń, "Peter Fudakowski: Byłoby źle gdyby reżyser był w pełni zadowolony," interview with Peter Fudakowski, *Wprost* (17.04.2015), <https://www.wprost.pl/tylko-u-nas/502307/Peter-Fudakowski-Byloby-zle-gdyby-rezyser-byl-w-pelni-zadowolony.html>.

³¹ Jo Siedlecka, "Secret Sharer—Q&A with director Peter Fudakowski," interview with Peter Fudakowski, *Independent Catholic News* (16.06.2014), <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=24966>.

tions, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.”³²

Another work which I would like to discuss in the context of film adaptations is *Heart of Darkness*—a universal story about the human nature, its limitations, about civilization and barbarism, about the clash of culture with nature, which continues to inspire new generations of artists all over the world. I agree with Michał Oleszczyk who states that “*Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola, has the status of a masterpiece and one of the true milestones in the history of cinema.”³³

Apocalypse Now directed by Coppola is not an adaptation but rather a transposition, transformation, an artistic supplement to Conrad’s novella.³⁴ Coppola changes Conrad’s story into an ambiguous commentary on the Vietnam War.³⁵

Even though Coppola’s work is the most popular example of taking Conrad’s story to the big screen, the film director has no intention of informing a viewer about it, as he does not make any direct references to the original piece.³⁶ Yet, *Heart of Darkness* is present in every frame of the movie. In spite of a different time and the place where the action occurs, the subject matter of *Apocalypse Now* clearly derives from its literary predecessor:³⁷ The film talks about “the duality of man, moral ambiguity, the dark depths of the human soul, the consequences of war and imperialism.”³⁸

Marlow was replaced by Benjamin L. Willard who travels upstream in search of Colonel Kurtz. His journey is reminiscent of the one undertaken by Marlow in the past, both of them experienced “the heart of darkness,” but can Willard say like Marlow: “It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot.”³⁹? Contrary to Conradian Marlow, he is deprived of illusions from the very start and is much more experienced than the hero in Conrad’s story. He is aware of being “infected” by the war. He says:

³² Conrad, “Preface” to *Narcissus*, pp. 11-12.

³³ Michał Oleszczyk, “Always a Folly? The Problem with Adapting Joseph Conrad,” <https://culture.pl/en/article/always-a-folly-the-problem-with-adapting-joseph-conrad>.

³⁴ Cf. Agnieszka Kallaus, Sławomir Koziół, “Introduction,” in *From Page to Screen. Adaptations of British and American Literature*, ed. Agnieszka Kallaus, Sławomir Koziół (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2012), p. 7.

³⁵ *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Conrad*, s.v. “Heart of Darkness.”

³⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, Michael Wedel, “The Hollow Heart of Hollywood: *Apocalypse Now* and the New Sound Space,” in *Conrad on Film*, ed. Gene M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 151.

³⁷ I would like to follow Michał Oleszczyk and employ the term “creative departure,” used by Alicja Helman: “as Alicja Helman calls it—a ‘creative departure,’ [is] one that is a proof of a lively dialogue with an eminent text and not its vulgar exploitation.” See: Alicja Helman, *Twórcza zdrada. Filmowe adaptacje literatury* (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1997), qtd in Oleszczyk, “Always a Folly?”

³⁸ Meredith Borders, “From Page to Screen: The 10 Best Film Adaptations of Classic Novels,” *Lit Reactor* (9.11.2012), <http://litreactor.com/columns/from-page-to-screen-the-10-best-film-adaptations-of-classic-novels>.

³⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, edited with an Introduction by Paul O’Prey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 113.

