

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Apocalypse makes war</b>
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Source	<i>L.A. Weekly</i>
Date	1979 Aug 24
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	36
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Apocalypse now, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1979



## Film

### "Apocalypse" Makes War

by Ginger Varney

**M**ore than any movie I've ever seen, *Apocalypse Now* lessens the distance between civilian and soldier. Simply put, it makes war on an audience, and this gives the film great power and great beauty.

That power and beauty begin to build in the opening shots. From somewhere far left of the screen the whack-whack-whacking of helicopters moves toward a green jungle made grey by a twilight sky. As the helicopters press closer, only one skims the top of the image, and the camera slides slowly right, revealing more jungle and the now distant dwindling choppers. Dust and smoke shimmer in the foreground, and palm trees bend under the pressure of disturbed air in the background. The Doors start to sing, "Is this the end?" and perhaps it is, for the jungle with the liquid thrust of slow motion, is suddenly consumed in a napalm orgasm.

Now the visuals buckle and multiply. Screen left, Martin Sheen's face comes into focus upside down, blending into a part of the jungle not yet burning. He smokes a cigarette, and that smoke floats toward the flaming trees as the twilight deepens into an angry orange. Screen right, a ceiling fan cuts through the flames the cigarette smoke has found. As the Doors' dirge drains away, the camera slips into the shadowy solitude of a hotel room where Willard (Sheen) lies in bed. A curious intruder, the camera examines Willard's wallet, his brandy bottle and few family pictures before angling up to the ceiling fan that makes the same whack-whack-whacking noise as the helicopters. On the ceiling another face appears, wild and muddy and still as stone. It's Willard, Willard as he will look at the end of the river in Cambodia.

This is not the end of the river; this is Saigon. It's 1968 and Willard, a captain in the regular Army, has returned for a second tour in Vietnam. The fact that part of him never left, we already know from that first masterly sequence merging the man, the war and the jungle. Now for the first time we see the full physical Willard, face and body, legs, arms, chest, and belly are tight, their muscles smooth and ready; but his eyes have a loose, inert look which suggests they were jammed into hollow sockets in one of nature's afterthoughts. He is a soldier who got caught in combat and scattered under the impact. Some of the pieces are still missing.

#### Search & Destroy

It's to retrieve the missing pieces that he needs a mission, a second tour. This mission will take him, and us, to the end of the river, to Cambodia and Kurtz (Marlon Brando) and the temple where Willard's missing pieces have fled. Willard also needs the mission to make him a major, a fact not mentioned until the movie's end. Willard may be flying apart, but he's a career officer flying apart, and a junior officer at that. Junior officers do not disintegrate without discipline, not if they wish to wear the rank of fieldgrade leadership. So Willard,



Martin Sheen, an exceptional portrayal

not inexplicably, holds the hell he knows and holds himself together with the words we hear as a voice-over on the soundtrack.

Not unlike our own interior voices, Willard's voice pushes, punishes, probes and explains. Above all, it explains. Eventually its explanations heckle an audience's intelligence. Apparently, Coppola could not trust us to be capable of connected thought at the end of his splendid visual messages, and Willard is made to mouth a verbal annotation after every important sequence. Each time Willard tells us what we've seen — what we must make of the magnificent horrors just witnessed — the visuals and our memory of them shrink. After awhile revelation becomes rhetoric.

#### The Real Thing

But not before the movie has made a profound mark. In the combat sequences, especially those featuring Col. Kilgore (Robert Duvall) and the air Cavalry unit he commands, the whirling, swirling sights and sounds of men and machines and firepower rush over an audience with suffocating sweep. Clattering choppers come crashing down, the earth erupts in sprawling splotches of dirt and stone and grass, bridges and buildings burst, their broken beams arcing off the screen. All the while the snarling sound of rockets and mortars and motors thunder through the theatre, and 100,000 fragments of steel split the afternoon air. Everything is arms and legs and death.

These are concrete images concretely felt. Deliberately and directly they threaten the space an audience occupies, and no companionable characters shelter our psyches or funnel our fears. Willard, sick with the split he sees inside himself, is wooden and remote. He is our guide, not our comrade. Kilgore is neither guide nor comrade; he is a colossal cartoon.

I've not been in combat, but I have been to summer camp as an Air Force reservist. Summer camp is the simulated insanity the military provides for its reserve members. In Texas for two weeks each year, 20,000 civilian soldiers gather in a group known as the 49th Armored Division (Patton's old command) and play war in pastures and fields. Some are designated friendlies and some are designated enemies. They point guns at one another and get high on their own very real hysteria.

After the first three days and nights of constant artillery bombardments and random attacks from tanks and troops, the only enemy that matters is hysteria.

