CHAPTER 12.

# *Apocalypse Now* (1979): Joseph Conrad and the Television War

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IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM NOTES OF *APOCALYPSE NOW,* Francis Coppola states the dual intention of his film, implying, through use of the journey archetype, the role Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was to play:

> The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war. . . . I tried to illustrate as many of its different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars. [In making the film,] I, like Captain Willard, was moving up a river in a faraway jungle, looking for answers and hoping for some kind of catharsis.

But the film suffered at the hands of critics because it did not fulfill expectations of what a Vietnam film should be. Like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), it was measured by realistic-political standards precisely because the war was still recent, vivid, and ideologically charged for many viewers.

At the time, any battlefield film about Vietnam would have found less acceptance for its visual interpretation since the American experience of the war was so visual. Nor would the filmmaker be working against the beautifully framed and composed black-and-white imagery of a *Life Magazine.* That vision of war, static and even orderly helped create the aesthetic backgrounds for the obviously staged, thematically simple films about World War II. On the other hand, the Vietnam war was an intimate, loosely framed, on-the-run cinema verite experience. The immediacy, the emotion, the cumulative parataxis of this experience, the sense that things happen but do not connect, had undercut any attempts to interpret or put in perspective, whether from a visual artist, a president or a Senate Foreign Relations Committee opponent. Under the visual-aural onslaught, reason and order lost much of their authority.



There was a Walter Cronkite, "the war's narrator," accepted as both credible and rational. His popularity, however, probably had more to do with his function as a masterful moderator of images than as a profound commentator.' Eric Sevareid, who had the role of commentator on CBS, was quite good at it. But even those of the audience who wanted to believe that the horrific and endlessly repeated off-focus action or in-focus blood and pain could be enfolded by his reasonableness must have finally come to view those wrapups as feats on a par with Johnny Carson's nightly monologues.

Those who remember anything of the many interviews and press conferences about the war, probably remember the tone and tenor of the questions more than any of the answers. The questions grew increasingly skeptical and even cynical, all too plainly communicating to the television audience that no subsequent answers were to be trusted. The cumulative impact of such questions suggested that there were no answers that had not been "tried" before. A distrust in answers, a distrust in answering and the use of the logic, authority, and language involved in answering,' a sense that experience itself was unavoidably fragmented, leading to what R.D. Laing had earlier called a "politics of experience": these were all part of the legacy of the "television war." [4]

In this context, then, any film about Vietnam that followed the traditions of realistic narrative filmmaking (especially of war films) would be working against a collective sensibility that had arrived at different preconceptions of what was authentic. The panoramic shots of an omniscient camera, in-focus shots with a foreground and background, painterly attention to image and color tones, expertly edited, rhythmic alternation of shots, a story that follows various individuals through a plot with episodes that begin, peak and have an end or pause, clearly heard dialogue, music: all these elements of a carefully produced feature film were counter to the war that was pre-

[1] Larry Lichty's "The Night at the End of the Tunnel," *Film Comment* 11 (July-August, 1975), 35.

[2] Mark Crispin Miller and Karen Runyon, in a summation of Cronkite's career, agree that his presence, his "quality of restrained benevolence," contributed more to his appeal than what he actually said. "And That's the Way It Seems," *New Republic* 185 (February 14, 1981), 22.

[3] The weariness with explanations and language itself was occasionally expressed directly by the newscasters. At the end of a 1972 report during which viewers saw women and children killed by road mines, Bob Simon was moved to say, "By evening government spokesmen are saying another grand victory has been won in Quang Tri province, the situation has once again been stabilized. But there will be more fighting and more words. Works spoken by generals, journalists, politicians. But here on Route One, it's difficult to imagine what those words can be. There's nothing left to say about this war. There's just nothing left to say." Quoted in Lichty, p. 33.

