

# Orienting the Coppolas: A New Approach to U.S. Film Imperialism

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Every cultural critic must experience the frustration of encountering an exhausting and exhausted text, one that overruns the interpretive rubric designed to understand it. This article suggests adopting manifold critical models to approach and parse rich textual constructions or tense combinations of texts. The manifold I'm proposing is postcolonial, psychoanalytic and feminist. The combined texts to be appraised are by three members of a well-known Hollywood family, the Coppolas: Francis Ford's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; his wife Eleanor's insightful diary of their family's stay in the Philippines during the making of the film, published under the title *Notes* (1995); and finally their daughter Sophia's *Lost in Translation* (2003), which intensifies yet partially resolves the aesthetic and neo-imperial contradictions that emerge at the junction of the former two.

My conjecture is that wider and more lively landscapes of reading surprisingly elicit far more focused and defensible claims about themselves. A family of texts elucidates all of its members more clearly. Here I mean to define a family of texts without any reference to the supposed biological or social configurations of human family structure or normative 'family values.' Instead, I take a text to be 'familied' with another out of its ability to squabble, to elucidate the limitations and inequities of the other because it secretly or avowedly contains related limitations. Families of texts tie themselves together into a politically directed environment of discursive enunciations that lay bare their internal prejudices and faults as well as those mirrored in the world around them. In the case of the three Coppola texts, the internal structure of each text repeats the structure of the social relations that sustained it.

Widening the ambit to include a family of texts rather than privileging a single text will, I hope, alleviate the fatigue that texts and their readers experience in critical environments overly-saturated by the fascination with

cultural totems like *Apocalypse Now*. By demystifying that filmmaking event, and making its international politics more familiar and even more familial, this multi-generational portrait of the Coppolas will reveal the role cultural history and criticism has played in carrying the processes of American deimperialisation into a pacific century of critical inquiry.

As recently as 2010, Kuan-Hsing Chen, a proponent of situating centres of Asian Studies within Asia itself, complained that the 'presence of the United States in East Asia as an imperial power has not been seriously taken up as an object of study, and we must try to account for this lack of analysis.'<sup>1</sup> Scholars of American and Asian studies outside of America are uniquely positioned to correct the lack of analysis Chen describes. One way of doing so would be to recognise that the cultural and aesthetic products of the United States, such as those authored by the Coppolas, frequently identify the intrusion of America, both as rhetorical figure and political force, into Asia. Such textual families take imperium as an object of study, and they can study themselves (or fail to) as facilitators of American power's irresponsible excesses.

For practitioners of American and Asian studies who work toward deimperialising the role of the U.S. in East Asia, recent feminist scholarship has suggested that the family is not only a basic organisational unit of American imperialism, but also a discursive realm where private and public oppressions can be intimately addressed and even resolved.<sup>2</sup> Those 'foreign affairs' that produce the lasting guilt and resentment of American colonisation have long depended on the family to advance them and socialise them, and so private affairs both parallel and disrupt the geopolitical machinations of foreign policy. After the work of Mary Ryan and Amy Kaplan, any understanding of American imperialism requires an understanding of American domesticity and the evolving, historical construction of the family. Such a critical perspective displays both Francis' *Apocalypse Now* and Sofia's *Lost in Translation* as comprised of internal aesthetic relations that repeat the discursive domestic relations of

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<sup>1</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> For important work in this area see Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830–1860* (New York: Routledge, 1982); Ella Shohat, 'Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema' in *Visions of the East* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Amy Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity,' in Donald Pease and Kaplan (eds.) *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

the family life that surrounds them. Eleanor's diaries—with their reflections on film theory, housekeeping, historical colonisation, gender oppression, family rearing and travel—provide an indispensable key for uniting the family's film aesthetic to an atmosphere of political oppression that it both internalises and resists.

In early 1977, when the excesses of the *Apocalypse Now* production started to make headlines, Eleanor Coppola sent a telex from San Francisco to the Philippines insulting her husband in light of what she saw as his tyrannical carelessness. She copied the telex to his Director of Photography, Vittorio Storaro, his production manager, his production designer, Dean Tavoularis, and the helicopter pilot coordinating the aerial cinematography, Dick White. The memo suggested that the sycophantic atmosphere around the director, where everyone supported his genius without reservation, was producing a 'kind of franticness,' whereby Francis had lost 'the discrimination that draws the line between what is visionary and what is madness.'<sup>3</sup> More to the point, Eleanor told Francis

what no one else was willing to say, that he was setting up his own Vietnam with his supply lines of wine and steaks and air conditioners. Creating the very situation he went there to expose. That with his staff of hundreds of people carrying out his every request, he was ... going too far. (177)

