Colonial Landscapes and the Rhetoric of Encirclement from *Aliens* to *Heart of Darkness*

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The setting: an abandoned outpost on the frontier of an imperial domain. The narrative movement: an emissary ship, sent from the metropolitan center to reestablish contact with the outpost in question, arrives to find a decimated territory which has apparently engulfed the colonizing apparatus. The protagonist must decide either to abort the mission or to continue in search of his missing comrade(s). In the end, the fate of the imperial project remains dubious at best, as it is not entirely clear whether the terrain and its inhabitants can be "successfully" incorporated into the domain of the colonial power, or whether the *signs* of civilization projected into this heart of darkness will themselves become entirely consumed by the alien landscape.

The narrative is a familiar one, not a bed-time story perhaps, but certainly one loaded with all the associative power of the Western canon. Like the journey Marlow recounts to his shipmates aboard the *Nellie* in Conrad's novel, the narrative I envoke here has been widely disseminated, though its circulation is confined to the ritual space of *postmodern* storytelling: the cinema. The emissary ship is one that travels at the speed of light, and though it embarks from Earth, its destination is a human colony on a distant planet. With lead role played by Sigourney Weaver, James Cameron's *Aliens* embarks on the imaginative terrains of twentieth-century science-fiction, and yet -- with all the rhetorical force of a mythology as ancient as civilization itself -- it tells us a story we 've already heard a thousand times in different guises.

Heart of Darkness plunges us head-first into the maddening ambiguities on which turns the very motor of colonialist discourse. Marlow 's route is a tactical insinuation into the "dark continent," a penetration of an unyielding other-space figured, through Marlow 's own elaborations, as a woman 's body. "There it is before you -- smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering. Come and find out."[1] Yet what you see from the coast is but a "sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth," [2] behind which lies the "truth" of Africa: the "untouched expanse" of a virginal interior completely inaccessible to vision. Indeed, the problematics of visibility -- and by extension, of *readability* -- become a binding thread throughout the fabric of the narrative. Even as the tiny skiff winds its way into the uterus of the continent, Africa remains undisclosed and therefore "unknowable " from the protagonist 's perspective (which is also our own): "I had also judged the jungle of both banks quite impenetrable -- and yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us".[3]

Her interiority for the most part unmapped, Africa attracts Marlow precisely because she is an "enigma," a guardian of secrets as yet unrevealed to the probing eye of scientific rationalism. Surveying a cartographic representation of Africa, Marlow dreams of *writing* on the body of the continent, filling in the empty zones of whiteness with signifiers of his own language. Yet the prospect of inscribing an imperial text on African soil is everywhere overshadowed by the mysterious disappearance of Kurtz. As a purveyor of *la mission civilisatrice*, Kurtz had once clothed himself in a rhetoric of philanthropy which purported to bring the "light" of Western knowledge to "benighted" African peoples. Ultimately, however, it seems that Kurtz and his discourse have themselves been swallowed by the savage animus of the dark continent, rather than the other way around.

With astrolabe provided by the contemporary mythology of critical discourse, the internal construction of *Heart of Darkness* has been thoroughly mapped and its "enigma" decoded along an entire spectrum of interpretive possibilities -- from attack on the racist imagery peddled by Conrad, to Edward Said 's adamantly defended position that the novel enacts a subtle subversion of the assumptions underlying

the colonial imaginary. Approaching this text for the first time can even be a bit intimidating, encased as it is by lengthy introduction, selected bibiliography, numerous footnotes, etc. what Michael Taussig has called "the magic of academic rituals of explanation ... with their alchemical promise of yielding system from chaos."[4]

Perhaps a more engaging grounds for investigation is to be found outside the text (despite poststructuralist warnings as to the "limitlessness of context"). Of course, a thoroughly historical elucidation of the textual genealogies from which Conrad 's novel emerges might take us to the deepest recesses of European memory. Our journey could start in the heart of primeval semantic forests haunted by signifiers such as the Latin *salvaticus* (a phantom inhabiting Conrad 's vocabulary as our own): those spaces constituting the underside of that time-honored binarism nature/culture, through which has operated (and self-justified) the transformation of "wilderness " -- and the displacement, subjugation, or extermination of its denizens -- by "civilized" techniques of land *cultivation*. Our quest might also traverse the Atlantic through the pages of Columbus ' journals, in which we find inscribed an ambivalent suspicion that the non-European world is not, after all, a *tabula rasa* willing to take the textual imprint of Western social/religious forms: the equivocal fear, articulated at the dawn of European territorial expansion, that the project of consuming resources contained in other lands might itself be consumed by such diabolical figures as cannibals and wild beasts.[5] Of course, a detour through the labyrinth of European representations of indigenous populations disseminated during the giddy heights of nineteenth-century imperialism would bring us to the discursive formations contiguous to the production of *Heart of Darkness*.

