

# Introduction

## The Conrad Effect in Contemporary Culture

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*Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech*

*The Resonance of Joseph Conrad in Contemporary Culture*, a diverse and multinational collection of essays, explores the enduring influence of Joseph Conrad on contemporary culture, marking the centenary of his death. The volume features contributions from scholars of various nationalities and cultures, including French, Italian, Polish, German, Japanese and English speakers. These essays delve into Conrad's impact across a range of media, encompassing literature, film, comics and graphic novels. Noteworthy artists discussed in relation to Conrad include John le Carré, Jacek Dukaj, Benjamin Bachelier, Chantal Akerman, Arianna Dagnino, Anne Carson, John C. Waller, Chris Cullari, Peter Fudakowski and Robert Silverberg, among others. By bringing together authors from Canada, Japan, Poland, Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, the book fosters a transnational dialogue that bridges the gap between different national perspectives on Conrad's cultural significance. An additional highlight of the volume is the inclusion of more than twenty vibrant reproductions from various films, graphic novels and comics, enhancing its visual appeal and scholarly depth.

The initial chapter by Richard Ambrosini discusses the perspective on Conrad that resulted from the two main lines of research that went into his biography of the writer, and suggests new directions for exploration. The chapter begins by delineating the dual approach Ambrosini has taken towards Conrad's works. This involves recognizing him as a skilled manipulator of perspectives and temporal shifts, as well as a creator of ironic narrators bent on dismantling ideological constructs. In tracing the narrative arc of Conrad's stories, Ambrosini foregrounds the

significant role played by female characters in his formal experiments. Initially, his novels often began as sketches centred around male protagonists, indicated by titles like 'Tuan Jim: A Sketch', 'Nostromo', 'Verloc' or 'Razumov'. However, these narratives evolved beyond the actions of these flawed male leads. Ultimately, the stories transcend individual destinies, leaving readers with a sense of tragic universality, unrelated to the violent deaths of characters like Verloc, Jim or Nostromo, but rather tied to the female figures embodying the human condition – what Conrad refers to as 'our common fate', which particularly afflicts women with a distinct cruelty.

Biography and translation are also the focus of the [second chapter](#), by Kaoru Yamamoto, who juxtaposes the lives of two writers, contemporary Canadian poet Anne Carson and Joseph Conrad, demonstrating how the latter influenced her approach to translation. Yamamoto attempts to draw parallels between the self-translating author Conrad and Carson's essay on translation *Nay Rather*, aiming to prove that the untranslatable foreignness of Conrad's texts stems partly from 'a third place to be' that he apparently takes in translating his own experiences. While Conrad is referenced in Carson's short story 'An evening with Joseph Conrad' and her poem '1 x 30', he remains absent in *Nay Rather*. However, as Yamamoto argues, the essay strongly evokes Conrad through its emphasis on the significance of silence in translation practice. Carson's assertion that translation provides 'a third place to be' can be interpreted, according to Yamamoto, as a depiction of Conrad's works, which often engage with translation on various levels. This unique perspective allows Conrad to reveal insights that were previously unseen and to resonate with contemporary concerns.

Karol Samsel's chapter continues the issue of experimental translation. Samsel examines Jacek Dukaj's 'transcreation' of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, titled *Serce ciemności*, published in Poland in 2017. Dukaj views his work as a product of a post-writing culture, as discussed in his essay 'Live Me', originally published in 2017 in the collection *Conradology*. Both the experimental translation and the accompanying commentary, closely intertwined, are subject to critical analysis in this chapter, approached from the perspective of contemporary stylometric linguistics, which is closely linked to Conrad's research (Mary Morzinski's and Michael Lucas' studies), and the philosophy of radical scepticism of Willard van Orman Quine, centred on the idea of the indeterminacy of translation.

The [second part](#) of the volume delves into Conrad's connection with the world of film. Laurence Davies in his chapter investigates two works rooted in Conrad's short story 'The Secret Sharer'. Despite their common ancestry in a captain new to his command who shelters a stowaway and

risks the safety and stability of crew and vessel, their narratives differ quite drastically in genre, setting, time and space. What they do have in common, however, is that the stowaway is a woman. Piotr Fudakowski wrote the script for and directed *Secret Sharer*, while the other work examined is Robert Silverberg's novella *The Secret Sharer*. The former's setting is the South China Sea in the present day, with a notable emphasis on global commerce, whereas the latter's is a colossal spaceship on a voyage to a remote sector of the galaxy. The stowaway is a teenage woman who, like the legitimate passengers, is present in the form of an electronic matrix. She has hidden herself on board to escape the drab life of her birth planet. Communication with the captain is possible, brain to brain, and she is able to see and feel the glory of the skies outside the ship, a sublimity opposite to the shabbiness of Fudakowski's seascapes.

