

In praise of infidelity: an introduction

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Orson Welles once declared that “every Conrad story is a movie.”¹ In a different sense, every Conrad movie is also a story. The story of these movies is the subject of this book.

Since the appearance of Maurice Tourneur’s *Victory* in 1919, more than eighty films or television dramas have been based on works by Joseph Conrad; yet despite the steady interest shown by major filmmakers in the cinematic potential of Conrad’s writings over the past half-century, the story of Conrad adaptations remains largely untold. Scholars have been slow to accept the fact that we live in an age in which film has replaced literature as the main channel through which cultural values are transmitted. Conrad was introduced to many of us at the movies long before we met him in the library, and movies and videotapes continue to provide the most readily available form of public access to his work. No doubt a great many more people have seen *Apocalypse Now* than will ever read *Heart of Darkness*, as was demonstrated recently when the correct answer to one of the quiz questions in the Penguin Fiction Challenge, a promotional contest sponsored by Penguin Books in the United States, described Conrad’s most famous novella as “the haunting tale of a seaman’s quest for an enigmatic WWI officer who’s gone AWOL up the Congo.”² However laughable they may be, such lapses are also important signs of the process of cultural transmission, and they deserve attention from those concerned with what happens to Conrad’s message as it undergoes transformation into other media.

Conrad films can also provide us with information about certain features of his work that remain difficult of access in literary form. Film versions of his “colonial” novels provide us with visible models of the extent to which Conrad’s own insights into multiculturalism

and cultural conflict have been compatible with the parallel and shifting conventions that govern the dissemination of literature and film. Conrad's dialogue often tends toward melodrama when stripped of a narrator's ironic commentary, and Conrad films, particularly those of the 1930s, have revealed the surprising extent to which the plots of some of his "darkest" political novels, like *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, contain elements of romantic comedy. Certain analytic terms in narratology (such as "focalization" or "narratees") can be applied with greater clarity to film than to works of fiction, and the results obtained from film can also help us to understand the structures of the literary narratives on which they are based. In short, adaptation is a two-way process, and the study of films can help us to understand Conrad's literary works precisely because the former are "unfaithful" to the latter. A truly "faithful" film, were such a thing possible, would have nothing to teach us, but we can profit from a study of the ways in which films fail to "do full justice" to the originals on which they are based.

Orson Welles, who wrote three Conrad filmscripts, apparently felt that Conrad's stories were ready-made for the cinema, requiring little or no adaptation.³ Moreover, he regarded this essentially filmic quality as unique to Conrad: "I don't suppose there's any novelist except Conrad who can be put directly on the screen" (*This is Orson Welles*, 262). Yet Welles failed to realize any of his own Conrad scripts as films, and he conceded paradoxically that "There's never been a Conrad movie, for the simple reason that nobody's ever done it as written" (*This is Orson Welles*, 32). Why have filmmakers been unable to put Conrad "directly" on the screen, or to "do it as written"?

A film can no more be "faithful" to a work of literature than a photograph can be "faithful" to a personality; and to demand textual fidelity of the Conrad films, as readers and critics have often done, is to miss the point that the imaginative and meditative play of images in which we participate while reading a novel is radically different from our experience of the immediate and specific images that pass before us on the silver screen. What we see while we read is more in the nature of a set of mental sketches than a series of photographs complete to the last visible detail. The images evoked in a

reader's mind are neither entirely nor immediately visual, while such images constitute a film's very mode of existence. Literary and film artists do share a common concern in making us "see" with more than just our eyes, but the means by which they achieve this goal are essentially different. Written words contain an acoustic element (Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structural linguistics, defined verbal signs as a bond between an "acoustic image" and a "mental concept"), and what one "sees" while immersed in a novel is not only the words on the page. In film, the images need not be acoustic, and even after the advent of "talking pictures," sound was traditionally relegated to a secondary and subordinate role. The history of "progress" in literature, certainly in Conrad's time of post-impressionist experimentation, was largely a matter of the conquest of the visual, with the development of techniques not only to "make us see" but also to make us understand something of the nature of perception. The history of film, on the other hand, has largely been the story of its transcendence of the visual, with the introduction of sound, music, and other nonvisual or ultravisual features (including experiments with 3-D, wrap-around screens, and even Smell-o-Vision⁴).

