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Apocalypse Now, Vietnam and the Rhetoric of Influence

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Abstract
Readings of Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979) often confront the difficulty of having to privilege either its aesthetic context (considering, for instance, its relation to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness [1899] or to the history of cinema) or its value as a representation of the Vietnam War. In this paper, I will argue that viewing the film as a meditation on the nature and rhetoric of influence allows us to bridge this gap and provides us with valuable insights into both the film’s aesthetic precursors and the circumstances of its historical setting. Keywords: Apocalypse Now; Vietnam; Rhetoric; Influence.

Resumo
As leituras do filme Apocalypse Now (1979) de Francis Ford Coppola são muitas vezes marcadas pelo imperativo de escolher entre uma abordagem ao seu contexto estético (referindo, por exemplo, a relação do filme com a obra Heart of Darkness [1899], de Conrad, ou com a história do cinema) e uma análise do seu valor enquanto representação da Guerra do Vietnam. Neste ensaio, irei defender que uma aproximação ao filme enquanto meditação sobre a natureza e a retórica da influência permite preencher esta lacuna e realçar aspectos fundamentais quer acerca dos precursores estéticos da obra, quer sobre as circunstâncias específicas do seu contexto histórico. Palavras-chave: Apocalypse Now; Vietnam; Retórica; Influência.

Since its release in 1979, the film Apocalypse Now has pulled film critics and cultural historians in distinct, and distinctly difficult to reconcile, directions, in an analytical tug-of-war that has little to do with disciplinary boundaries. One of these directions lies in the film’s relationship to the Vietnam War, with questions ranging in nature from the specific to the general: What does the film tell us about the experience of Vietnam? How does it position itself ideologically with respect to the war? How indicative of general tendencies within American culture at large is Coppola’s film? The other tendency points back toward the film’s literary precursor, again with varying degrees of specificity: How closely does Coppola follow Conrad’s narrative? How similar are the characters of Willard and Marlow? To what extent do late 20th century Cold War politics mirror, or diverge from, the colonial practices of the late 19th century? Though these questions, addressed individually, have provoked a variety of interesting responses, it strikes me that the film’s relationship to both the historical phenomenon of Vietnam and to Conrad’s novella is best approached by placing it in the context of a much more deeply-rooted set of political and cultural discourses.