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A collection of surreal Vietnam War scenes goes in search of a unifying idea and a way to mourn

By Lynn Garafola

FIVE YEARS IN THE MAKING, at a cost of $30 million, Francis Ford Coppola's epic of Vietnam has finally reached the screen. *Apocalypse Now* is "film opera" on a grand scale, a work of moral and political judgment. But the film is neither the masterpiece its director set out to make nor the last word on the war. Despite the sweep of its vision, *Apocalypse Now* remains a succession of brilliant war scenes in search of a unifying idea.

Loosely based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now* is really two films—a political statement about Vietnam and a quest for knowledge in the form of an adventure story. Martin Sheen as Captain Willard takes the role of Conrad's narrator, Marlow. Ordered by Special Forces to "terminate with extreme prejudice"—army jargon for "assassinate"—the renegade Green Beret Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), Willard sets out for Kurtz's Cambodian fiefdom in a journey that reveals to the audience the "darkness" of the Vietnam war.

With *Apocalypse Now*, the horror of the war will not easily be forgotten. Coppola has taken images familiar enough from television footage, and magnified them into an overwhelming vision of slaughter and devastation.

Among the film's most powerful sequences is the destruction of a Viet Cong village. A model of tranquillity with its schoolchildren and rice paddies, it is levelled by an air cavalry squadron in an orgy of violence. Coppola's operatic sensibility serves him well here. Transformed by the 70mm. screen into monstrous birds of prey, the helicopters swoop down to the accompaniment of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." On a smaller scale, there is a shattering echo of My Lai in the massacre of unarmed Vietnamese civilians on a sampan.

Coppola does not hesitate to show American bombers napalming the remains of villages or the imbalance of technology as the Vietnamese counter air strikes with rifles. Nor does he shy from showing the disintegration of the army itself—the low morale, hustling, drugs, and breakdown of discipline. And by contrast with the white ethnic fantasy of *The Deer Hunter*, he graphically depicts the disproportionate numbers of blacks on Vietnam's front lines.

Coppola reserves his greatest scorn for a rough-riding colonel (Robert Duvvall) who describes the smell of napalm in the morning as "victory." Enamored of war, with his band of snub-nosed surfers he epitomizes the mentality of the "finest" career officers.

Kurtz symbolizes the logic of Vietnam carried to its ultimate extreme. A third-generation West Pointer, once counted among the army's best and brightest, he now accepts Vietnam's horror as the inner logic of the war. He recounts to Willard the incident that drove him "over the edge." Inoculating the children of a town, he returned to find that the vaccinated arms had been cut off by the Viet Cong. Repelled by the act, he could not but admire the commitment of men able to suspend moral judgments in devotion to a political cause. Now ruling Montagnard tribesmen in white face, Kurtz dispenses death and wisdom with equal ease.

Mystery man.

Coppola's Kurtz is the apotheosis of a system that suppresses humane and moral values. Yet the man himself remains a mystery. E.M. Forster once wrote about Conrad that "he is misty at the center as well as at the edges." In the film, as in the book, the transition of Kurtz from a man obsessed with horror to one obsessed with power remains murky as does the nature of his Jim Jones-like demogogic hold on others. In part, this is the fault of the script. But it is also because Brando himself, so bloated that Coppola shoots him in shadow from the neck up, fails to project that power.

Unlike *The Deer Hunter*, where the American is portrayed as a *naif* corrupted by the miasma of Vietnam, Coppola intimates that evil is inherent in the system of which Kurtz is a product. A news clipping of the Manson murders suggests an inner corruption independent of the war and jungle "savagery." The subject of Kurtz's Harvard M.A. thesis—the U.S. suppression of the Philippine insurrection, 1899-1902—reveals a parallel to Vietnam earlier in American history.

Unfortunately, the film's political coherence is purely visual. Worse, it is undermined by the script. Michael Herr, author of *Dispatches*, a collection of war reportage originally published in *Esquire*, is credited with the narration. He brings to it a New Journalism sensibility at odds with the film's apocalyptic vision. What strikes Herr about Vietnam is not the politics of the war or its morality, but the incongruities of its details—a soldier with a peace sign at a USO show or a T-bone steak cookout in a napalmed village. Like his book, Herr's narrative sags under the weight of portentous but meaningless statements like "Vietnam is a pile of bullshit." Similarly, the pretentious quotations from T.S. Eliot toward the end indicate not some profound message, but an exhaustion of the film's intellectual imagination.

Herr's eye for Vietnam's incongruities never rises to a vision of its larger absurdity. Kilgore, for example, obviously conceived as a proto-fascist, is trivialized by casting him at the same time as captain of a squad of surfing cowboys. Effective in an anti-war comedy like M*A*S*H, the device jars in a work of a more serious order. Likewise, an acid head photo-journalist, played by Dennis Hopper as a caricature of himself, reduces the high seriousness of Kurtz to pop platitudes.

The penitent.

But it is the character of Willard that represents the film's most problematic element. Remaining true to Conrad, Coppola casts him as the recorder of events; through his rasping voice-overs the horror of Vietnam is relived. But Willard is not a guide—either morally or politically. Without another observer, the film loses a point of reference, an over-arching interpretation. On rest and relaxation in Saigon, he awaits a commission with impatience. He is obsessed with bombings and blood. When first he learns of his assignment, he is drawn to Kurtz because of the similarities between them, just as Marlow is to Kurtz in the novella.

Willard's journey into the heart of darkness is a quest for knowledge, and the man who returns is changed. But significantly, he grows not in political awareness, but instead undergoes a moral catharsis. In typically Catholic fashion, he is cleansed of past transgressions, including the cold-blooded murder of a woman on the bullet-ridden sampan. Like the characters in *The Deer Hunter*, Willard is exonerated morally for what are ultimately political acts.

Despite its strong visual impact, *Apocalypse Now* leaves its audience remarkably unmoved. In large measure, this is because of Willard. Travelling upstream, he registers sensations with a diffident eye and gazes on death as an outsider to its suffering. A man under orders, he remains throughout impervious to humanity, American as well as Vietnamese.

Questionable as its political perspective may be, *The Deer Hunter* has far greater emotional immediacy. Among Coppola's characters, there are no emotional bonds comparable to those uniting Cimino's protagonists. In *Apocalypse Now*, people die impersonally, victims of a war machine that sends men into battle by radio and returns by helicopter for their corpses. A momentary tear may be shed, but there are neither buddies nor brothers to mourn the loss of life. The audience, like Willard, is called upon to witness events, but at no point is it asked to grieve.

The absence of an emotional center reflects Coppola's own confusion. From its initial conception as an anti-war film, *Apocalypse Now* has gone through many changes. Whatever else may have happened—typhoons, heat prostration, extracurricular romance—the films conflicting themes remain at war with one another and never resolve into a coherent statement.

Coppola's difficulty with the ending attests to this. In polling an L.A. screening audience on how to end the film, Coppola as much as admitted that he had lost control of his material and had reached a creative dead end. As it is, two endings remain. The reserved seat audience now sees Willard returning downstream after killing Kurtz. This fall's mass audience will be treated to another display of American firepower as the final credits roll over the screen.

Like *Hair, Apocalypse Now* hoists its anti-war banner too late for peace marches. Yet as the boat people capture headlines, Coppola's vision of the war counters the prevailing tide of national self-exoneration. Whatever its flaws, *Apocalypse Now* lays responsibility for the horrors of Vietnam where it rightfully belongs. ■

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