Like Welles, V. S. Naipaul has also been impressed with the peculiarly filmic quality of Conrad's fiction. For Naipaul, "The Conrad novel was like a simple film with an elaborate commentary."⁵ But when they are transferred to the screen, the simply filmic (visual) elements of the story become subject to what Henry James called "weak specifications" and thus overdetermined, while the "elaborate commentary" is necessarily simplified or entirely lost. Conrad's self-proclaimed task was to make the reader "see," but on film the viewer is often made to see too much, or too clearly, at the expense of other forms of insight that lie beyond the visual.

The "elaborate commentary" mentioned by Naipaul is usually supplied in Conrad's novels by a narrator who remains invisible to the extent that he involves the reader in his narrative. Films can present narratives in action, but they have difficulty "showing" the act of narrating from a perspective other than that of the camera. As George Bluestone put it, "Where the novel discourses, the film must

picture.”⁶ The film camera, as the point of view from which the pictures are presented, occupies the position of the narrator in a fictional work. This condition was axiomatic for *Bluestone*: “the camera is always the narrator” (*Novels into Film*, 49). In this sense, all shots in a film are “point-of-view” shots, but the camera’s point of view need not be associated with a narrating voice or a fixed point of audition.⁷ We may share both the eyes and ears of a filmic narrator, but we can also witness scenes from camera angles that are unthinkable for any human agent, or hear things (like a studio orchestra) that none of the characters on the screen are presumed to hear.

While the presence of a narrator like Conrad’s Marlow can provide a warrant of authenticity and control for a literary narrative, films have traditionally replaced literary narrators with a set of conventions that more closely resemble those of third-person, so-called “omniscient” narration. The window that is opened by the camera does not readily admit the presence of a human mediator proposing to explain things that viewers can easily see for themselves. Voice-over narration offers the nearest equivalent to a narrator in film, but the camera rarely remains within the eye of the speaker. Experiments with the “subjective camera” like *Lady in the Lake* or *Dark Passage* (both 1947) have shown how difficult it is to involve the camera as a human eye in dramatic action; and Orson Welles’s plan to film *Heart of Darkness* entirely from Marlow’s point of view required cameraman Gregg Toland to devise intricate new techniques like the “feather wipe” simply to enable Marlow to move around.⁸

The problem of finding a filmic equivalent for literary narrators is particularly acute in the case of films based on novels famous for the complex layerings of their narrative voices and the intricate orchestrations of their ironies. Henry James hailed Conrad as a writer “absolutely alone as a votary of the way to do a thing that shall make it undergo most doing.”⁹ Most of this artistic “doing” is immediately undone in the process of turning a novel into a film, which begins by reducing the entire work to a summary proposal or “treatment” of the kind parodied in films like *The Last Tycoon* (1976) or *The Player* (1992). The novel is first reduced to its basic plot or *fabula*, and is judged on this basis before undergoing elaboration into a film.

It is hardly surprising that this reconstruction often takes the path of least resistance, adapting the specific differences of the novel to bring them into conformity with current (and demonstrably marketable) stereotypes about romantic love, lost honor, or virtue rewarded. These stereotypes are by no means specific to film; they are derived largely from the very models of popular fiction that Conrad managed to “out-do” in his own works.