The *fifth chapter* by Julie Gay explores the cinematic adaptation of Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* by Belgian director Chantal Akerman. The concept of resonance, in its literal sense, implies the idea of prolonging the duration of a sound, as through its reflection on the walls of a hollow space. In the interest of sounding out the resonance of Joseph Conrad in the twenty-first century, the essay investigates Akerman's 'camera', which in its etymological sense means 'room' or 'chamber', as both a literal and metaphorical chamber of echoes for Conrad's text, allowing it to resonate all the way into the twenty-first century. Gay examines how Akerman's 2011 film *La Folie Almayer*, which Akerman herself describes as a loose adaptation of Conrad's early novel, offers a both visually and phonically striking (though perhaps slightly deforming) echo of Conrad's text, through the intermedial process of adaptation. It is indeed by wilfully taking some distance with the novel, Gay argues, that she paradoxically manages to create a filmic aesthetics that is perhaps closest to Conrad's narrative poetics, as though the echo required space to best reverberate the original. Within the framework of adaptation theory, the chapter explores in particular the similarities in the two artists' aesthetic sensibilities, as shaped by their very personal experiences of exile or displacement, and by their relatively marginal position in relation to their host country's canon.

The following two chapters examine the movie *African Apocalypse* from distinct theoretical and practical viewpoints. Robert Hampson's essay takes off from Rob Lemkin's recent film *African Apocalypse*, which utilizes *Heart of Darkness* as both an initial inspiration and a structural framework to explore its own narrative. The film follows in the footsteps of the Voulet-Chanoine Mission through modern Niger to Captain Voulet's grave. It sets up Captain Voulet as a real-life equivalent of Kurtz and, in doing so, foregrounds the anticolonial aspects of *Heart of Darkness*. Since

the title *African Apocalypse* draws an explicit connection to *Apocalypse Now*, Hampson compares how both films interpret *Heart of Darkness* as an intertext. This comparison serves as a lens to explore Conrad's stance on the decolonization agenda. The chapter's final section investigates this decolonization agenda through the lens of Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's recent novel *The History of Man*.

Rob Lemkin, the director of *African Apocalypse*, on the other hand, tells the story of its making and reception. Tracing the route of the Voulet-Chanoine Mission in modern Niger to Captain Voulet's grave, the film parallels Captain Voulet with Kurtz, highlighting the anticolonial themes of *Heart of Darkness* and the lasting impact of colonial violence on colonized societies. Lemkin's text explores the ways that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* motivated a cinematic account of the French colonial conquest of Niger. Drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin's idea of historical construction focused on commemorating the forgotten, the chapter examines how Conrad's narrative shapes present-day efforts towards truth and reconciliation regarding colonialism. The second part of the chapter discusses the reception of the film in both the United Kingdom and Niger. Importantly, it highlights the impact on the Nigerien population and the political ramifications following its screening. In this way, Lemkin demonstrates the performative aspect of Conrad's fiction and its cinematic offspring.

Michel Arouimi concludes the cinematic section by drawing parallels between Conrad's narratives and modern horror movies. His chapter delves into the complexities of Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and its impact on contemporary horror films, unravelling the enigma of feminine violence as a recurring theme. Focusing on Conrad's portrayal of Winnie's rebellion against the patriarchal order, the author draws parallels with modern horror cinema, exploring how the themes of androgyny, double bind and the interplay of art and violence resonate across time. Through a critical analysis of specific horror films like *The Raze*, *Clown* and *The Aviary*, the essay examines the nuanced connections between Conrad's narratives and contemporary portrayals of women. The conclusion suggests that the writer's insights continue to influence artistic consciousness, offering a lens to interpret the evolving roles of women in the face of societal challenges. The enduring enigma of feminine revolt invites ongoing introspection, highlighting the intersection of gender dynamics in our ever-changing contemporary cultural landscape.

The [third part](#) of the book is dedicated to examining Conrad's substantial impact on fellow writers. Stephen Brodsky, Jan Gordon and Joanna Skolik discuss Conrad's influence on John le Carré, Anthony Burgess and Arianna Dagnino, respectively. Brodsky's chapter shows in paradigm