At first Francis was furious, but, by the time he was introducing *Apocalypse Now* to an audience at Cannes, he had absorbed Eleanor's critique of his megalomania into his own vision of himself. 'My film is not about Vietnam,' he stated: 'it *is* Vietnam.'<sup>4</sup>

Eleanor's contrary telex was aimed at exposing her husband's chauvinist politics—his dictatorial control over an army of cultural industry workers—but if her complaint aims at the national trade hegemony that authorised the hubris he demonstrates at Cannes, it aims too at Francis the husband. Condemning his 'supply lines,' she couches her attack in the vocabulary of foreign affairs, which Francis co-opts in France, while her anger is equally directed at the oppressions of their marital affairs, an issue Francis omits in France. Tellingly, two months after Eleanor's angry, anti-imperial telex, the couple were discussing divorce, and by September

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<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Coppola, *Notes* (New York: Faber, 1995), p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Coppola in Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, and Eleanor Coppola *Hearts of Darkness: a Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Paramount Pictures, 1991).

Francis admitted that he ‘was in love with another woman’ (211). While happy to self-publicise as oppressed by his own genius and even as a dictatorial oppressor of his crew, the private oppressions inflicted upon Eleanor are recorded by her diary not by his press conference.

Published in 1995, Eleanor’s *Notes* on the making of *Apocalypse Now* present a fragmented travelogue of her time in postcolonial Philippines. She moved there precisely 30 years after the nation’s full independence from the United States, and 75 years after the American genocide of Filipinos secured it as a colonial possession.<sup>5</sup> That the Coppolas are aware of the bloody history of the Philippine-American War is evident even in *Apocalypse Now*, though obliquely evidenced, by the title of Colonel Kurtz’ Harvard MA Thesis: ‘The Philippines Insurrection: American Foreign Policy in South East Asia, 1898–1902.’ The ‘Philippines Insurrection’ refers to a protracted American occupation of the Islands from 1898 to 1907, during which, in Mark Twain words, ‘Thirty thousand killed a million.’<sup>6</sup> Indeed by 1902 there were 70,000 U.S. troops on the islands, waging a brutal war against a local guerrilla insurrection. Upwards of 1.6 million Filipinas died. The U.S. ignored the Hague convention on humane warfare, using outlawed ‘dum-dum’ bullets, placing civilian populations in *reconcentrato* camps, and torturing captives with the ‘water-cure’ to simulate their drowning.<sup>7</sup>

Though historians tend to mark 1898 as a watershed date that announced the arrival of the U.S. onto the stage of world colonialism, Walter Williams writes, in an essay published the year after *Apocalypse Now* premiered, that the that United States did have a ‘tradition of holding alien peoples as colonial subjects’ well before 1898, and that the brutal annexation of the Philippines needs to be situated in the longer history of

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<sup>5</sup> Luzviminda Francisco, *The Philippines: The End of An Illusion* (London, 1973); William Pomeroy, *American Neo-Colonialism: Its Emergence in the Philippines and Asia* (New York: International Publishers, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain, ‘Thirty Thousand Killed a Million’ in *Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire: Anti-imperialists Writings on the Philippine-American War* (ed.) Jim Zwick (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Luzviminda Francisco, ‘The First Vietnam’ in *The Philippines Reader: a History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Resistance*. (Boston: South End Press, 1987)

U.S. American Indian Policy.<sup>8</sup> Though Eleanor's diary investigates the repercussions of America's colonial war in the Philippines, Francis' film tends to place Vietnam in the deeper history of the American Indian genocide, especially in the discomfiting USO scene, where the U.S. soldiers gawk at Playboy Playmates of the Year come to comfort them. Dressed as a Cowgirl, an Indian, and a Cavalry Officer, the three playmates fondle M-16s like phalluses. Surrounded by even more obviously phallic rocket cut outs, the audience of American GIs, who are trapped in yet another unfinished project of American imperialism, are distracted and entertained by tokens of preceding historical conflicts, which, from the point of the view of the colonising military, are reassuringly over, present now only in erotic simulation.

However, the scorched earth policy implemented so fiercely in the Philippines (or in the napalming of Vietnam) was first ordered by U.S. commander General George Washington, who ordered John Sullivan to raid and burn Seneca villages in Western New York State. This historical violence, clothed in the USO Indian costumes, resurfaces in softer forms of pleasure and entertainment, and so its menace extends to the women conscripted into the fantasy of American military power. One dramatic upshot on the playmate of the year, which should underline her towering and powerful stature, also frames a helicopter blade, unseen to her, whirring ominously over her head, foreshadowing the violence that will befall the playmates down the river, when their bodies are traded in exchange for petrol.

