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Not With a Whimper

Diane Jacobs

Apocalypse Now
Ziegfeld

Seeing a working print of a film is rather like having a last fitting on a dress — the difference being that, unless you're intimately acquainted with the person who has right of final cut, you don't have much say on last-minute alterations. Still, it's difficult not to make hypothetical improvements, as I did when I saw *Apocalypse Now* at the Cannes Film Festival in May. The main character of paid assassin Captain Willard was, despite an expert performance by Martin Sheen, too shadowy a figure. He needed to be fleshed out, his contained horror differentiated from the more colossal horror of insane Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), whom he is dispatched to kill. And the surrealistic last half-hour of the film, set in Kurtz' "wasteland" compound, needed to be joined stylistically to the brilliant, nightmarish, yet also realistic texture of the rest of the film.

Beyond these cavils, I found *Apocalypse Now* an enormously impressive, if not fully realized work, that rare "event" film whose power and originality transcend the bog of media gossip (much of it, inevitably, true). *Apocalypse Now* was an equally powerful experience the second time around. And what's more, with added narration and wonderfully eerie music by Coppola and his father (author of *The Godfather's* score as well), the film has been tailored in a way that quells many of my strongest reservations. The new ending is another matter, but more on that later.

Apocalypse Now is based on an original screenplay by John Milius, reinterpreted by Coppola, who insinuated elements of Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, and of T.S. Eliot's poetry, specifically *The Wasteland* and "The Hollow Men." (To make matters a bit more complicated, "The Hollow Men" also pays tribute to *Heart of Darkness* with its epigraph: "Mr. Kurtz — he dead.") Lest this sound overly abstruse, let me quickly add that *Apocalypse Now* is very much a mythic war film with literary footnotes rather than vice versa. Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* has a slim plot and gleams its power from description. Where Conrad evokes his "fascination of the abomination" through some of the richest language in modern English literature, Coppola forges a vision of war and — less successfully — related horrors through dense, multilayered cinematography (by Vittorio Stovaro) and brilliant use of sound (by Walter Murch).

The film opens as palm trees sway in a rainless gloom and the bottoms of helicopters glide just within the film frame. Then the Doors' "The End" blasts on the soundtrack while images of trees, fire and Willard's (Martin Sheen's) upside-down head are superimposed on one another so fluidly they might be adrift in a fish bowl. Our narrator, Captain Willard, has been menacingly idle in Saigon for a week. He stares at a picture of his wife, with whom he was home long enough to divorce,



Martin Sheen as Willard: still too shifty

gulps booze and splinters a large hotel mirror with his fist, bloodying himself. What Willard wants and clearly needs is work, concrete action to turn his mind from troubling memories. As if in answer to his wishes, two soldiers appear at his door and spirit him off to receive orders for a top-secret intelligence mission.

As they consume a sumptuous meal, Willard's commanding officers inform him that he will be asked to ferret out and murder a certain Colonel Kurtz. Once an exemplary soldier, Kurtz has apparently gone mad, setting himself up as a kind of god/king in a compound just beyond the Cambodian border. He's ordered executions not sanctioned by superiors and, divorcing himself from the general war effort, has enlisted loyal native and American followers to help him set "lands in order," the way he sees fit. One officer suggests to Willard that "what Lincoln calls the better angle of our nature" has lost out in the battle for Kurtz' soul. He must be eliminated swiftly, but with discretion. Since Willard has assassinated for the government in the past, he seems a most likely candidate for this endeavor.

Apocalypse Now has many of the ingredients of a classic war, gangster or Western genre film. There's the "bad" guy and the young, yet blemished, fellow sent to find him and do him in. Rather than crossing the Rockies or penetrating the Chicago underworld, Willard will have to cross war-wasted Vietnam and travel down the river (of life) to Kurtz' stronghold. We are told that Kurtz graduated from Harvard and West Point and holds peerless military credentials that might well have won him a general's slot. We learn that Willard has few conventional scruples and that he has served on a number of clandestine intelligence assignments.

