Adapting to Vietnam: A Look at MASH and Heart of Darkness from Books to Films

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Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Kirsti Bohanan
College: Arts & Sciences
Department: English
Faculty Mentor: Charles Maland

PROJECT TITLE: Adapting to Vietnam: A Look at M.A.S.H. and Heart of Darkness from Books to Films

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Charles J. Maland, Faculty Mentor
Date: May 2, 2001

Comments (Optional):

"Kristi wrote a solidly, clearly thought-out essay on the novel and film versions of M.A.S.H. and Heart of Darkness. Her introduction demonstrated that she had engaged herself in the aesthetic issues involved in literary adaptation to film. I was pleased with how clearly she described her focus at the start and then studied with it in the body of the essay. Her citation form was exemplary, and she worked her research into the body of the paper with skill and clarity. My only suggestions to Kristi, besides minor stylistic revisions, were: 1) that she might have included more specific examples from the film to support her analysis; and 2) that she might have gauged the response to each film that she might have researching contemporary reviews. Overall, however, this was solid work, well deserving of honors."
Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
PLAN FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDY, WORK, AND TRAVEL

Name: ____________________________________________________________

College: ___________________ Department: __________________________

Faculty Mentor: ___________________________________________________

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE:

I have discussed the above plan with this student.

Signed: ________________________________ faculty mentor

Date: ______________

_______________________________________________________________

ATTACH COPIES OF: Your travel schedule, addresses of institutions with which
you will be affiliated, copies of relevant correspondence from host institutions.

I have met with this student and discussed the plan and attachments describing the
proposed international study, work, and travel. The plan is well-conceived, and the
student appears to be prepared adequately for this experience.

Signed: ________________________________ Date: ______________

Elizabeth Ousley, Advisor
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Return this completed form to The University Honors Program, F101 Melrose Hall,
974-7875, at least 1 month prior to your departure.
Adapting to Vietnam:  
A Look at *MASH* and *Heart of Darkness* from Books to Films

Kristi Bohannon

Senior Honors Project
ABSTRACT:

Literature has been a great benefit to narrative filmmaking since its beginnings by providing both stories for film to draw from and also ways of telling them. Many hands are involved in the process of adapting a book to film, and so it is inevitable that changes to the story will be made. Typical changes include the deletion of characters and events, primarily because of time and financial constraints. Alterations also can occur from the filmmaker’s interpretation and their goals for the outcome of the film. Sometimes, these interpretations are influenced by a director (or screenwriter, producer, etc.) who wants to make a political statement which may or may not be also present in the book. Such is the case in the adaptations of Richard Hooker’s *MASH* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Although neither book deals with the Vietnam War, their filmic counterparts, *M*A*S*H* and *Apocalypse Now*, set out to make comments on the Vietnam War. However, they were adapted to do so in drastically different ways. In adapting *MASH*, the filmmakers stayed fairly close to the novel in both style and content, keeping the setting in the Vietnam War. Only subtle changes in the film allude to Vietnam. The anti-war sentiment at the time of the film’s release also helped to bring these subtleties to the forefront. The themes and characters of *Heart of Darkness*, however, are barely recognizable in the film *Apocalypse Now*. Here, filmmakers transplanted the story directly into the Vietnam War. It is unmistakable that their agenda in adapting the book so loosely was to show the “horror” of the Vietnam War.
At just over 100 years old, film is one of the youngest of the arts. Because of this, film has been able to develop quickly by drawing from the techniques and traditions from other arts, particularly literature. Literature has not only provided filmmakers with stories to tell but also with narrative techniques. For example, as Sergei Eisenstein points out, the novels of Charles Dickens have inspired filmmakers by both their stories and the writing style, which helped filmmakers to develop such film techniques as the close-up and the montage (122-136). This is particularly apparent in the films of D.W. Griffith, the great American director regarded as the “father of film technique.” Griffith’s films were some of the first to use these methods, and Dickens was a source for a number of these films. Even before Griffith, however, directors had been pulling stories from novels. The first notable adaptation was George Melies’ A Trip to the Moon (1902), loosely based on a Jules Verne novel (Boyum 3). By doing this, Melies started a trend that continues to this day.