*Apocalypse Now* insistently interweaves threads of geopolitical and gender oppression in a way that takes clearer relief against the background of Eleanor's private record of resentment. In her diary, the consequences of America's mistreatment of the Philippines are evident in her close attention to the local political economy. For instance, on 1 May 1976, Labour Day in the Philippines, Eleanor records that President Ferdinand Marcos 'raised the minimum wage in Metro Manila to 10 pesos, a day, approximately \$1.25' (46). This Labour Day entry comes after several months of considering local inequity and its relation to geo-colonial politics. Francis had recently been pleading with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for the ability to rent U.S. military equipment, as opposed to the older helicopters that the U.S. had sold to the Philippine Air Force. On 2 April,

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<sup>8</sup> Walter L. Williams, 'United States Indian Policy and the Debate over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism,' *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 4 (March 1, 1980): 810–831, doi:10.2307/1887638.

those Filipino aircraft were diverted from the middle of rehearsing a complicated shot, to 'fight the rebels in a civil war about 150 miles to the south.' Eleanor complains that there is 'no news of the war in the government-controlled' newspapers and discovers from a Filipino crewman that the attack was directed toward a guerrilla group in the southern islands that is 'fighting for independence' (26).

Whether she is misled by her native informant, or purposively misdirects her readers, Coppola frames the ongoing military struggle in the erroneous terms of postcolonial nationalism and even American patriotism, reporting that the rebels are 'fighting for independence.' In reality, the group that Marcos attacked on 2 April 1976 is a Marxist-Leninist military organisation called the New Peoples Army, which makes Marcos' strike a function of the American cold-war policy of containment that Coppola's film hopes to expose as problematic. His renting of equipment from the Philippine Air Force funds the suppression of a leftist group who are not so much promoting the nationalism of postcolonial independence movements, but who are, in fact, still resisting the neocolonial tendencies of globalisation today. On 26 March 2011 the NPA ambushed a local trucking convoy, disrupting the Australian mining company Xstrata Copper, a giant of capital intently divesting the Filipina mountains of their rich stores of copper and gold.<sup>9</sup>

As the diary continues its critique of Francis' imperial film policy it exposes the limits of its own critical position. For example, the copper that multinational commodities traders extract from the earth make possible the cheap appliances that Eleanor misses in 1970s Manila but marvels over in Hong Kong. For her, Hong Kong is

the supermarket of Asia like Las Vegas is the gambling centre of the United States. Every aspect of the city is focused on one thing, buying and selling international products. The neon signs say Sony, Sanyo, and Gucci, instead of Golden Nugget and Caesar's Palace. Francis loves to look at all the new products and gadgets. He went to see all the cameras and tape recorders and equipment in the stores. I went to two places where they sell products from Mainland China. I love the incredible embroideries, especially the old ones. (92)

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<sup>9</sup> Guanqun, Wang. '3 Killed in Leftist Rebels Attack in S Philippines.' Xinhua. 26 Mar. 2011. Web. Accessed 21 Oct. 2013. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-03/26/c\\_13799301.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-03/26/c_13799301.htm).

Whereas Hong Kong shines with the post-mining excess of Las Vegas, living in Manila is 'like stepping back in time,' not toward the ancient allure of an old Chinese embroidery, but to a cheap past where instant coffee is 'very chic,' plastic plants are 'really in' and servants carry silver trays laden with big jars of Maxwell House (66). The Filipino tendency to value cheapness extends even to domestic labour, the corollary concern Coppola binds to the issues of anti-colonial warfare and international trade.

Three weeks before Marcos' Labour Day concession to the left, and a week after he attacks the leftist rebels in the south, Eleanor resumes threading some narrative about the domestic space she is establishing for her family in the Philippines, when she advertises her discomfort with having a laundry maid:

I like our laundry maid Cecilia, but it really bothers me that I have a human washing machine. She washes everything in the laundry tub by hand and irons in this heat. She is also the dishwasher. It makes me feel bad when I put my dirty clothes in the basket. I was complaining to the woman next door. She told me that Cecilia was glad to have a job with a nice family, that I was providing much needed employment. She earns, in pesos, about 55 dollars a month plus room and board. Here a major appliance costs more. (30)

Eleanor shows a fascination with domestic practices more manual and essential than those attracting the attention of feminist critics like Kaplan and Ryan, who see the nineteenth-century home as a place where a mother's education shaped the imperial mindset of national subjects. Eleanor's diaries certainly display attention to that kind of ideological fashioning, especially as she orients Sofia's fascination with Japan, but *furnishing* as such occupies her mind as much as fashioning, and she carefully catalogues the chores of shopping, cleaning, decorating and repairing. The severing of those tasks from her personal responsibility troubles her as much as the possible exploitation of Cecilia, as one gets the sense that her divestment of household responsibility is making her feel bad when placing her clothes in the hamper as much as any abstract colonial shame. Coppola operates in that familiar environment where those who make a little serve those who make a little to a lot more, and in the final instance, she justifies her employment of Cecilia economically, and maybe even selfishly, by considering that in her month-to-month life in

Manila a human washing machine is more cost-effective than purchasing the several copper-wound home appliances it would take to replace her.