What remains of Conrad once his involuted narrators have disappeared and his convoluted chronologies have been reduced to a tale told straight through from beginning to end? For many Conrad filmmakers, the answer has been a tale of romantic love. The teacher of languages is entirely absent from *Razumov*, Marc Allégret’s 1936 adaptation of *Under Western Eyes*, and the revolutionaries in Geneva are represented only by Laspara and Nikita. The hero’s guilty love for Natalie leads him to attempt suicide, and Natalie then nurses him back to health in a Swiss sanatorium. In the end, he confesses his treachery to save her from a police trap, and dies with a smile on his lips and words of thanks for his executioner: “Merci, Nikita.” Conrad originally thought of having Razumov marry Natalie so that their child’s resemblance to Haldin would ultimately drive Razumov to confess his betrayal, but the novel as written condensed these motivations into an astonishingly tight and complex narrative in which Razumov is driven to confess by the accumulating pressures of a single day. Allégret’s film relaxes Conrad’s taut time-frame and reduces the plot to the familiar elements of conventional melodrama: Razumov kills the villain (Mikulin’s agent, sent to Geneva to keep an eye on him) and dies to save his beloved. Similarly, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1936 adaptation of *The Secret Agent* as *Sabotage* shifts the primary focus of interest away from the relationship between Winnie and her repulsive husband and toward the growing affection between Winnie and “Ted,” a handsome policeman who bears not the slightest resemblance to Conrad’s Chief Inspector Heat. In the end, the Professor blows up all the evidence, and Winnie and Ted accidentally live happily ever after. Heyst and Lena also find happiness at the end of all of the film versions of *Victory*, where the title is emblematic of Heyst’s victory over loneliness and isolation. Lena

dies in the novel, which ends with the word “Nothing!”; but John Cromwell’s 1940 adaptation ends with Heyst taking Lena in his arms to declare, “We’ll never be lonely again. We’ve won our Victory.”

These examples illustrate the requirements of a film industry whose products are designed for a mass audience, but they also suggest that Conrad’s novels may be based on romantic stereotypes to an extent that has not been fully appreciated. These stereotypes provide grist for the mills of Conrad’s ironic narrators; but when the narrators quit the scene, they take their ironies with them, leaving their filmic counterparts to speak for themselves in terms that are often embarrassingly melodramatic. Filmmakers have sometimes tried to compensate for this loss of ironic narration by inflating the language of the characters to a level of high sententiousness, as in the monologues of Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or Nicholas Roeg’s *Heart of Darkness* (1994). Kurtz is just a “voice” in Conrad’s novella, but on film he is obliged not only to show himself but also to say something – albeit in the mode of satire, as in Ettore Scola’s *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l’amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* (1968), or of low comedy, as in Jonathan Lawton’s 1988 spoof *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death*. The chiaroscuro lighting of Kurtz in Coppola’s film, which prevents us from seeing him clearly, can serve as a visual analogue of the narrative management that relieves Conrad’s Kurtz of the need to speak.

Underneath their ironic narrative disquisitions and beneath their chronological convolutions, Conrad’s novels are based on dramatic action, and this element of adventure not only survives but is often enhanced by the rite of passage through a “treatment” and re-laboration into a film. The clash between good and evil invokes a world of ready-made cinematic stereotypes requiring only that the villains become even more villainous and the heroes even more heroic. In Richard Brooks’s 1965 version of *Lord Jim*, the “General” who stands in for Sherif Ali is a cruel sadist, while an added scene in which Jim saves a lighter loaded with gunpowder shows that what he lacks is not courage but self-respect. The arduous journey upriver provides a natural adventure framework for film versions of *Heart of Darkness*;¹⁰ Brooks borrows this motif for *Lord Jim* and converts Jim’s

journey to Patusan into a riverine equivalent of the desert crossings in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

In summary, putting Conrad on film makes it virtually impossible to preserve the ironic commentary and chronological complexity that characterize his novels. The process of adaptation requires these features to be stripped away, and the remaining tales of love and death in exotic settings can then be dramatized within the filmic repertoires of romance and high adventure. What characters do in a novel can usually be put on film, but showing what they think, or what their action means, requires the development of techniques that are radically different from those employed by novelists. In consequence, the most interesting features of film adaptations are those which illustrate the various ways in which directors have risked infidelity to their literary models for the sake of a new and more equal partnership between fiction and film.