[4] Michael J. Arlen, in such books as *Living-Room War* (1969) and *The View from Highway I* (1976) has written perceptively and critically of television's coverage of Vietnam. Two of the contributors to this volume, Peter Rollins and David Culbert, have completed a film on the subject, *Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Visual Images,* available from Oklahoma State University's Audiovisual Center.

sented to the American people by television. Many reviewers were never quite able to get this television war out of their minds when they viewed Vietnam films. Ironically enough, the superior quality of the picture on the big screen—which *seems* more real for all of its detail—also tended to draw many into a consideration of how well the films imitated what *really* went on in Vietnam[5]

Coppola attempted to use and confront viewers with the fact that their experience of the war had been shaped by the media. His film features a structure which has radical disjointures of tone and action from episode to episode and a script that repeatedly enforces a view of the war as a disorgan ized, futile exercise moving to the beat of Wagner and hard rock. Nonethe less, viewers were all too aware that an auteur-director and, in the latter half of the picture, a star had control of the script and the necessary organization of technology to bring off the best lines and the most spectacular scenes. The *Heart of Darkness* elements were apparently meant to move the viewers away from vicarious involvement in the experience toward "the moral issues." These elements were regarded by many, however, as aesthetic self-consciousness or overcontrol, an unnecessary self-reflexivity that, along with the voice-over narration, book titles, and quoted lines, made the film much too "literary." In fact, those critics who avoided judging the film as realistic mimesis often ended up judging it as literary mimesis. The film was neither Vietnam nor *Heart of Darkness* and it was so much the worse for that indeterminancy.

In a sense, the most negative critics were right: the film was neither and it had meant to be both. Setting aside the issue of whether any carefully wrought film about Vietnam could have struck the audience of 1979-80 as being fully authentic, the contradictions between realism and "literary effects," experiential disorder and imposed moral lessons inherent in this film undercut its unity. A possible theme, enunciated by Willard, stresses the search for an orderly way to prosecute this war. The unsettling implication of his encounter with Kurtz is that at the center or around the chaos there may be a calm, meditative buddha or nature that can contemplate any destruction, including its own. Unfortunately, the implication is not developed enough during the whole film experience of the war up to Kurtz's compound; too, Conrad's world is hardly Coppola's. Hence, Kurtz's final utterance, "the horror," is neither a complete summation of the film nor a point where Conrad's theme joins Coppola's.

Like Coppola's film, *Heart of Darkness is* a highly personalized journey

[5] I would qualify this statement with an impression: most young people I have talked to seem less bound by mimetic questions, except as they assert that *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter* portray events similar to what "really happened" or capture the "feel" of combat in Vietnam. Of course, we already have a generation of young adults whose primary memory of Vietnam is films, not newsreels.



through a particular setting. It does not seek, as its primary aim, to document and analyze the typical operations of imperialism. Indeed, based as it is on Conrad's brief contact with those operations in one extreme situation (King Leopold's Congo), it tends to portray them more through isolated confrontations and hearsay than through direct description. Marlow may glimpse the soul of Kurtz, but he fails to explore the inner workings of the Company. Nor is he really interested in such details, since he can judge the whole affair by its waste of human lives, black and white. A more precise detailing of the company's typical methods or agents would hardly clarify or alter Conrad's conclusions. Quite the contrary. To make an indirect brief for the film, it would be analogous to those futile attempts to make sense of the Vietnam war from the kill ratios released by the Defense Department. Moral conclusions must ultimately rise above such facts. On the basis of Marlow's experience, it would be fair to say that the more one becomes enmeshed in the details of company operations, the more one is mentally and morally endangered. Marlow chooses Kurtz as his nightmare against the spectre of a "sane" station manager, so professionalized and dehumanized by his administrative position that he can only judge Kurtz in terms of how his methods will affect company profits. What, then, causes the moral and psychological degeneration of those who enter this dark continent? For all of the observed inefficiency and stupidity, Marlow finally stresses unmeasurable and mysterious causes—a certain lack of inner restraint, a loss of civilized values, and the force of a brooding natural environment.

