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# Mr. Coppola's WAR

Never before has an ego taken on the dimensions of an entire war on wide screen. But besides tooting his own horn Coppola has also changed the way movies are made



*"I too was moving up a river in a faraway jungle and hoping for some kind of catharsis."*

By Pat Aufderheide

**A**POCALYPSE NOW IS the biggest, most expensive, most self-important film about the Vietnam War yet. Francis Ford Coppola's film has capped a wave of commercial film on the subject and enters the market at the beginning of a wave of TV treatments. (After *Friendly Fire*, CBS plans two TV films, *Children of An Lac* and *Waiting Out the War*. NBC plans one, *When Hell Was In Session*.)

But *Apocalypse Now* is not just another war film. It's not even just a Vietnam war film. *Apocalypse* is the most ambitious project by America's premier artist in cinema, which is the great American art form. In a word, *Apocalypse* is Art.

But Coppola claims that art imitated life on the set, and the making of the film was like the story the film told. It was "like a war," it was like the journey upriver for Joseph Conrad's character Marlow; it was like the mad general Kurtz' megalomaniacal control of a mini-world.

The problem with all of this is simple. Somewhere the difference between life and art gets lost. And it becomes easy to make the film's goal a sensation shower rather than to compose sensations so that they can take on a larger meaning.

Coppola is highly taken with the parallels between the film and his life. He claims in the written credits for the film, "I found that many of the ideas and images with which I was working as a film director began to coincide with the realities of my own life, and that I, like Captain Willard, was moving up a river in a faraway jungle and hoping for some kind of catharsis." His wife wrote in her diary, now published as *Notes* (Simon and Schuster), how like Kurtz her husband became: "There is the exhilaration of power in the face of losing everything, like the excitement of war when one kills and takes the chance of being killed."

Everyone seems to have been affected by the parallels between the film and the war, and the film and the story of *Heart of Darkness*. Donna (wife of Michael) Moriarty, who lived on location, said, "for many it was like a tour of duty for many there was the experience of dark brooding, an internal journey into the recesses of one's own mind." It must have become as hard to tell life from art in that Philippine enclave as it was for Coppola's youngest child, who on first sight of the village said, "It looks like the Disneyland Jungle Cruise."

## Imitation of Hell.

Who cares if Coppola suffered an identity crisis while making this film? Let's assume something we don't have to—that the filming of this movie was indeed like a war and that Coppola's interior journey was like Marlow's journey up river. Then what? That touch of reality doesn't guarantee the movie will be any more moving. Not every soldier on the front is a poet, and not every nut is a Van Gogh.



But it's an act that sells tickets. Coppola bares his chest and shows us his scars. It's the psychological counterpart to telling us, "This movie cost \$30 million." It becomes almost sacreligious to pipe up and say—to the man with the stigmata, "But what does it mean? What did you want to say?"

By putting his agony—and the crew's—into every press release on the film and into the credits information, Coppola tries to draw attention away from the final product and to the process of making it. The process becomes a product in itself, suitable for advertising copy everywhere.

Coppola has drawn others into the same swamp of indecision that plagued him. So busy undergoing his journey of self-discovery that he couldn't decide how to finish the film, he shifted the burden of decision to others. He got Brando to improvise the key part of Kurtz, whose character defines the last part of the film. Once again life—Brando on location—was supposed to create art by happy accident. Finally, Coppola took the film to the public. Both in Hollywood previews and at Cannes he showed a work-in-progress for comments and suggestions.

Art is supposed to imitate life. It is supposed to take the chaotic and meaningless day-to-day mess we live in and shape it, interpret it and shed light on it. But once art is life, it becomes as arbitrary at the personal level as what originally needed to be understood—for instance, the American role in Vietnam. No wonder Coppola couldn't finish the

film. He was acting out an agony that never really ended.

Perhaps a need to explain the stewpot of sensations he cooked up in the first part of the film has made Coppola free with references to high-flown literary works that have been "sources" for his work.