The history of Conrad films is a microcosm of the history of film technology in general, from the first silent two-reelers through the introduction of sound and postsynchronization to the development of Technicolor, wide screens, and Dolby or digital sound. The chapters in this book have been arranged in chronological order to reflect the ways in which filmmakers have invented or adapted new techniques to the specific task of putting Conrad on film.

In the first chapter, Wallace S. Watson traces film variations on the theme of Conradian irony, and explores a number of attempts by film and literary theorists to understand why irony has proven so resistant to filmic expression. Film scholars, literary theorists, and narratologists have defined various kinds of irony which can be compared and evaluated on the basis of a survey of Conrad films.

Conrad usually spoke disparagingly of film, often joking with his agent J. B. Pinker about the immense sums of money to be made from the purveyors of what he considered “absolutely the lowest form of amusement.”¹¹ Nevertheless – or perhaps for this very reason – he became the first major English author ever to practice the art of film adaptation. Conrad’s silent “film-play” *Gaspar the Strong Man* (1920), based on his story “Gaspar Ruiz,” has never been produced, and was

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Plate 2 Lost treasures of the silent screen: *The Silver Treasure* (1926) . . .



Plate 3 . . . and *The Road to Romance* (1927). Note the narrative use of deep focus.

published only once, in Italian translation. My chapter 2 chronicles Conrad's involvement with film and introduces *Gaspar the Strong Man* as a vivid and long-neglected example of "Conrad on film."

The arrival of sound in the late 1920s was a revolutionary event in cinema history, and it posed specific problems in the case of Conrad films. William Wellman's 1930 version of *Victory*, called *Dangerous Paradise*, was primarily a Paramount vehicle for launching a new starlet named Nancy Carroll, whose name was printed even larger than the film's title on advertising posters. But the accompanying publicity materials also hailed the development of "Sea-Telephone Poles" as a great technological breakthrough:

Telephone poles, floating on end on the open sea, solved for Paramount technicians the problem of recording water scenes in Nancy Carroll's first starring picture, "Dangerous Paradise" ...

Several important scenes in "Dangerous Paradise" take place on the deck of a yacht and microphones had to be placed on the boat, above the players. But Paramount's huge and costly sound truck could not be floated. Experts solved the problem by mounting short poles on floating rafts, tying them together to form a string that stretched from shore to far at sea. The wires carried Miss Carroll's voice and that of Richard Arlen, her leading man, to the sound-recording apparatus ashore.¹²

Filmmakers would, of course, soon discover that microphones did not have to be placed within range of the players; sound would soon, as a matter of course, be recorded separately and added in postsynchronization.

Paramount also faced the problem of how to maintain its foreign audience after the advent of sound. Intertitles could easily be translated into different languages, but the translation of actual voices required the development of new techniques. Among the more striking experiments of this kind was the establishment in 1930 of Paramount studios at Joinville, near Paris, for the express purpose of producing multiple foreign-language versions of ten selected films, one of which was *Dangerous Paradise*. Foreign actors and directors were brought in, and as each set was constructed, film crews from



Plate 4 Ricardo and Mr. Jones in Alberto Cavalcanti's *Dans une île perdue*, one of five versions of *Dangerous Paradise* made at Joinville in 1930–31, all of which are now presumed lost.

France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Poland were put through their paces in turn; then the set would be struck and replaced with a new scene. Five versions of *Dangerous Paradise* were produced in this assembly line fashion. Comparisons among them would make it possible to isolate for analysis the differences between national film styles at the time.¹³ Unfortunately, all the Joinville copies appear to be lost, so we may never know how five different film cultures solved the problem that required floating telephone poles.

The exotic settings of Conrad's fictions appealed to early filmmakers, and the surviving silent films are essentially costume melodramas that stress the romantic elements of his stories at the expense of their political or moral dimensions. Alfred Hitchcock's *Sabotage* and Marc Allégret's *Razumov* (both 1936) were the first of the Conrad films to be based on novels set elsewhere than in the colonies. Hitchcock rewrote Conrad's story of espionage as a romance, but was also the first director to develop filmic correlatives for the darker side of