No reason to stop there: the new mythology of cinema, emerging right at the time of Conrad 's novel, will adopt the march of encroaching colonialism as one of its favorite storylines. Whether the setting is the dark continent or the Great West, teleological narrative closure will be repeatedly endangered by a pervasive trope we might call the "rhetoric of encirclement": unruly others lacking all the signifiers of civilization come to embody the savage animus of the land -- an elusive but omnipresent force that surrounds and threatens to engulf the impetus toward white exploration and settlement. John Ford will be the first to successfully translate this trope into the language of cinema. Just as the stagecoach carrying "our " collective hopes and dreams struggles through the inhospitable landscapes of Monument Valley, the westward progress of Manifest Destiny is menaced only by the unseen: Apaches in the bushes, surrounding the fort, always outside the encampment, just beyond the threshold of the visible world. Hitchcock will master the rhetoric of encirclement, applying it to social spaces as a means of fabricating suspense, and even later it will become enshrined by *Jaws* (where the encirclement comes from below the water). So familiar are the tropes deployed in *Heart of Darkness* that they have become trite and unimaginative clichés, and yet the fears that float beneath their surface movements remain a ubiquitous force structuring Western narrative techniques.

At the beginning of *Aliens*, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and her crew enter into a cavernous space -- a city built on a distant planet by human colonists who seem to have disappeared completely. As they learn upon arriving at the center of the unlikely metropolis, the colonists are still present in some sense, and although the gestation process incubated within this uterine space is most certainly organic, it is decidedly inhuman. The interior of the human city has undergone a ghastly transformation, its architecture literally incorporated into some larger structure as yet unidentifiable. The bodies of the human colonists, preserved in what seems to be a bodily fluid, are encased within the cavities of this corporeal entity. Most have been permanently silenced, cloaked in the mute and terrifying metabolism of this alien land, but one former human is able to briefly overcome "the horror, the horror" of being slowly digested in order to articulate a warning to Ripley's crew: "Get out! Save yourselves!"

Although equipped with hand-held machines capable of detecting motion through solid walls, Ripley's crew is unaware that a group of monstrous bodies (apparently invisible to the humans' technology) are surrounding them. When the creatures attack, the humans are unable to defend themselves; as one unlucky character says just before being whisked away, "they're comin' outta the goddamned walls!" Mobilizing a narrative structure quite familiar to the audience, James Cameron invokes our deepest fears by raising the specter of encirclement: the invisible and unseen, and consequently that which is unconceptualized within the reassuring grids of our Linnaen classifications, is once again cast as the quintessential villain. And as any enemy hostile to human welfare, the alien must be exterminated, and will be justifiably defeated with complete audience consent -- that is, of course, until the one creature which escaped thorough annihilation again takes seed, setting the stage for further human intervention in the next sequel, the next war.

Perhaps the uncanny durability of this trope can be attributed to a violence inherent in the scriptural mechanisms enabling the circulation of narratives such as these. As elucidated by many literary and cultural theorists, writing (in its broadest range of meaning) is essentially a repressive regime: as in traditional historiography, with its fetishization of linear causality and its formulas of explanation, where the articulation of historical narratives (whether monolithic or revisionist-pluralist) takes shape through the exclusion of other perspectives; or as in mainstream narrative cinema, where suspense is dispelled and closure attained through a fantasy that the protagonists embody an ethical imperative shared with the audience; or even as in academic discourse itself, which seems invested in exploring narratives "lost" at the bottom of the sea but which nevertheless remains so often on the surface, safely aboard its interpretive apparatuses, viewing the ocean through the portholes of its conceptual grids. Hence the rhetorical force of the colonial narrative, which justifies and propels its representation of alien territories by acknowledging the incompleteness of that very representation: the frightful threat of that which lurks "outside the known world," the alleged danger of that which escapes -- for the moment -- being seen and named, provides the instability needed to expand once again the bounds of representation -- along with the boundaries of subjugated landscapes.

If our investigation now seems unbounded in its geographical and analytical scope, it might behoove us to cede to the position justified by the "limitlessness of context" argument. Yet precisely because there is no way to limit the parameters of such an exercise, why not look to outer space? If an expansionist imaginary is able to project similar dramas onto colonized spaces everywhere from its own backyard to distant colonial holdings, why should the heart of darkness not be transplantable across light years as well?

Footnotes

[1] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1995, p. 29.

[2] Ibid., p. 30.

[3] Ibid., p. 73.

[4] Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, p. xiv.

[5] If we took the time to flip through the library accompanying Columbus on his journeys, we would find a prototype for the New World cannibals in Pliny 's description of dog-headed cenophaluses, a "discovery" transporting us once again to the lore of antiquity.