The interwoven themes of domestic practice draw Eleanor's eye from one example of handicraft to the next, from one instance of manual labour to the next, from one maid to one servant to the next. One of the first things she does in the Philippines is visit the art department of the film's production office.

Outside was a large studio with a sculptor and five or six assistants carving the huge head and temple decorations in clay that will be cast for the temple buildings at the main set called Kurtz Compound. They were working from Dean's drawings and photographs of Angkor Wat. The model for the big head was a beautiful young Filipina Maid from a nearby boardinghouse. Now she was sitting in the studio by the window in the afternoon light listening to the radio and crocheting. (23)

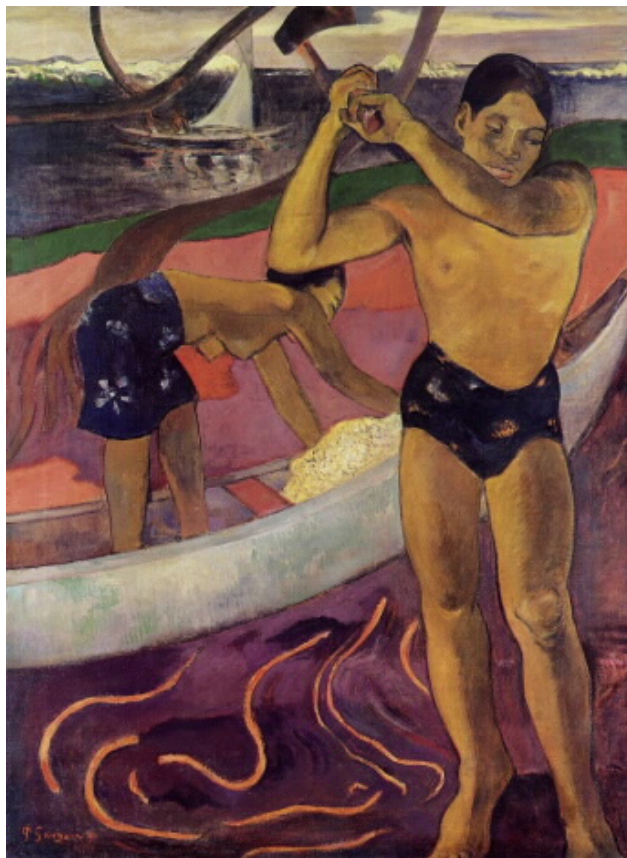
Eleanor captures the same mixture of tropical labour and indolence supposed by the modern primitivism of Paul Gauguin.



Paul Gauguin, Tahitian Women [*Femme de Tahiti*], 1891



In 'Tahitian Women', the turned muscular arm of the girl in the floral-printed *lavalava* extends upward to the apex of a triangle marked by her shoulder, the third point of which is the blunt fragmented foot that refuses to stay suppressed in the background. The wilted frond and tense fingers of the girl in the pink colonial mission dress repeats the figure of the folding toes in her single visible foot. Petal, box and sand-sketch are tensely arranged in front of her; and for the forlorn pair of maids, the beach is not a place of repose, but of intense activity, as their contemplative moods seem to express the same flux as the cresting, folding ocean that engulfs their heads.



Paul Gauguin, The Man with an Axe [*L'homme à la hache*]

This arrangement of activity and stasis is reversed in 'The Man with Axe' where the triangle of the man's arms supports the effortlessly floating axe-handle. His tool seems gravity-defying in the same way that the swirling tree trunk suggests a whip, cracked in mid-air, uncoiling towards the back of the man with the axe. The tree roots end in the pink-in-purple swirls of the foreground, as they make visible the breeze that pushes the sailboat further into the background. Mid frame, the second triangle of the woman's body seems to tip breast-first into the swab of pink surrounding the pair, the colour of which is repeated in the mouth of the man with the axe. Despite their labour and the tree's whip-like insistence, their bodies are relaxed by the erotic infusion of colour and shape that lavishes them like a tongue. The indolent Tahitian women seemed seized in stress, while the working couple labour in ease.<sup>10</sup>

Coppola's portrait of the Filipina maid sitting in the afternoon light, crocheting and listening to the radio, obtains an additional level of reflexivity over Gauguin's portraits. Her postmodernist primitivism shows us the process by which a European totem of exoticism is constructed, as the men labour like the man with the axe, carving the iconic face of the Filipina beauty as she sits embroidering one of the many textiles that Coppola weaves in and out of her diary. Her reflexivity stitches closed the gap between her observational writing and the maids' practice of being observed stitching. Tapestry-like and conscious of its construction as such, the diary ceaselessly ornaments itself like Eleanor's carefully furnished interiors, whose walls you'd expect to find bedecked with Orientalist touches: 'Japanese-patterned paper, Chinese paper cuts of bright colored opera masks and a round embroidery' (238).