Helpless to resist it, some of the troops admit it and some don't. Those who do are generally enlisted men; those who don't are generally officers. But there are some few who actually embrace the hysteria. Those men (almost always officers and senior NCOs) the younger enlisted troops of my acquaintance christened "Major Marvelous" or "Colonel Crazy" or "Sgt. Strange Light" — titles that implied both a sneaking admiration and a withering scorn, and summed up the ambiguity combat, even simulated combat, inspires.

These are the men Kilgore represents in *Apocalypse Now*. They are all bathed in a "strange light" (Willard calls it a "weird" light in the voice-over text) and therefore fireproof. For them, war is a stage, a theatrical stage, that hosts the enactment of their own heroic notions — notions that have nothing to do with good or evil. As Kilgore strides untouched through the chaos his own Air Cav creates, he is a man released from the restraints of a regulated living. His dream life has surfaced and is a fully functional force. War frees him to bomb one of Charlie's villages for no reason other than the fact that it sits by a sea whose waves produce the only peak in Vietnam. And as Kilgore himself puts it, he surfs and Charlie doesn't.

Kilgore's a cartoon, but he's not a fraud. Nor is he a cheap gimmick to get easy laughs. At summer camp late afternoon battles were postponed because generals wanted to get in a game of golf before the last light of day. An extra armored attack was organized because a weather officer, a colonel, had always wanted to ride in a tank. When I protested that these absurdities defeated the purpose of playing war, the two Vietnam combat vets in my weather flight had their longest, loudest laugh in two weeks.

#### Film As Sculpture

The reason I'm going into such detail is that *Apocalypse Now* is a rich dense picture. There's an enormous amount to be gotten out of it. Coppola and his crew, particularly cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, have not simply filmed but sculpted a picture that is seriously worth seeing. Each sequence is an artwork that awaits interpretation in the final passage.

Each of the three leads represents a different aspect of the Vietnam War. Sheen is its conscience, Duvall its absurdity, and Brando, apparently, its soul. As such, each is considered at remove. Willard is frequently shown in sections. For seconds, sometimes minutes at a time the camera

concentrates in a claustrophobic close-up on his eye, or a profile of his head, or his hands holding Kurtz's military personnel file. In the long and middle-distance shots he remains on the edge of the action, watching, seeking some meaning in his own madness and the madness of the war. It is the American conscience — fragmented, unfocused, struggling.

Kilgore is shown only in the warp of his own ornamentation, isolated in the center of the self portrait he uses war to paint. It's what happens when John Wayne's myth is absurdly enacted in real life.

Kurtz stays mostly in shadows, unseen. When he is seen, it is, again, in sections. Only an eye is illuminated, or the crown of his bald head, or his nose. All else is dark, denied light. It is the Americansoul, scattered into pools of unconnected, unreconciled light.

Even the crew of the patrol boat that takes Willard upriver is kept at a distance as they surrender themselves to the surreality of this war. Lost in the effects of LSD or the hallucinatory hell Vietnam was even without drugs, they never come close to us. It's the film's last section, Kurtz's country and Coppola's interpretation that should seam all these parts and themes together, but it does not.

Kurtz's country is a pagan place. We see warriors, stone idols, a temple and human corpses in elegant, ceremonial mix. The corpses carry little or no emotional charge. They are background clutter, yet another aspect of a man in moral anguish, a man somewhat like Willard who has seen the enemy's strength and knows that it is stronger, more pure than his own. Unlike Willard, Kurtz has acted on that knowledge and matched the enemy's purity. He kills without passion, without judgment; acts that are now killing him. It's the anguish which results from those acts and the ceremony which attends it that Coppola uses as his interpretive tool of the War.

But if ceremony is to have an interpretive impact, it must be rooted in reality, either concrete or mythic. The ceremony of this last section is rooted only in Kurtz and his anguish, and we have no experience of either. Throughout the film Willard has talked of Kurtz from the information he reads in Kurtz's file. But it is a file, not the man himself. Kurtz explains his anguish, repeatedly, but it has no resonance because again we are hearing only words, the verbal description of acts we know nothing of. We have experienced neither Kurtz's strength nor the enemy's strength. We have experienced only American weakness.

For this reason, the film's last section stays in the shadows, the same shadows which constantly shroud Kurtz. Marlon Brando and the three million dollars that bought him are wasted. At worst, he's a sepia-colored humpty-dumpty; at best, a movie star with the eye of his mind elsewhere. It's hardly his fault. He must compete for our attention with an underdeveloped character, a soundtrack that suddenly sounds as if a symphony orchestra is concealed at the temple, and the visual flash of Coppola's now unanchored imagination. The movie we have been watching is now only empty ritual.

Still *Apocalypse Now* is a good, even a great movie and the last section does not dilute its power. Part of the power is in the actors' performances. Martin Sheen is exceptional and Duvall hardly less so. *Apocalypse Now* is an experience no other movie has given us, one we too frequently tried to avoid when it was offered in reality. Coppola's interpretation may fail, but this duplication of the War does us service enough. ■