Willard's four American companions (played by Albert Hall, Larry Fishborne, Frederick Forrest and Sam Bottoms) on his journey downriver are both mythic figures and skeletons — grander and slighter than human beings. The presence of John Milius (*The Wind and the Lion*) is

felt in many of the earlier scenes. A number of the characters are California types: a well-known surfer, for instance, and a sailor who is perpetually euphoric on drugs. A letter from Willard's predecessor, seduced from his job by Kurtz' charisma, reveals him to be a sort of guru worshipper. "Sell the house, sell the kids, sell everything!" he instructs his wife, like a Jim Jones acolyte. Albert Hall is excellent and oddly sinister as the black navigator who deflects the mission to inspect a Vietnamese launch and precipitates the bloody death of an innocent woman sheltering her dog. The most appealing of the characters is Chef (Fred Forrest), a New Orleans saucier who reads *Sexus*, has kindly instincts and clearly lacks the intelligence to perceive "the horror" of war within himself. And Robert Duvall is outstanding as Lt. Colonel Kilgore, a certifiably sane officer who, in Catch-22 fashion, orders his men to surf along the coast while a village explodes behind them. ("If I say it's safe to surf this beach," he bellows, "it's safe to surf this beach.")

In the working print of *Apocalypse Now*, Willard was an opaque character. He hadn't the moral fiber or emotional vulnerability of the traditional Howard Hawks/Humphrey Bogart hero, and he displayed few characteristics to distinguish him — philosophically or otherwise — from his mates. Michael Herr's narration gives Willard added dimension. We have a better idea how our protagonist's mind works when, after observing Kilgore destroy an entire village on the chance that it might harbor a Viet Cong or two, Willard comments, "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they had against Kurtz." And it doesn't hurt to have certain points rubbed in. We need Willard to tell us, as he now does, that Kurtz' story is also his own.

Yet I'm still not thoroughly satisfied with Willard, who needs to be developed more carefully than a run of the mill protagonist, because he is *not* an Everyman to *Apocalypse Now* in the way that Marlow,

for instance, is to *Heart of Darkness*. Where Marlow is a seaman, Willard is a trained assassin. We can identify with many of Willard's impulses, but others — such as his only half-merciful killing of an injured woman in order to get on with the journey — are jarring. As a rule, I'm all in favor of idiosyncratic characterization, but there's a problem with it here because Coppola is flirting with myth, with situations and characters that are on the whole more sweeping and less delineated than life. To lead us through this mythic world and, more important, to render that world credible, he needs a guide whose quirks we recognize and understand. We need someone (if not Conrad's Marlow, then perhaps Chandler's Marlowe) to make sense of bridges that are destroyed every night and rebuilt each dawn to keep up the appearance of an open waterway. We need a sensibility capable of observing the particular lunacy of playgirls hired to taunt sex-starved soldiers and of men water-skiing through war zones, and of taking that lunacy a step further. Willard is not quite that man. He's still too shifty, too reticent with his ideas. Thus the horror he glimpses is not as universal and not as fully explored as it might have been.

Despite this substantial weakness, *Apocalypse Now* is an exceptionally daring and, on the whole, successful film. It has almost no story and little suspense. We know that Willard/Sheen must survive the various challenges to his intelligence,

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Francis Coppola

Sarah Longacre

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cunning and physical well-being because we know he must live to reach Kurtz. The genius of Coppola's mis-ensemble is that it simultaneously batters and soothes: while the Dolby sound whooshes at us from speakers all over the theater, the limpid images attract us with their sensual beauty and repel us with their content. Similarly, the cinematography renders us both victim and perpetrator of any number of horrors. In one spectacular scene we watch fire-spitting helicopters swoop down from the skies as if we were the bewildered Vietnamese on the ground. In the next shot the camera places us behind the helicopter's controls, affording us the arrogant, shameful exhilaration of power.