Although film takes many of its approaches from literature, it is indeed a different art form altogether. Therefore, many times a film has significant narrative
differences from its literary source. The differences in the two forms, the written word and the moving images accompanied by sound, necessitate at the very least slight changes. Typical alterations include the deletion or combination of characters and events. Reasons for this are "in part from the dictates of time and the difficulties an audience has in following a large cast of characters, and in part from the nature of the medium" (McDougal 4). Film can take seconds to set up a scene or physical character description that could take pages for a novelist to display. In contrast, very rarely can a film get inside the mind of a character and show their feelings and motivations as easily as can be done in a book. Similar changes in character, costume, setting, and other visuals can also be due to constraints placed on filmmakers by the industry itself or by producers, such as censorship or financial burdens.

Many hands are involved in the adaptation of a book to film, and inevitably this variety of influence will have an effect on the outcome of the film. The screenwriter is essentially the first lens through which the novel is filtered. Very often, however, even the screenplay itself is transformed several times before the project is finished. These secondary transformations usually come through the director's and producers' interpretations of the book and their goals in the outcome of the film. Directors in
particular my exercise a great deal of creative control over such a project. In some cases, the filmmakers have a social or political statement that they wish to portray in their film. Not always are these statements present in the original source, and therein lies yet another reason for alterations from the book.

Such is the case in the adaptations of Richard Hooker’s *MASH* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Although neither book deals with the Vietnam War, their filmic counterparts, *M*A*S*H* and *Apocalypse Now*, set out to make commentaries on the Vietnam War. Through these two examples, one can also see different methods of adaptation. In adapting *MASH*, the filmmakers stayed fairly close to the novel in both style and content, keeping the setting in the Korean War while commenting on the Vietnam War. The themes and content of *Heart of Darkness*, however, are barely recognizable in the film *Apocalypse Now*. By thoroughly exploring the differences in the novels and the films and how the changes serve as criticism of the Vietnam War, one can see that both a close adaptation and a loose adaptation can produce a film with a political statement that was not present in the original source.

*MASH*, published in 1968, was written by Richard Hooker and was inspired by the author’s experiences as a doctor in the Korean War. The structure of the novel is episodic,
focusing on the experiences of three army doctors, Hawkeye Pierce, Duke Forrest, and "Trapper" John McIntyre. The three pull various hijinks in order to deal with their situation and to attempt to make army life more bearable. The three have quite a disdain for authority, and many of their pranks are at the expense of the career officers. Hawkeye, Duke and Trapper do not fit neatly or eagerly into the military hierarchy. Instead, they seek to make the 4077th MASH fit to suit them, ridding the unit of such "regular army clowns" as Major Hobson and Frank Burns. Those they do not run out of the 4077th eventually either side with the "swampmen," (so called because of their tent being known as "the swamp") or at least tolerate them (as does the commanding officer, Henry Blake). Despite the eagerness of the men to be finished with their tour of duty, the idea behind the novel seems to be not so much an anti-Korean War effort as an anti-authority display. "The American military establishment and various aspects of army medicine are the forces the swampmen fight" (Gilliard 16). They do not seem to be against war as such, but rather upset more about being drafted and forced into the military hierarchy.

The film M*A*S*H came about when producer Ingo Preminger bought the movie rights to the novel and had the screenplay written by Ring Lardner, Jr. It was not until
Robert Altman agreed to direct that the film really took off, however. Although not the first choice as director, Altman had a great deal of influence on the outcome of the film (Plecki 11). M*A*S*H was Altman's first commercially successful film, and it was also the film that most helped to establish and popularize his distinct film style. His use of overlapping dialogue is all throughout the film and helps to give it a more realistic feel. Also giving the film a more realistic feel are the surgery scenes, which, though not particularly gory by today's standards, vividly show the workings of an army hospital.