Every time I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after my first tour, it was worse. I'd wake up and there'd be nothing... I hardly said a word to my wife until I said yes to a divorce. When I was here I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I've been here a week now. Waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker.⁴⁰

Willard's journey to the heart of the jungle (as it happens in Marlow's case) reminds us of Dante's wandering through the circles of hell, of which every next circle seems even more terrifying and at the very end he is confronted with Kurtz. Kurtz observing never-ending madness of the war, can fully picture its nonsense and insanity. Thus, he becomes more understandable to us. Having rebelled against his commanders, he starts his own war on his own terms, creating his own kingdom. As John Hellmann points out, Willard is fascinated by Kurtz, since society called him "a murderer." Like Conrad's Marlow, he consciously turned back on corrupted or incapable community of European colonisers. Willard has chosen "his nightmares" like Marlow did.⁴¹

Even though in the story Kurtz dies of natural causes while in the film Willard kills Kurtz, this is still an act which proves Willard's loyalty, in the same way as Conradian Marlow remains faithful to the memory of Kurtz. Kurtz reaches his end and wishes to die. Willard could have replaced Kurtz as a ruler, almost a god, but he retreats,⁴² like Marlow. Coppola is less optimistic here than Conrad was. Willard sails down the river but a viewer is left with a thought that there is no home for him, no future. What remains imprinted in a viewer's memory are the words of dying Kurtz "The horror! The horror!" and the character played by Marlon Brando.

Brando created a legendary screen character in this film, for his Kurtz is both mad and rational. There is a famous scene which makes viewers realise that civilisation and the whole Western culture mean nothing in the jungle. Kurtz recites "The Hollow Men" by T. S. Eliot (the epigraph of this poem is a sentence taken from *Heart of Darkness* "Mistah Kurtz—He dead") the camera shows the books lying on the table, these are: *The Golden Bough*, *From Ritual to Romance*, *Faust* and *The Bible*, so a specific combination of mythology, anthropology, studies concerning the search of Holy Grail, stories about redemption and sacrifice. Thus, Kurtz reciting Eliot links all the three artists: Conrad, Eliot and Coppola. Yet, there are some critics who regard the second part of the film as rather inconsistent with its beginning and perceive the above-mentioned scene with Marlon Brando as absurd (Robert Hampson, a British Conradian derides the sequence: "and the whole bit at the end when he seems to be

⁴⁰ *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by John Milius, Francis Coppola. Transcript. https://sfy.ru/transcript/apocalypse_now_ts.

⁴¹ John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 196.

⁴² It looks as if Willard did not want to take part in a ritual described in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, where killing the king in the prime of life guarantees revival of his power in his successor. See Robert A. Segal, "Myth and Ritual," in *Myth a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 61-78.

doing an Open University course in early modernism with all those books around him...⁴³).

Just as Conrad portrayed the nonsense of colonizers' activities in the Congo, Coppola pictured the madness of war by making the actions of American soldiers totally unreal (the most memorable scene is the air cavalry attack ordered by Colonel Kilgore, when the whole air strike is accompanied by Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, blasted from loudspeakers of attacking helicopters).

Coppola managed to capture the Conradian message, by introducing his characters in the contemporary "heart of darkness" which was the Vietnam War. Seymour Chatman⁴⁴ rightly notices that Coppola presented the American intervention and the defence of democratic values in the same way as previously Conrad showed a civilizing mission of Europeans in the Congo. Both narrators, Marlow and Willard, reveal the insanity and corruption of white people (European colonizers and American soldiers). Those who were supposed to defend indigenous people, conclude that the only solution is: "Exterminate all the brutes"⁴⁵ or "Drop the bomb. Exterminate them all!"⁴⁶