Many critics found the final 30 minutes of the working print screened at Cannes to be the most problematic. For me, the confrontation between Kurtz and Willard was and is a highlight of the film. The musical score (there's a kind of "Kurtz motif" played when the Colonel is discussed), along with Willard's new, lengthy speculations on Kurtz' character, make Kurtz a vital presence earlier in the film. Marlon Brando has disappointed me in everything he's done since *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Godfather*, but as a bald and ethereal demon god, he's in top form here. By showing him only in profile and half-light, Coppola renders Kurtz/Brando almost without substance, as far from the realm of the body as from the realm of sanity. Brando delivers his pivotal speech — a rumination on the frightening intelligence of severing children's arms — with a power that rivals any of his earlier performances.

The new ending to the film, which I will refrain from recounting, is less ambiguous and more optimistic than the ending screened in Cannes. The two endings suggest such radically different outcomes that it's impossible to judge one as better. The first implies that Willard has been offered power and hasn't decided whether to accept it. The second and present ending implies that Willard (and, by implication, the American people?) has left Southeast Asia to its own devices. Cocteau once said something to the effect that what his audiences didn't like he cultivated, because he knew that integrity lay in abrasiveness. With Coppola the opposite is true. He trusts his public to tell him where he's gone wrong. Although there was doubtless also pressure from United Artists, I believe

Coppola decided to use the more upbeat ending because his preview audiences preferred it; and that decision is telling. Coppola is a brilliant director, but he is also a commercial one.

Apocalypse Now is not an art film. Although Coppola has stretched his scope and his talents here, he's made this film for the masses.

Will they buy it? Time will tell. What is sure is that, with Robert Altman and Woody Allen, Coppola is among our most gifted directors working today. *Apocalypse Now* is a flawed but often masterful film.

Unlike the film, Francis Ford Coppola's press conference was disappointing. He arrived thin and obviously in pain from back trouble and a hernia operation. He shook from time to time, and the often vicious and more often vapid questions were frequently answered testily. Clearly, Coppola has said more than he wants to say about *Apocalypse Now*. The few salient exchanges are recorded below.

Q: Why did you select this rather than the more ambiguous ending you showed in Cannes?

A: A complicated piece of work that is attempting to say something — unlike a genre film — struggles on its way to completion. The ending is obviously the most important part of a film; so I took extra care with the ending. I knew what I wanted the film to feel like at the end, but I didn't know how to achieve that feeling. At previews the people in the audience weren't feeling the way I wanted them to. On the basis of audience reaction, we came up with this ending. I hope to take the audience through an emotional experience and then give them some relief at the end.

Q: Why did you never show Marlon Brando in full light? Was it, as has been reported, because Brando was too heavy to look like the Kurtz you'd imagined?

A: No. Kurtz is a tricky character. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is sliced razor thin. You build up a lot of anticipation about Kurtz because of what the Marlow character, the narrator, tells you, but when you actually meet you only get hints about who he is. You get a lot of "Kurtz talked for hours," but you don't get what he said. Now there's a lot that a filmmaker can do with light and darkness. We used the shadows to establish that

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mysterious aspect to Kurtz.

Q: What is the importance of T.S. Eliot in the film?

A: Well, you probably noticed that Kurtz is reading *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance*. *The Wasteland* is very closely bound to *The Golden Bough*, to the idea of the fisher king. I thought that Kurtz, at this point in his life, would be interested in these things. All the imagery at the end of the film is related to Eliot. Whenever Willard looked at that stone head, that head was also equated with Kurtz.

Q: What was working with Brando like?

A: He was very cooperative. His big thing is that he hates baloney, which he thinks almost everything is. If he thinks someone's trying to do something that's a little special, a little humanistic, he'll jump into it.

Q: How has this film changed your life?

A: It was an experience. I've had my personal life spread out like a piece of butter. Yes, it had a profound effect on me. I don't think I could now go back and just make a genre picture. I don't think I could get enthusiastic about anything that wasn't a big adventure. ●