Much like the novel, the film structure is episodic. It too follows the experiences of Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland) and Duke Forest (Tom Skeritt) as they arrive at the 4077th and are joined in their escapades by the new thoracic surgeon, "Trapper" John McIntyre (Elliot Gould). Most of the events and pranks pulled by the three in the novel are preserved in the film, especially those that are at the expense of the "regular army clowns." At times, the dialogue in the film is essentially lifted directly from the pages of the novel, and so much of the anti-authority sentiment from Hooker's book seeps through into the film.

The most distinct differences in the film from the novel occurred in the combination, deletion, and addition of characters. For example, the characteristics of Major
Hobson and Frank Burns were condensed in the film as Robert Duvall's character Frank Burns. Like Burns and Hobson in the novel, the three main protagonists also ridicule the Frank Burns of the film. Largely, it is because of his personality and his willingness to buy into the strict rules of the Army. By making this his priority, "he totally ignores and disregards his ability to inflict harm on others" (Baker 249).

Other more subtle differences, however, are what bring up the anti-Vietnam commentary. Although both the novel and the film remain set in the Korean War of the 1950's, the anti-establishment sentiment from the novel was kept and lends itself to be interpreted as a statement about Vietnam. This interpretation was most certainly anticipated, as the film was released in 1970, a time when anti-war protests and sentiment were still at a high. Altman added his own special touches to make this interpretation even more inviting to viewers. The clothing and long hairstyles in the film are the most apparent of these changes, being more current with the fashion of the 1960s than the 1950s. Near the end of the film, an announcement on the declaration of marijuana being declared a dangerous drug over the PA also makes reference to the 1960s. Audiences certainly picked up on these changes and reacted to the film accordingly:
"younger, hip audiences applauded its relevance to Vietnam" (Plecki 19-20).

Apart from these changes in mise-en-scene, Altman's narrative structure certainly leaves room for this interpretation. "A very crucial aspect of Altman's work involves the ways in which his films can be considered to be 'open,' and how this quality of openness can encourage an 'active' response" (Karp 12). So, while Altman did not directly mention the Vietnam War or make a strong, concrete reference to it in M*A*S*H, he did leave it open for this interpretation and encourage the inference through the subtle changes, playing off the younger audience's own anti-war sentiments. Altman was able to make an anti-Vietnam, anti-war statement without making drastic changes to the novel. Not only that, but he was able to do so without showing any direct battle or gunfire between the troops (although the results of such battles are shown in the surgery scenes). In fact, the only "battle" in either the book or the film is the somewhat climactic football game the 4077th plays against General Hammond and the 325th Evac.

Unlike MASH, Heart of Darkness was vastly transformed in its journey to the screen. Conrad's novella, published in 1902, is set in the colonial nineteenth century and traces the journey of sailor Charlie Marlow down the Congo River in the heart of Africa. The story is told through the
first person point of view of Marlow recounting the experience to his friends and is further filtered through the perspective of one of the listeners. Marlow has been sent by the Company to find the once-great ivory trader Kurtz. Marlow has a number of vivid and interesting experiences on his trip down the river, and finally meets Kurtz in a memorable scene. The novella reaches its climax with the death of Kurtz, and Marlow is left to sift through the moral issues brought up by his experiences.

The film *Apocalypse Now*, released in 1979, was directed by Francis Ford Coppola, who certainly held most of the creative control over the film. *Heart of Darkness* was not officially credited as a source for the film. According to David Blakesly, however, "Coppola himself freely identifies three source texts: the novella [*Heart of Darkness*], Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and John Milius' 1969 script" (105). For the most part, critics have regarded the film in light of its relation to Conrad's text.