Nicolas Roeg made a very faithful screening of Conrad. His film *Heart of Darkness* (1993), in spite of fidelity to its literary predecessor, is a one-dimensional creation, deprived of the depth and multi-layered construction which characterizes the original piece. It appears that as in the case of Wajda's *The Shadow Line*, excessive faithfulness to the written words inflicts damage to the language of images. Concentrating merely on Conradian plot gives the film one-dimensional character, as a result of which the film loses its ambiguity, depth, uncertainty and some kind of unobviousness. Marlow narrates his journey up the Congo in search of an agent working previously for a Belgian trading company. Kurtz, as he is the one referred to, was supposed to amass a remarkable quantity of ivory. Marlow while sailing upstream, passing subsequent stations, all the time takes part in talks concerning a mysterious agent who, depending on the teller, is either a madman, a genius or simply an exceptional man. Marlow, in fact, begins a journey into his own soul, an adventure slowly transforms into a nightmare which is hard to escape unscathed. Roeg's film is an easy to read anti-colonial treaty (or even an ecological one). He entirely loses the ambiguity of judgement of human nature, which is an inseparable element of Conrad's story. Similarly, there is no resemblance of Marlow's and Kurtz's life stories, Marlow does not feel connected to the agent in any way, there is no link between them. John Malkovich as Kurtz is not very captivating, even though his physical appearance as well as the conduct of the character he created are close to a Conradian vision. Unfortunately, he lacks the charisma of Marlon Brando, who despite his physical conditions, simply transformed himself into Kurtz.

⁴³ Siedlecka, "Secret Sharer."

⁴⁴ Seymour Chatman, "2 ½ film version of *Heart of Darkness*," in *Conrad on Film*, ed. G. M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 215.

⁴⁵ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Chatman, "2 ½ film version of *Heart of Darkness*," p. 215.

The current discussion concerning film adaptations of Conrad's prose allows for a conclusion that films somewhat inspired by Conrad's literary output are more successful than faithful screenings of his works. I believe that Robert Hampson is right, when he speaks about the freedom of an artist:

So I think for me as a Conradian the idea of an adaptation is to see how it stays close and faithful to the story in the different media. Something "inspired by" has much more freedom and the question then is to what extent does it work as engagement with or commentary on the original Conrad story.⁴⁷

Those film directors who focused on faithful translation of the plot into the language of film lost what is considered the most essential in Conrad—that is, hesitation, elusiveness, uncertainty⁴⁸—somewhere along the way. They did not go beyond the surface of the text, did not delve into its subsequent semantic layers. However, there are some exceptions to this rule, there are Conradian film adaptations in which faithfulness to the plot does not mean being unfaithful to the author's message. In such adaptations everything is "saved in translation."⁴⁹

The Duellists (1977), directed by Ridley Scott, undoubtedly belongs to such adaptations where in spite of introducing new motives the film director, following Conradian story and recreating the reality of the epoch with great detail, made a stunning spectacle in which a viewer is confronted with Conrad who, with tongue in cheek, says that a man can pervert everything and reach the point of absurdity, even of such a noble idea as defence of honour, when a real reason behind a challenge to a duel is not wounded pride but mere rowdiness and unruliness.

The history of film adaptations of Conrad's prose proves that the success of a film project is not determined by fidelity to the plot or the reality of the epoch in which the action of the original piece takes place, but it lies in conveying Conrad's message: "to render the highest kind of justice to [the] visible universe." Conversely, while slavishly following the original text we can lose what constitutes a Conradian world. In order to reflect the spirit of his prose we may remain faithful to the plot but we may well be faithful to his message when we depart from the original content of Conrad's texts...

What works as a deception is either overdone faithfulness to Conrad and overlooking the essence of his text, which always goes beyond the action or the plot of his work, and which appears only fleetingly between the lines. The second danger is related to excessive "storyline wilfulness,"⁵⁰ which may also lead a film director astray.

⁴⁷ Siedlecka, "Secret Sharer."

⁴⁸ Cf. Oleszczyk, "Always a Folly?"

⁴⁹ It is a title of Barańczak's book; cf.: *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu: szkice o warsztacie tłumacza poezji z dołączeniem malej antologii przekładów* [Saved in translation: sketches on the craft of translating poetry. A small anthology of translated poetry included] (Poznań: a5, 1992).

⁵⁰ Oleszczyk, "Always a Folly?" Oleszczyk writes about "storyline wilfulness" and gives as an example Richard Brooks's adaptation of *Lord Jim* (1965).

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