By the same token, *Apocalypse Now* does not really attempt to document the course of the Vietnam war or even many of its typical features. If anything, it bypasses documentation to confront our media-fed memory of the war and our armchair moralisms about its futility with scenes which push us to the extremes of vicarious participation (the air assault) and gut-level revulsion (the carnage at Kurtz's compound). The first scene, in Willard's hotel room, challenges our very sense of reality and prepares us for some of the surrealism in the last third of the picture, reminding the Conrad reader, perhaps, of the way the listening sailor characterizes Marlow and his style of tale-telling in the beginning of *Heart of Darkness.* In an excellent article, "The Power of Adaptation in *Apocalypse Now,"* Marsha Kinder analyzes the scene to show its importance in defining important structural elements for the whole film: the subjective point of view, a surrealistic or dream-like war, a dispassionate voice-over narration, a mad ritual of violence, and simultaneous layers of experience that tend to dissolve into obsessive images of heads, helicopters, fire and smoke.[6]

There are some problems, however, in Kinder's contention that this scene immediately conditions the viewer to perceive all of the subsequent ac-

[6] *Film Quarterly, 33* (Winter 1979-80), 12-20.

sented to the American people by television. Many reviewers were never quite able to get this television war out of their minds when they viewed Vietnam films. Ironically enough, the superior quality of the picture on the big screen—which *seems* more real for all of its detail—also tended to draw many into a consideration of how well the films imitated what *really* went on in Vietnam.`

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Under helicopter cover, U.S. patrol boats stage an amphibious landing on a coastal village under Viet Cong control, in *Apocalypse Now,* a United Artists release. (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

tion as a kind of dream. With the arrival of the two soldiers to sober Willard up and the next briefing scene, filmed and acted in slow, nondramatic, documentary fashion, the first scene becomes quite unique, a kind of localized hallucination. The layering of experience, the simultaneous realities of the dream, for instance, don't recur in the same way until the ritual killing of Kurtz and the final scene. This is not to deny the importance of the first scene in defining stylistic elements; it is to realize what Coppola realized when he confronted the large task of editing—that the style of the film tends to change from scene to scene.[7]

For my own more modest purposes, the first combat scene "declares" Coppola's anti-documentary intentions more effectively for the viewer. In fact, the director himself appears in the scene as part of a television camera team. "Don't look at the camera. Just go by like you're fighting. ... Move! Move! Keep on going. . . . Don't look at the camera," he yells to soldiers slogging ashore into a village which is being "liberated" by an Air Cavalry unit. The viewer who realizes that the director is in the picture perhaps accepts this appearance as another self-conscious auteur gesture, in the tradition of Alfred Hitchcock. Those who know of Coppola's agony of process in making his overbudget project, may see the appearance as another assertion by the director that Willard's journey and Kurtz's conflicts were also *his.*

[7] Eleanor Coppola, *Notes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 233.



On the realistic level, however, the television camera and, later, the many Nikons strapped to Dennis Hopper should remind the viewer that the Vietnam war was the most photographed, reported, and even staged war in history. In that first battle scene, the director's own cameras move with the soldiers, away from the fixed television perspective, to the apparent confusion of mopping up. It is a reality that overwhelms the viewer's eyes and ears, quite in contrast to the contained "reality" on the small screens of our television sets. A bellowing cow being lifted by helicopter sling, houses burning or being bulldozed, a church service in progress, smoke rising, villagers being herded into a landing vehicle, bodies lying all over, all shot in ground-level pans which capture foreground action while passing over planes of background activity that cannot be included at the same time: the television icons of war are all there, but in much more threatening deep focus. This is a reality that one cannot stabilize, a reality that juxtaposes glimpses of kindness towards villagers with devastation of their village, perceptual disorder with the order of an operation being carried out as planned, even down to the unit "signature" in the playing cards left on the dead. The film initiates the viewer into a Vietnam outside the television screen, a place and a war that cannot be framed and parcelled out in nightly newscasts. It encompasses and passes by so much that it becomes simultaneously complete and fragmentary, real and unreal.

The style of filming moves the viewer toward what had seemed only the hallucination of Willard's overwrought mind in the opening scene. Although sometimes sacrificed for a more "omniscient" style of rendering—as in the later air assault—the approach to reality in this scene defines the way Coppola will approach the Vietnam war. It will be a personal, view that tends to sacrifice moral distance for perceptual overload. Unlike Conrad's Marlow, one will not be able to focus on surface necessities as a way of staying disengaged.

