

# The first contact in apocalypse now

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## The First Contact in Apocalypse Now and Heart of Darkness

In *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola obviously modifies and embellishes the characters, scenes and dialogue of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. However, with only minor modification Coppola powerfully represents Charlie Marlow's first contact with Kurtz' camp. Marlow is greeted by a completely unexpected young Russian adventurer who had become a part of Kurtz's family. Although Coppola has changed the Russian adventurer into an American photojournalist he has kept the characterizations and dialogue very close to Conrad's original. In doing so, the impact, theme and message of the cinematic and textual versions of the same scene are virtually parallel. Nonetheless several elements missing from the screen version causes it to be less than helpful in understanding the text version.

The young Russian was Charlie Marlow's first sight when he reached Kurtz' camp and he looked at him "in astonishment. There he was before me, in motley, as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes, enthusiastic, fabulous. His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering" (p. 119). Although not English like Marlow, he made immediate note of his commonality as a "brother sailor" (p. 116). Rather impetuously he requests some of Marlow's "excellent English tobacco" while pointing out "your pilot-house wants a clean up!" (p. 115). Aware of Marlow's potential peril at the hands of the natives, he advises him to keep the boat's whistle ready; "one good screech will do more for you than all your rifles" (p. 115).

The Russian took it upon himself, and appeared literally compelled to tell Marlow as much as possible of Kurtz and his relationship with him. He was clearly in awe of Kurtz and yet casually mentioned Kurtz had threatened to

kill him. He described the great intellectual and emotional conversations they shared. He made no apologies for the obvious atrocities carried out under Kurtz' command—human heads mounted on stakes. As an explanation he pleaded to Marlow “ you don't know how such a life tries a man like Kurtz” (p. 124).

He denied Kurtz was mad; he protested “ you can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man” (p. 121). In spite of it all—or perhaps because of it all—the Russian had nursed Kurtz through illnesses and tried to convince Kurtz to leave the jungle. But Kurtz remained: according to the Russian “ this man suffered too much. He hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away” (p. 121). The Russian knew it was time to leave and perhaps time for Kurtz to leave as well, and Marlow gave him cartridges, tobacco and even shoes as he was leaving the camp. Upon leaving he exclaimed “ you ought to have heard him recite poetry—his own, too...oh, he enlarged my mind!” (131).

Coppola is very faithful to the original in his characterization of the American photojournalist who greets Willard on his arrival. The American, nameless as Conrad's Russian, quickly establishes his commonality with Willard and the crew, crying out “ American! I'm an American civilian!” Similarly he quickly boards the boat, stating happily “ you got the cigarettes!” and exclaiming “ This boat is a mess, man!” Willard is flabbergasted at his appearance, but just as grateful as Marlow when the American advises “ just zap ' em with your siren!” in reference to the hostile natives surrounding the boat.

The American, like the Russian, is a “ disciple” of Kurtz and takes it upon himself to tell Willard all he can about Kurtz and his relationship with him.

He's concerned Willard has "come to take him away" this "great man" who is "a poet warrior in the classic sense." Like the Russian, the American has also been threatened with death by Kurtz but is loyal nonetheless. Willard, like Marlow, sees the grotesque heads on pikes and the American responds "you're looking at the heads—sometimes he goes too far" and fears "you're gonna call him crazy."

The two scenes are virtually parallel in theme and message. The appearance of both characters is completely unexpected and adds the suspense of "what else can be expected in this other-worldly place?" The unexpectedness is combined with the theme of being caught off-guard by the appearance of someone "familiar" in an unfamiliar environment. Is it safe or dangerous to trust this person?

Additionally the characters provide Marlow/Willard with "interpretations" and defense of Kurtz, which is equally frightening when the profound effect of Kurtz upon the characters is revealed. It is a very effective way of giving substance to a man who has yet to be seen. The characters are very appropriate gatekeepers to the "Heart of Darkness" Marlow/Willard are about to enter. The message is the power Kurtz can exert on a fellow European/American and both reader and viewer are left to wonder what effect Kurtz will have on Marlow/Willard.

Unfortunately Coppola's scene does little to assist in understanding the scene as written by Conrad for a very simple reason: despite the dramatic jolt the American gives, he is an "incomplete" if not "throwaway" character. Conrad's Russian is a man of his own adventure who had nursed Kurtz and

urged him to leave; he clearly recognizes the time to move on, which helps put Kurtz and his influence on the Russian in perspective.

Coppola's American, by contrast, has not been of any assistance to Kurtz nor urged him to leave, and is not heard from after bringing Willard into the camp. The Russian has survived and thrown off the influence of Kurtz; whether the American survives is left to the imagination. Despite this, Coppola has provided the viewer a powerful visual representation of the entry into the Heart of Darkness.

#### References

Conrad, Joseph. (2003). Heart of Darkness. New York: Barnes & Noble.

Coppola, Francis F. Apocalypse Now. 1979. Zoetrope Studios.