influences and resonances of Conrad's Modernist oeuvre in the novels of recent and contemporary writers, and Conrad's continued moral relevance in today's world. Two works have been chosen: Conrad's *Lord Jim* and le Carré's derivative *Our Game*, for a comparative analysis of their parallel contextual histories, narrative technique, theme and plot. 'A Narrative Congruence' opens the chapter's thesis with a sample of the resonances explored through the novels' principal protagonists: Conrad's Charlie Marlow and Lord Jim, and le Carré's Timothy Cranmer and Laurence Pettifer. Brodsky recapitulates the characteristics of Modernist literature, advocates revival of figurative language in scholarly criticism and defines 'avatar', as it applies to influence and reception in scholarly discourse. In the final section Brodsky demonstrates the parallelism of historical contexts in the fictional plight of the Bujis in Patusan, and the Ingush in the North Caucasus, both resonant of Partitioned Poland in 1831 and 1867. Also, he discusses the '*Homo duplex*' concept, which deals with the Modernist theme of opposed elements of manifold truth, manifested in the clashing claims on the principals, and proves how it applies doubly in le Carré's world of espionage. It ends with a speculative summing-up of the *casse-tête* posed by the Modernist theme of individual transcendent ideals and oppressive sociopolitical institutions manifested in the martyrdom of the fictional Jim and Larry.

The **ninth chapter** by Jan Gordon concentrates on the affinities between Conrad's and Burgess' Malayan trilogies. Gordon begins by examining the metaphorical narrative of literary rescue and its resonance in the trajectory of Conrad's career, particularly in light of his decision to abandon *The Rescue* in favour of writing *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. It is within this context of literary navigation that Conrad's themes find a new light, particularly when compared to the strikingly similar tropes found in the works of Anthony Burgess, specifically his *Malayan Trilogy*. As Gordon explores the thematic and narrative intersections between the two writers, it becomes apparent that both authors share a deep engagement with linguistic and cultural nuances, especially within the context of colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. This chapter attempts to illuminate the ways in which Conrad and Burgess grapple with the challenges of colonialism, decolonization and the search for individual and collective identity amid shifting sociopolitical landscapes. From the treacherous seas of Conrad's narrative to the bustling streets of Burgess' Malayan setting, we embark on a journey of literary exploration, guided by the shared themes and motifs that bind these disparate works together.

Joanna Skolik's chapter showcases how through Conrad's fiction, contemporary readers can uncover insights into various aspects of modern South African reality, explored by artists who observe African characters

from diverse perspectives – whether as natives of Africa, mere visitors or somewhere in between. Characters in works like *Tsotsi* (both Dagnino's book and Fudakowski's film) and *The Afrikaner* encounter situations reminiscent of Conrad's themes, teetering on the edge of moral and existential dilemmas. They must respond to these challenges, make tough decisions and then grapple with the consequences, summoning the courage to confront their inner struggles and search for the true meaning of life despite the hardships they face. Ultimately, they strive to rediscover their humanity amid adversity.

The *final part* of the collection focuses on Conrad's relationship with illustrations. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech analyses *Heart of Darkness* as a template for a graphic novel *Cœur de ténèbres* by Jean-Pierre Pécau and Benjamin Bachelier. I argue that Conrad's novella has become a model for contemporary artists to articulate the horrors perpetrated by humanity, such as war and genocide. For instance, *Apocalypse Now* addresses the Vietnam War, a Brazilian animated film explores drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro and the 'imitating the dog' theatre company's *Heart of Darkness* confronts German concentration camps. The essay puts a recent visual adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* centre stage to demonstrate that adaptation is a 'layering process [that] involves an accretion of deposits over time, a recognition of ghostly presences' (Adamowicz-Pośpiech in this volume). In other words, adaptations rely on 'the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory' (Ellis 1982: 3, emphasis added). I believe that fidelity paradigm, which traditionally evaluates adaptations based on their adherence to the source, may overlook alternative sources, contexts and interpretations. Instead of using fidelity as a measure of an adaptation's merit, I investigate the relationship between the original work and its adaptation. The chapter discusses the strategies of revision constituent of the adaptive process such as substitution, reduction, addition, inversion and shift of focus, among others.

The *last chapter* contains a comprehensive bibliography of Conrad's works illustrated by various artists worldwide. This demonstrates that not only scholars from different nations, but also illustrators around the globe, have drawn inspiration from Conrad's writings. Frank Förster explores the illustrations of Conrad's books, highlighting the limited research on the relationship between the narratives and the visuals they inspired. This annotated bibliography aims to encourage deeper investigation into the links between Conrad's novels and the illustrations that accompany them.

The collection mirrors the enduring resonance of Joseph Conrad in contemporary artistic awareness. Through diverse lenses and varied explorations, these chapters collectively strive to deepen our understanding of the 'Conrad effect' in literature, cinema, graphic novels and the ever-evolving cultural landscape. As we navigate the vast expanse of Conrad's literary seas, may these essays serve as navigational aids, fostering continued introspection into the compelling world crafted by this Polish English literary master.

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## References

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