Like Eleanor's diary, a decorative documentation of her decorating, Francis' film tends toward an abstraction of a baroque tapestry, patterned by repetitive and interlaced threads of colour. One interwoven visual thread is the face of a young South East Asian woman, whom Eleanor observes being immortalised in stone, sitting in the sun. The Art Department model would become the Angkor Wat inspired temple edifice that rises over the main set of Kurtz' Compound. Even as the maid Eleanor observes in the studio is the model of orientalist fascination and beauty, in that she seems to sit placidly and let the fineness of her face be exploited for the gain of

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<sup>10</sup> My reading of 'The Man with the Axe' is indebted to Bruce Gardiner, 'Talking of Michelangelo: Routine and Radical Inquiry into Literature and Aesthetics,' *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 2 (February 23, 2012), <http://ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/LA/article/view/5770>.

the Hollywood industry, she is the perfect match for the face of Martin Sheen. For however central Sheen becomes to the film's history, spot-lit by cinema stardom, the uncredited woman falls deeper into oblivion. His star power rises inversely to the dark historical descent that the film creates in what it excludes from its credits. Though her name is lost, her face becomes emblematic of the film's ponderous power, as her stone effigy is part of a triple superimposition made during the film's opening sequence.



Here the orientalist image and the Hollywood icon of Martin Sheen are inverted, with Sheen upside down and the temple sculpture right-side up, as their faces balance both sides of the screen, framing the scorched environment of a fire-bombed Philippine/Vietnamese forest.

Just as Eleanor inspects the mechanisms whereby the local service staff are converted into a labour resource for Hollywood's industrial gain, Francis and Eleanor discuss the ethical implications of drawing the life out of an actor, extra or model by capturing their performance with the camera, or their image in stone. Eleanor's attention to the use of the maid in the making of the Ankor Wat effigy is resumed by a discussion with her husband about the direction of Willard's infamous breakdown scene:

Francis asked him to go to the mirror and look at himself and admire his beautiful hair, his mouth. Marty began this incredible scene. He hit the mirror with his fist ... His hand started bleeding. Francis said his impulse was to cut the scene and call the nurse, but Marty was doing the scene. He had gotten to the place where some part of him and Willard had merged. Francis had a moment of not wanting to be a vampire, sucking Marty's blood for the camera, and not wanting to turn

off the camera when Marty was Willard. He left it running. He talked Marty through the scene. Two cameras were going. (104)

The pair of cameras documenting the emotional breakdown appears to Francis as a set of vampiric fangs drinking the actor's blood. This resonates with a famous metaphor for capitalist violence:

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.<sup>11</sup>

The Coppolas' attention to capitalist expropriation comes into conflict with their theory of American imperialism in general, as well as their specific interpretation of how the *Apocalypse Now* production recreated the foreign policy situation it sought to critique. While Francis' USO scene critically places Vietnam amid frivolous simulations of previous colonial wars, and while Eleanor's concern for the exploitation of models, actors and servants suggests a sensitivity to neocolonial iniquity, the figure of excess that Eleanor's telex critiques simultaneously underwrites an essentially exceptional vision of America's imperialism in East Asia. The fantasy of American imperialism as an act of superabundance mystifies the horror of vampiric extraction as it advances a theory of America's cultural contributions to the world.

Through post-war cultural promoters like Jack Valenti and New Hollywood directors like the Coppolas, American imperialism narrated itself in contradistinction to European imperialism, which might be understood as the mercantile extraction of resources and the destruction of local economies to create market imbalance between colonial metropole and colony. By contrast, American imperialism narrates itself as a fable of abundance, an indulgent 'supply line,' with its only sin being its ineffectiveness, its uncritical and repetitively flawed misdirection of resources. The Coppolas' nervousness about exploiting the labour power of both unionised Hollywood culture-industry workers, as well as the local

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. I* (New York: Penguin, 19), Ch. 10. p. 342.

service and crew members, troubles the view of America as a mere promoter of goods, and the good capitalist way of life.