At first glance, the film seems to be completely unrelated to the novella. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) is the only character who keeps his name from the Conrad text. Martin Sheen's Captain Willard is obviously the parallel to Charles Marlow, but the two are quite different characters. *Apocalypse Now* seems to be most indebted to *Heart of Darkness* in the central catalyst of the narrative being a
snaking river, a dominant, powerful image in both works. In addition, "in both versions, the river ultimately leads to Kurtz and his dying words of horror" (Kinder 15). While even some bits of dialogue were lifted from MASH, here there are no similarities of dialogue in Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now, save these infamous, soft-spoken (yet powerful) last words of Kurtz. In addition to keeping the river journey as a structural device, Coppola retained the idea of Kurtz as a once great man now fallen in the film. Both Kurtz characters are secluded in the jungle for a long period of time, and at their meetings with Marlow and Willard are nothing like their former selves.

The differences between Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now are quite noticeable. The first and most important is the shift from the colonized Africa of the late 1800s to the Vietnam War of the 1960s-1970s. Although both jungle settings are portrayed vividly by their authors, they involve completely different contexts altogether. Other obvious changes are that most of the characters and events have no precedence whatsoever in Conrad. Willard's "companions" on the boat travelling down the Nung River seem chosen to display a variety of the young men that were sent off to the Vietnam War, not as parallels to Marlow's steamship crew.
Also unlike the novella, virtually every character in the film seems a bit maddened at one point or another, from the surfing-obsessed Captain Kilgore (also played by Robert Duvall), who "loves the smell of napalm in the morning," to the men stationed in the trenches at the bridge. Willard himself is not immune to the madness, seeming mad even before the trip down the river, performing a strange ritualistic dance in his hotel room in the opening scenes (Boyum 132). With everyone eventually becoming insane, including the "protagonist," it is difficult to see whom the audience is to get the moral lesson from. However, this does help to show that the war is not just horrifying and chaotic, but that it deeply affects those who are involved, causing mental and emotional damage.

By placing the story directly into the "dark heart" of the Vietnam War, the political statement made by the filmmaker is unmistakable. Coppola constantly bombards the audience with vivid visuals that are shocking, violent, and almost surreal to take a definite anti-Vietnam stance. As noted by Marsha Kinder, Coppola himself asserts this in a promotional brochure:

The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of Apocalypse Now was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the
Vietnam War... I tried to illustrate as many of its different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars. (13)

Undeniably, Coppola is successful in portraying the horrors of the war. He spares no one and puts every gruesome detail out in the open for the audience to see. It is difficult to come away from the film without feeling how horrible the Vietnam War must have been. Although Coppola's adaptation is very loosely tied to its source, it manages to take an extremely direct and successful approach to reaching the political goal of the filmmaker, without (arguably) remaining altogether untrue to Conrad's novel.

Unlike *M*A*S*H*, *Apocalypse Now* was released well after American troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam. Perhaps this too had an effect on the way the two novels were adapted. Most likely, the filmmakers of *M*A*S*H* did not have the liberty to so outwardly criticize a war in which the country was still involved. By feeding off the sentiment of the time, however, Altman was still able to make the anti-war sentiment come across through allusions to the time period and through the anti-establishment escapades of the characters. Francis Ford Coppola had much more freedom to make a film that directly took a critical view of the Vietnam War. By 1979, those who had experienced the war
had come home and had time to digest their experiences, and so more and more people had accepted that there was indeed a great deal of "horror" in the Vietnam War. Coppola played on these sentiments much as Altman had relied on the sentiments of his audience. Those who were not familiar with the extent of the tragedy in the war were forced to look it in the eye with the film *Apocalypse Now*.

So, while *M*A*S*H* sticks closely to its source and uses subtleties to make a comment on Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now* thrusts the audience directly into the horrors of the war. Neither novel, *MASH* nor *Heart of Darkness*, was written for this purpose, and so the filmmakers had to take a very active and creative role in persuading their audiences to be receptive to their view. Robert Altman and Francis Ford Coppola took greatly different approaches to adapting the books to films, but both were able to come to similar results in making a meaningful statement against the Vietnam War.
WORKS CITED