He likes to strike the pose of brooding thinker. He mentions as intellectual founts for his work (besides Conrad) Nietzsche, Jesse Weston (*Ritual to Romance*, on the legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail), James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, among other things on rituals of regicide) and T.S. Eliot (*The Wasteland*, which Kurtz reads from in the film). This is more books than most filmmakers these days even have in their homes.

### Thought and myth.

Has Coppola been reading, thinking and digesting his own Five Foot Shelf? Not necessarily. While on location, he flew in an old college friend (from UCLA film school), a Nietzsche buff whose talk enchanted Coppola and crew. Some of his taped conversations with Brando, in fact, went straight into the film. The briefest contact with Eliot—say, in the Norton Anthology of English Literature—will also lead a browser to Eliot's inspirations: Frazer and Weston. Eliot railed in *The Wasteland* (as elsewhere) against the derivative shallowness of mass culture. Eliot had particularly liked in Weston's work the image of the fisherking in the Grail legends. The fisherking was once powerful, but his impo-

tence or death brought sterility to his kingdom.

Coppola need not have achieved more than an as-told-to understanding of any of the "sources" he gravely cites. It's easy to find in Monarch Notes clues to their common themes—eternal and cyclically recurring myths concerning powerful but decadent heroes of dying civilizations. This is a classy version of John Milius' straightforward *machismo*, a celebration of bygone heroism.

Coppola too wanted to make a myth. He has called *Apocalypse Now* a "film opera" that "could have taken place at any time" because it has an eternal theme—"moral ambiguity."

"What the film says," he explained, "is that we are all straddled between good and evil, that we make each decision as we go along and we always will, that there is no such thing as absolute good and evil." (If there isn't, what are we straddled between?)

Mythmaking may be part of the problem of why a chunk of our lives and our history like Vietnam is so difficult to comprehend. Conrad, the supposed inspiration for the whole project, would have balked at the vague truism that moral ambiguity is eternal. *Heart of Darkness* described a moral problem of a specific time and place—the height of English imperialism in Africa. Kurtz had a philosophy, an exalted version of the white man's burden. He claimed one can "exert a power for good practically unbounded" by appearing to pagan Africans as a deity. But Conrad, through Marlow, criticized Kurtz and showed the

folly of his grandiose thinking, which finally reduced the Africans for Kurtz to "brutes."

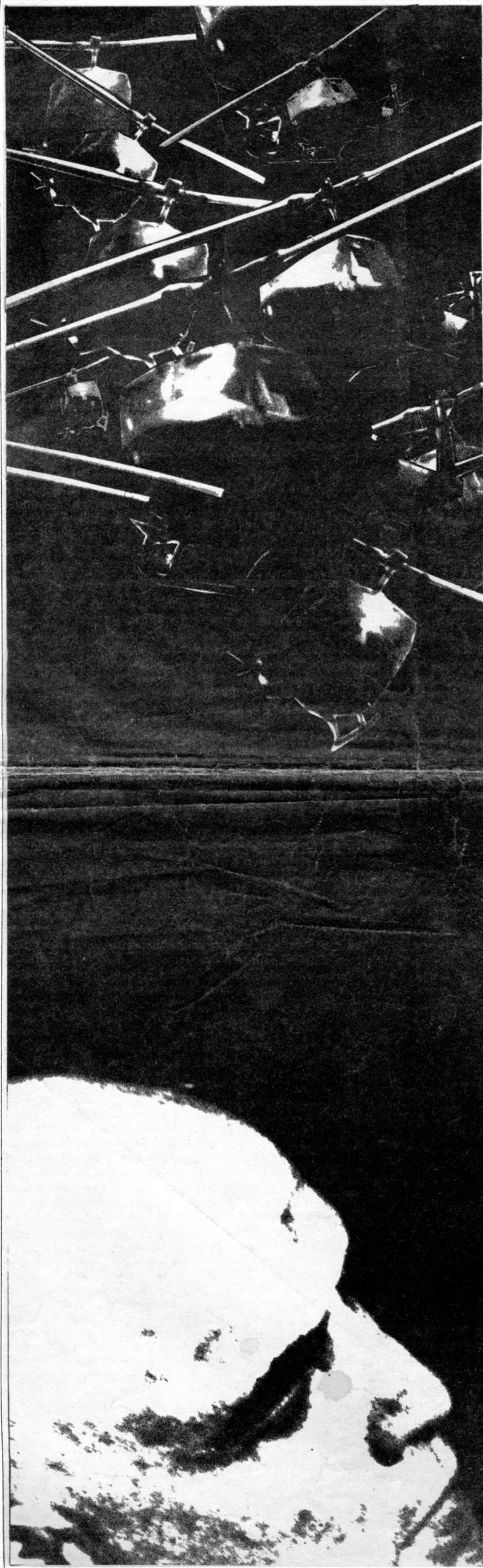
Marlow respected Kurtz' charismatic power, but knew it to be empty. Conrad's moral questions were far from eternal. They were specific, and they happened as a result of a style of colonialism, a combination of greed and missionizing.