The problem of American imperialism, as something self-delusionally exceptional, as subject to what Donald Pease calls 'strategies of disavowal,' whereby it is denied to be imperialist at all, is nested within a second problem, the problem of domesticity.<sup>12</sup> Eleanor's second theory regarding *Apocalypse Now*, after her theory that it recreates the political conditions it seeks to critique, is that it serves as an allegory of the faltering marriage that sustains it. The film's disorder is inseparable from the disintegration of the family it fails to depict directly as subject matter, but whose operative laws it cannot help but obey. Francis tries to resolve the film through the strategies of American imperialism, with his hubristic excess, while the aesthetically superior way to resolve the film, Eleanor seems to suggest, would be to free his family from the same poisonous resentment that chokes both postcolonial Philippine history and her attitude toward him as spouse.

As if in response, Francis makes an incredibly attenuated attempt to construct a sentimental family space within the interior of Kurtz's Compound. At the end of the film, Captain Willard has progressed up the river to the compound, on a mission of assassination to remove Kurtz from command of his mad mercenary army. To prevent Kurtz's death from being bathetic, Coppola attempts to formulate some structure of sentiment around Kurtz, who is played by a very overweight Marlon Brando, bathed in shadow to hide his heft. To proxy the fiancé that Conrad's Kurtz wants contacted by Marlow, Brando's Kurtz mentions a son whose understanding he covets. Willard closely inspects the family photos pinned to Kurtz's bedside. But the primary prop that affects a family space is the placement of a young Cambodian girl who haunts the fringes of Kurtz's domicile.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).



The camera cuts suspiciously to the Cambodian woman's face when Kurtz is telling a particularly emotionally rendering story about American soldiers who have attempted to inoculate a village against polio. After they leave, the Viet Cong enter the village and hack the inoculated arms off the children. Sitting on the edge of Kurtz' room, within earshot of his voice, the girl's eyes drift downward at just this moment of the narrative, as if she's dejected and dismayed by the Americans' failure to protect the Vietnamese from the disease of their own remorseless will for self-definition. When, in the final moments of the film, Willard is approaching Kurtz to kill him, the young woman again appears, following worriedly behind Willard. For a moment we think she may intervene to protect Kurtz. In her motion, she perfectly visualises her source's text:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high ... She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.<sup>13</sup>

Despite all the controversy that Conrad's portrayal of the 'savage' African woman has attracted, critics have said very little about her being recycled by the film as an enigmatic figure on the cusp of Kurtz' intimacy. At an obscure age, she could be mistress or adopted daughter. On the physical fringes of Kurtz' quarters, she treads a liminal space between concubine and innocent. Like the name of the maid whose beautiful face provided the

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.99.

model for the temple statue, the name of the uncredited young Filipina or Ifugao woman who played this undefined role has slipped into historical darkness. In the context of the Coppola family drama, it makes less sense to read her presence as an allusion to Conrad and more sense to see her as a way that Francis proxies Eleanor's and even Sofia's equally unattributed voice, as a part the family's often unrecognised contributions to the film.

If Kurtz' death avoids bathos, it's not because of the meagre family dynamic Francis' dialogue and *mise-en-scene* produces. The assassination of Kurtz compels because of the concurrent animal sacrifice proceeding outside his domicile, sound-tracked by the disordered spasms of The Doors' rock and roll. The ceremonial sacrifice of the carabao, which Francis uses as metaphor for the assassination, restages an Ifugao ceremony that Eleanor and Francis attended out of *her* ethnographic and documentarian intuition. Her diary informs us that Francis went reluctantly. Enhancing its fragmentation, the fractured family picture of the Kurtz compound is surrounded by the interwoven kinship pattern implied by the tribe. The familial immanence of the tribe and the closeness of the military company present what the Coppola family is distinctly *not*. In comparison with the tribe, or, perhaps, amid the capitalist exploitations of the studio, the film is distinctly *not* interwoven, wholesome, organic or complete. In one of the many appropriating manoeuvres made by new-age Eleanor, she draws from the expertise of the *I Ching* to complete her analysis:

Twice I have gotten number 37, 'The Family': 'The family shows the laws operative within the household that, transferred to outside life, keep the state and the world in order . . . when the family is in order, all the social relationships of mankind will be in order.' (276)

Amid the disorder of America's disavowed colonialist exploitation, Eleanor and Francis begin to assume that their social relationship would be reordered once they get out of the Philippines and move to Tokyo, a place that ultimately promises to resolve not just their own marital problems but also the technocratic and spiritual contradictions of American society. According to Eleanor, Japan is

the one place in the world where the material and the spiritual world, the yin and the yang, the left side of the brain and the right side of the brain, the masculine and the feminine are coming together. (270)

Together Francis and Eleanor collaborate on daydreaming into being a 'romantic vision' of Japan as a place of marital cohesion and spiritual synthesis, which at the same time will allow his hubris to rise to an occasion of grandeur. According to Francis, 'Hollywood thinks people don't want to see films set in Japan,' but he aims to prove them wrong (270).

