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Apocalypse-in-Progress

Cannes, Saturday, May 19. I've rushed from the screening room to jot down a hasty first impression of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* before we go to press. Around me proclamations ranging from "Masterpiece of the decade" to "Fraud" are being madly typed and telexed around the world. From start to finish, the making of *Apocalypse Now* has been a drama; the climax is an overwhelming work of art. I say "overwhelming" advisedly: I've been so viscerally affected by the sheer visual brilliance of Coppola's *mise-en-scene* that I don't quite trust my initial response to the film.

The print screened this morning has only a tentative ending and is missing much of the music. Coppola compares the Cannes screening to an out-of-town theatre preview, but even in its present form, *Apocalypse* displays astounding virtuosity. It is easily the most powerful film of the festival. Despite the director's claims to the contrary, the first two-thirds of the film *are* about American involvement in the Vietnam War; and it is to Coppola's credit that he makes war — not just war in the abstract, but this particular war — seem at once horrible beyond comprehension and familiar. Unlike *The Deer Hunter* the film is not concerned with how a sinister Asian sensibility preyed upon normal Americans, but with the possibility for madness and terrible deeds that lurks within all of us.

Having said this, let me quickly add that *Apocalypse* is not, as Coppola intends it to be, a cinematic equivalent to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Although its narration and dialog are laced with references to literature and philosophy, it never manages to set up a true dialectic — a viable tension — between the certifiable madness of Kurtz (Marlon Brando) and the encroaching madness of the soldier (Martin Sheen) sent to murder him. Kurtz, the focal point of *Apocalypse*, enters the picture only in the final half-hour, and even Brando's superb performance cannot make a believable character of this "would-be king." The journey down the river to Kurtz's kingdom is neither more nor less hellish than the kingdom itself. Thus, the discovery of Kurtz is not a revelation, but a recapitulation of all that came before. Still, the film is an extraordinary — and extraordinarily dense — statement on war. I'll have more to say about it later. DJ