But Coppola can deflect any such criticism of his film by saying he wanted to show an experience, not to argue a point. As he claimed in the credits, "The most important thing I wanted to do was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of horror, of the madness, the sensuousness and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War." How does he know? Because he has suffered the war on a terrarium scale, in the Philippines.

Ambiguity, moral or otherwise, is not Coppola's strong point. He would like to turn the confusion of history into eternal truisms. He hopes, he says, that the film can explain what Vietnam was "really like" to Americans by sharing the experience of horror with them. If Americans could "look at the heart of what Vietnam was really like...then they would be only one small step away from putting it behind them." This shares with Nixon the attitude that what happened in Vietnam was a mistake, to be put behind us rather than understood. He wants to blow us away—clean us out—with the ultimate cinema experience so that we can re-enter the American inno-

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Tom Greenfelder

# Coppola

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cence, free once again of the stains of history.

## Technical whiz kid.

Whatever the potholes of the mind in Coppola's vision of hell, the making of this film has changed filmmaking in several ways.

Probably the most impressive of them is technical: the magnificent and innovative sound system that Coppola perfected and patented at his own Zoetrope studios. His "Quintaphonic" system, with three speakers in the front of the theater and two in back, requires special equipment, and so all theaters will not benefit from some aspects of his reverence for the soundtrack as a powerful separate element in the film. But on the soundtrack as elsewhere Coppola was a fanatic for accuracy in detail; and the soundtrack of *Apocalypse Now* has a character of its own.

Coppola can't take solitary credit for discovering the importance of the soundtrack. More than a decade ago Robert Altman was experimenting with overlapping dialog and unmasked background noise. The introduction of eight-track sound systems—each actor wired into a channel with a mini-microphone—made it possible. (*A Wedding* used two eight-track units.) Increasingly filmmakers have used noise-reducing and clarity-enhancing Dolby sound equipment, whose recent innovations require new equipment in the sound mixing studio and also in the theater. Terry Malick's *Days of Heaven* was a dramatic example of the difference Dolby can make; the viewers practically sat down amid the crickets of early evening. The mother ship's low rumble in *Close Encounters* was another example of the heightened psychological effect through better sound.

Coppola can, however, claim credit for an early understanding that sound would be the new dimension for filmmakers to explore. He made sound equipment a central part of Zoetrope, and hired a sound technician—Walter Murch—who became a full collaborator on both Coppola's and George Lucas' films. Zoetrope now has probably the best arrangements for sound mixing in Hollywood. Philip Kaurman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Wanderers* were both mixed at Zoetrope, and the studio is available for a growing network of U.S. and foreign filmmakers who Coppola is cultivating.