Sofia did that instead. 2003's *Lost in Translation* chronicles the ennui, melancholy and disorientation of newly-wed Charlotte (Scartlett Johansen). A critical success, *Lost in Translation* is also an egregious example of Hollywood orientalism. It provoked the disdain of Japanese critics, as well as Asian Media Watch, an anti-racism organisation in Los Angeles that campaigned against the film's four Academy Award nominations.<sup>14</sup> In his introduction to cinematic orientalism, Mathew Bernstein writes that by 1927 the studio-produced Orientalist film was so standardised as to be the subject of sharp parodies, simulating the saturated conventions of 'unbridled passion, miscegenation and wild adventures' set against exotic backdrops.<sup>15</sup> Hardly parody, *Lost in Translation* seems to bridle these conventions into quietude, while preserving what Ella Shohat calls the 'colonial gaze' of orientalist cinema in all Charlotte's curious inspections of Japanese life and texture.<sup>16</sup> Her point of view makes Tokyo an inscrutable, exotic object of Western fascination, wrapped in the comforting strains of her indie rock playlist, as the My Bloody Valentine songs seem to assimilate the uncanny Japanese landscape into something easily recognised by Charlotte's comforting melancholy.

Whereas Eleanor's diaries ask to be read as personal testimony, Sophia's films do not. Yet even as they deny the status of autobiography, they place themselves obviously enough in a history of family textuality. In a compound linkage between biography and fiction, the painful marginalisation of film Charlotte, another stay-at-hotel artist's wife, not only connotes Eleanor's time in the Philippines, but Sofia's recent relationship, as Charlotte's photographer husband proxies indie film-maker Spike Jonze, whose long shadow as the director of *Being John Malkovich* fell over his wife Sofia in the previous years. In another point of contact

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<sup>14</sup> Homay King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham: Duke, 2010), p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Bernstein, 'Introduction' in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Shohat, 'Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema' in *Visions of the East*, pg. 19–68.



with biography and fiction, Francis sat beside Akira Kurosawa in a series of 1970s commercials for Suntory whiskey, the same brand that Bob (Bill Murray) promotes in *Lost in Translation*. While following these family relations, it is equally important to dispel the notion that Charlotte is determinately Sofia and Bob Francis. Despite the fact that Marina Heung notes the frequency of Freudian ‘family romance’ being played out in the post-Vietnam era, reading the Coppolas in Asia as a literal Oedipal arrangement seems impertinent, nor does it seem fair for critics to define Sofia consistently as ‘Francis’ daughter.’<sup>17</sup> As Homy King warns, seeing Francis as playing a ‘Bob-like’ function to Sofia’s Charlotte verges on the simplistic, moralistic, and condescending, keeping the female director colonised by a protective patron.<sup>18</sup> Under close inspection, Sofia’s film cleverly subverts and seduces a number of her father’s artistic methods. In place of his hubristic claim to answer questions and solve the mythic riddles of human existence, she arranges a careful series of open-ended, enigmatic questions.

In the main, Francis’ attempt to sentimentalise the finale of *Apocalypse Now* failed because of his recourse to a structuralist brand of modernism. Family sentiment was marginalised by what Margot Norris has called his adoption of T.S. Eliot’s mythic method.<sup>19</sup> Francis’ readings of comparative mythologists James Frazer and Jesse Weston convinced him that human narratives have always been underpinned by a universal interest in the figure of rebirth. In a film interview on set, Francis speculates that the first man would have been dismayed by winter and rejoiced over spring, a figure of ‘renaissance.’ His reading of structuralism drives him to answer the big human questions, demanding an answer ‘on about 47 different levels.’<sup>20</sup> Resisting the demand to answer, Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* orchestrates questions and composes enigmas. In her ‘Speculum of the Other Woman,’ Luce Irigaray fragments Freud’s misogynist insistence on his own ability to answer the riddle of female

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<sup>17</sup> Mariana Heung, ‘The Family Romance of Orientalism: From *Madame Butterfly* to *Indochine*’ in *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> King, ‘Lost Girls,’ 169.

<sup>19</sup> Norris, Margot. ‘Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*.’ *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (1998): 730–766. Coppola’s swerve toward modernism and structuralist myth threatens to transport what Norris calls the ‘ideological freight’ of modernism into his film, reanimating its ‘incriminating relationships to colonialism, nationalism, class hatred, misogyny, and racism.’

