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A Flawed but Spellbinding Apocalypse Now Finally Debuts

By RICHARD SPRINGER

"Apocalypse Now" is a spellblinding "quest" movie, but it has some obvious weaknesses. The most glaring fault is the inconsistencies in the narrator-searcher, played by Martin Sheen. The sanity or lack of sanity in the character seems carelessly manipulated by the dictates of the plot. Sheen encounters every variety of horror, but, after the opening scenes of the film, we know this is nothing new for him. It's difficult to feel, even after Sheen's final scenes with Kurtz (Marlon Brando), that he has changed much, except by degree.

Compare the *character development of the Humphrey Bogart character in another 'quest' movie, "Treasure of Sierra Madre." Somehow a simple search for gold and the paranoia it engenders more real terror than all the decapitated bodies at Kurtz's hideaway.

CONRAD

Seeing the movie as an adaptation of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is a mistake on two counts. First, "Heart of Darkness" is one of the most complex, nonconcrete (abstract) short novels in American literature. Coppola and fellow scriptwriter John Milius have taken only the bare bones of the Conrad novel and brought it to bear upon our frenetic and often desperate involvement in Vietnam.

Second, "Heart of Darkness" is powerful because of its veiled ambiguities, an attribute difficult to reproduce in the concrete art form of film. Showing Kurtz and his empire in any literal form at the end of the movie will undercut the hyperbolic build-up that occupies the first two-thirds of the film.

EXPECTATIONS

Having read many articles and reviews of "Apocalypse Now," I was a victim of many mistaken expectations. The final scenes with Brando don't work, but more because he is put in an impossible plot situation than by any fault of his acting. He is also sabotaged by terrible set design and a confusingly-drawn character. Whether is is overweight or not is beside the point. Sydney Greenstreet, a fabulous character actor, was not criticized for being overweight.

There is much more graphic violence in the film that I was prepared for. Sheen makes his trek up the river to Kurtz with a small crew, and, although they never become fully-founded characters, we can't help but be disturbed by their violent deaths and their increasing madness. However, Coppola, even here, undercuts characterization by making the men clowns when he wants to show the irrationalities of the war. (Among the crew members of the patrol boat Frederic Forrest is outstanding as Chef.)

CRAZY

The much-talked about helicopter raid by the surf-board crazy Lt. Kilgore (Robert Duvall in another good performance) pretty much lives up to expectations. But I was more impressed by several unforgettable tableaux that dot the landscape of "Apocalypse Now."

One of my favorite short takes in the film occurs when Sheen and his crew reach the last American outpost before the Cambodian border. The camp is under siege,



Attack helicopters in a scene from "Apocalypse Now."



Director Francis Coppola directs Marlon Brando on the set of 'Apocalypse Now."

and, seemingly, without a commanding officer. Lights are strung around the camp, so that the impression is of an amusement park with all the rides going crazy.

a surfer-soldier, Lance, (Sam Bottoms) are making their way down a trench past soldiers obviously gone half-berserk. The screen goes momentarily dark. Suddenly a bomb exploding nearby illuminates four soldiers huddled in a tunnel. All four are black, obviously frightened and, one expects, defiant to the degree, that if any officer ordered them out onto the surrealistic battlefield, they would take a grenade, pull the plug and drop it in the officer's pants.

ANTI-WAR As to whether the film is a strong anti-war statement, the evidence is inconclusive. Coppola and Milius romanticize much of what they condemn. Sheen's bloodless control, Brando's strangely-ennobling attrocities, Duvall's unappropriately-comic

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eccentricities can't be interpreted as a strict condemnation of their actions. War is hell, but the soldiers are black angels, not devils.

The documentary "Hearts and Minds" is still the best documentation of the irrationality and tragedy of our Vietnam debacle. "Apocalypse Now" is a grand spectacle which is powerful in portraying the madness of war, but has little to say about moral dilemmas. There is not one single character in "Apocalypse Now" who seems capable of understanding what a moral dilemma is, much less confront it.

However, even acknowledging the blind-alley ending, lack of character development, ambiguous attitude toward war, and the lack of self-percèption in the narrator-searcher, "Apocalypse Now" is a mesmerizing film with sparks of insight, illustrating one more time, that Francis Ford Coppola is the D. W. Griffith of the current breed of writer-directors.