Coppola said, however, that *Apocalypse Now* has cured him of technologism. "I used to think technology was the answer," he has said, "but now I know it's money that comes first." *Apocalypse* set new spending standards for a single extravaganza; Coppola has raised the upper limit on what a select few can force a studio to consider within the bounds. Already Michael Cimino is rumored to be edging up on an estimated \$30 million for his new film, *Heaven's Gate*, which, like *Apocalypse*, started out with a \$12 million budget.

This process is familiar: a few spend more, and fewer films are made. Just as important in terms of financial precedent, however, is Coppola's technique for leveraging all the money over the original \$12 million, which came from United Artists. His financing techniques are important to independent filmmakers because he combined a variety of assets and options in order to retain artistic control.

## Foreign sales.

A combination of personal mortgages, sales of stocks and of royalties for *Godfather I* and *II* netted Coppola a \$10 million loan from United Artists—which

was in no mood to say goodbye to its original \$12 million because the picture wasn't finished. The rest of the money came almost entirely from deals with foreign distributors. The film was so attractive internationally because of three elements that traditionally guarantee lines at foreign box offices for Hollywood features: 1) action, 2) internationally known stars, 3) an internationally known director. At least \$6 million was raised in foreign presale agreements. It didn't hurt that Coppola made foreign deals with dollars at the then-rate of exchange, when dollars were worth more.

Coppola didn't buy complete artistic freedom by trading his future overseas. The final 35mm prints of the film, that is, those to be seen in the "fly-over" zone (outside N.Y. and L.A.) and overseas, will have a giant napalm explosion to end the film, over which credits will roll. Why? Because foreign distributors found it more "commercially attractive" to have an action-packed ending.

Coppola has also insured that UA now invests heavily in advertising for the most monumental film-in-progress that spanned the 1970s. UA's ad campaign comes to half a million dollars, and is positively presidential. Consulting on the campaign are White House media consultant Gerald Rafshoon and pollster Pat Cadell.

Coppola wanted much more than he got in the way of financial innovation for *Apocalypse Now*. He tried to break the policy of blind bidding by showing exhibitors the film before they bid. Usually between 60 and 90 percent of the films theater owners place bids on with distributors are films about which they have only the sketchiest of information. Distributors like it that way, and exhibitors hate buying a pig in a poke.

But when Coppola showed exhibitors *Apocalypse Now*, they had the same reaction as they had when shown *Godfather I* and *II*—general panic at the film's murkiness and lack of faith in its box office possibilities. Thus Coppola's best intentions only confirmed the distributors' worst fears.

The decade-long project of *Apocalypse Now* may have changed more than film making and film financing. It will also have cross-cultural effects as a result of the product. Coppola's crew set up shop, with more money and more equipment than any of the locals had ever seen, in a Philippine tourist village for months. The long range effect on the economy was less like growth than like cancer.

They hired a tribe, the Ifugao, who until recently were still headhunters, to play the Montagnards. The Ifugao taught the crew certain rituals, which promptly were engulfed into the film. The crew in turn acquainted the Ifugao with a selective version of Western culture. Depressingly enough, one of the special requests of a young Ifugao girl from a departing crew member was for his cassette tape of John Denver's collected hits.

No matter how spectacular *Apocalypse Now* became, Coppola was able consistently to dream bigger than it. He has, it seems, been incapable of limiting himself to it. He is in good company.

Orson Welles originally planned, for his debut film at RKO, not *Citizen Kane*—what he ended up doing—but *Heart of Darkness*. He wanted to play both Kurtz and Marlow, which he had already done on the radio.

Conrad's novella has attracted the boy-wonders of different eras in Hollywood. This is a parallel that may mean more than all the parallels Coppola has mentioned put together. Let's hope Francis Ford Coppola doesn't end up murmuring portentous nothings on Paul Masson commercials, instead of in his own megaprojects. ■