These are two films shown as an accompaniment to reading Joseph Conrad’s powerful novella, “Heart of Darkness.” “Apocalypse Now!” [1979, dir: Francis Ford Coppola], explicitly but loosely based on Conrad’s book, with Martin Sheen as the Marlowish Captain Willard and Marlon Brando [we do not see much of him] as Kurtz. Robert Duvall’s Col. Kilgore is NOT intended to be Kurtz. His character is a kind of composite of Conradian “pilgrims” and other “Europeans.” Students reading the book may be confused. Note also a very young Harrison Ford in a small role. Pay close attention to the remarks of the general at the beginning of the film. They are reminiscent of both Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Conrad. I generally show only the first forty-five minutes of the film since these segments are not only the best but are also connected to themes in the book.

“Fort Apache” [1948 dir: John Ford, born John Feeney, Sean O’Fearna, or Sean O’Feeney, not to be confused with the later “Fort Apache the Bronx”] with John Wayne as the Marlowish-Captain York and Henry Fonda as a somewhat Kurtzish Colonel Thursday [his daughter is played by an almost adult Shirley Temple]. Westerns made in this period are often seen in the context of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, with a subtext suggesting the need for Americans to be tough in the face of savage and crafty enemies. I generally show the last forty-five minutes in class since, again, these segments most closely relate to the themes of “Heart of Darkness.” Another important element for American students is that seeing a film like this underscores how arrogance toward non-whites and imperialism were homegrown as well as European. Other upsides include the fact that today’s students may never have seen a film with John Wayne [or Henry Fonda] or a film in black and white.

Ford has a reputation for being indifferent to the plight of Indians in the West but, in this film, the Indians are treated with great respect and there is a strong message about their mistreatment at the hands of Meacham, the “Indian Agent” representing the U.S. Government. One irony is that the character played by John Wayne—a conservative icon in “real life”—is the less ethnocentric of the two main characters. In real life, Henry Fonda—father of Jane Fonda—was much more to the left. Both Wayne and Fonda were huge stars for many decades.

One of Ford’s “biases,” was that the post-Civil War U.S. Army fighting Indians in the West had a great many immigrants, especially Irish-American immigrants. He also made a film [“Sergeant Rutledge,” in 1960] about black soldiers in the West—historically true—which was ahead of its time and not very successful. While we are addressing diversity, consider the use of Spanish as a lingua franca of soldiers and Apaches and the fact that the film takes the time to translate a conversation. Some critics cringe—unfairly, I think—at Ford’s use of ethnic music in films. The black-and-white cinematography is widely admired.

Note the lie that York tells to the reporters [an uninformed bunch] at the end of the film. Why does he do it? Is his lie comparable to the lie Marlow tells to Kurtz’s fiancée at the end of “Heart of Darkness?”