<sup>20</sup> Francis Ford Coppola, interviewed in *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*.

sexuality (what he admitted was to him a ‘dark continent’) by subjecting it to what Jane Gallop, in *The Daughter’s Seduction*, describes as series of impertinent questions.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Sofia responds to her father’s hubristic claim to be able to account for the experience of the universal ‘first man’ with a series of contemplative riddles.

As Hoday King notes, the daughter and father relationship, like the marital one, threatens to repeat the pains of colonisation. As much in the relation between Francis and Sofia as between him and Eleanor, the Coppola family romance with Asia raises problems and possibilities for the processes of ‘decolonization’ and ‘deimperialisation’ formulated in Chen’s *Asia as Method*. Concerned that postcolonial cultural studies are mired in an ‘obsessive critique of the West,’ Chen outlines the language whereby former colonies and former colonisers can collaborate to remove the imprint of historical shame. Decolonisation, for instance, is the ‘attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically and economically.’ Formerly colonised populations face these painful histories out of the ‘desire to form a less coerced and more dignified subjectivity.’ If decolonization is the work of the formerly colonised, deimperialisation makes demands of colonizing and imperializing populations, asking them to ‘examine the conduct, motives, desires and consequences of the imperialist history that formed [their] own subjectivity.’<sup>22</sup>

The family of Coppola texts—three instances of American travelogues in Asia—provide both American and Asian studies scholars with unique textual grounds for testing and elaborating on the processes of decolonisation and deimperialisation. Francis’ project in the 1970s was undone by its insouciance towards the family structures it needed and the original grounds of Filipina conquest in arguably stained anew. If *Lost in Translation* fails to ‘examine the conduct, motives, desires and consequences of the imperialist history’ that formed colonial subjectivity in Japan, it does so because it is intently decolonising itself from the masculine, modernist, and structuralist impulses run rampant in *Apocalypse Now*.

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: the daughter’s seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982), Chapter 4, ‘The Father’s Seduction’. Published in the U.S. under the preferable title *The Daughter’s Seduction*.

<sup>22</sup> Chen, *Asia As Method*, p. 4.

By the same stroke, if Sofia's film fails as a force of deimperialisation in Japan, it is because the film is suffused with theories of postmodernism, shocked by the schizophrenic symbolic breakdowns of post-structuralism. Frederic Jameson's contention that 'everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development,' that the logic of capital and the law of the markets have penetrated every territory on earth, seem in striking accord with neocolonial economics models rather than the critique of late-capitalism postmodernism might have been.<sup>23</sup> In Eleanor's diary, Sofia establishes herself as a privileged spokesperson of the postmodern. As a five year old, she experiences the jungle in Philippines as if it were Disneyland, decades before Jean Baudrillard would claim that Disneyland only exists to conceal the fact that the rest of America is just as much an amusement park, years before he theorised that our experience of jungle rivers are preceded by our rides in fun-park lazy rivers, as a precession of simulacra.<sup>24</sup>

In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte takes a train to Kyoto and enters a demonstration of post-structuralist linguistics. Kyoto heightens the orientalist mode of the film, as Charlotte looks, captivated and intent, at a series of what King calls 'enigmatic signifiers:' Kanji logograms, the train window, landscape, the Kyoto gardens, school girls in uniform, a stone footbridge, a geisha decorously embraced by her consort, the temple, a tree bough tied with paper prayers. After her trip to the shrine, Charlotte tells her friend over the phone: 'I didn't feel anything.' In Jameson's 1991 essay *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* he describes Lacanian schizophrenia as one of the 'constituent features' of postmodernism. This schizophrenia occurs with the breakdown in the logical links or conjunctions that connect signs and symbols into a meaningful experience. Charlotte's experiences—train—geisha—footbridge—schoolgirls—temple—paper prayer—a disconnected series of discrete present moments that fail to connect temporally or cohere semantically. She walks through what Jameson calls the 'rubble' of affectless signification. Charlotte's inability to make meaning from this

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<sup>23</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 310. Also, see Julian Murphet, 'Introduction: On the Market and Uneven Development.' *Affirmations: Of the Modern* 1, no. 1 (July 15, 2013): 1–20.

<sup>24</sup> The introduction of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to America come through the following publications: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e) 1983), *America* (London: Verso, 1988) and *Simulation and Simulacra* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

series of discontinuous ‘nows’ preserves a carefully composed enigma, making the structuralist certainty of her father’s modernist method empty and facile. Riddling the answers of modernist masculinity with enigmas that are compacted by their orientalist energies, Sofia’s film decolonises itself from patriarchy only to reinscribe the assumptions of U.S. imperialism in Asia. However, even its failure as a cosmopolitan language of translation exposes problems that future films of deimperialisation might solve, as the Coppola family romance reorients the important place of family relations and film aesthetics in the ongoing pursuit of global justice.

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