The scene provides access to the psychological plot of the film. As in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* the river keeps the plot moving, providing more or less traumatic encounters that represent the war as a series of massive incoherencies which test the stability and resourcefulness of the participants. In literary terms, it tends to graft the episodic plot and amoral world of the picaresque tradition to the stream-of-consciousness style of Michael Herr's *Dispatches.* As Willard travels up the river, beyond the Do Lung Bridge, the script becomes increasingly Conrad-through-Coppola, focusing more on the psychological-moral effects of the madness. Perceptual disorder increasingly becomes physical and mental disorder, until we reach Kurtz, whose apparent order of mind and manner are belied by the actual disorder around him.

In the original Milius script Willard was converted by Kurtz. So much so that he and Kurtz were firing up at the helicopters that are coming to get

him, crying crazily. A movie comic."[8] A later version, mentioned in Eleanor Coppola's *Notes,* had Willard die in a bomb strike as the result of a double-cross by headquarters.[9] This finale, which may be the footage that appears behind the credits in the 35-mm version, gave way to the alternate post-murder scene shown to "test audiences," in which Willard seemed to accept command of Kurtz's army. As he worked with Willard, however, Coppola slowly moved away from the film as the story of his journey, temptation and conversion. "In no way could he get in the way of the audience's view of what was happening, of Vietnam."[10] In fact, Harvey Keitel was released from the role, after filming began, because he projected too strongly. Quite obviously then, Willard was conceived at some distance from Marlow, first as a person who became what he sought to eliminate, later as a person who provided a neutral point of view for the unfolding of the war. As the latter version began to prevail, with the presence of Martin Sheen, Coppola had to return to the original conception somewhat to make Willard interesting: "Marty's character was coming across as too bland; I tried to break through it." The result was the insertion of the first crazy scene—which does not prepare the viewer for the neutral witness—and, more subtly, the sense of guilt, the disdain for the way the war is being run, and the growing sense of kinship with Kurtz.

The interior elements are communicated through a voice-over narration, written by Michael Herr, which was added after all of the on-location shooting was finished. One assumes that this method too was to make Willard more interesting, psychologically, without letting his character get the way of any important action. Kinder suggests that Sheen's poor health, after his heart attack, may have necessitated this monotone method of characterization.[12] The irony is that many critics seized the narration sections as borrowed and bungled Conrad, when, in fact, the two modes of narration are strikingly different in purpose and effect. Marlow's whole story is filtered through his matured consciousness, with each event valued and sometimes displaced so that the reader actually gets two "stories"—one of an adventuring self which is reactive and feels alternately fascinated and threatened by all that is around him; the other of a reflective self which characterizes, judges, and carefully shapes into words the earlier self and what encountered. In contrast, Willard's narration is more interior monologue, the reactive thoughts of someone involved in the action, who, in effect, does not think during the most intensely dramatic scenes. Often, Willard's comments seem more self-protective than analytic. The net effect is that while Marlow's commentary tends to deepen and extend the significance of his experience, Willard's narration tends to flatten his character even more than the low-key acting style. His neutrality can be interpreted as a professional pragmatism which positions him nearer to the disorder of the war than to any set of values by which it can be judged. This is particularly interesting, when we remind ourselves that Willard, like Marlow, is supposedly narrating his story after the fact. In the opening scene, the narrator tells us, "There is no way to tell his story without telling my own. His story is really a confession and so is mine." If so, it is a confession without much self-revelation or reflection, unless you assume that the filmed action is somehow selected and shaped by Willard's consciousness. As indicated above, I believe his sensibility is not present enough in the visual style for most of the plot up to the encounter with Kurtz. The consciousness of Willard frames the experience, without enclosing it. His consciousness, like the river, is the means by which we get to the major episodes, but the episodes themselves are unmeditated. Thus, the necessary shifts back and forth between image and voice create problems. Each time the viewer leaves an episode he has experienced with overwhelming directness, the returning voice "expects" him to accept a reductive moralism. Coppola, perhaps, thought such banalities as "We cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a bandaide." would help his audience put Vietnam behind them.

[8] "An Interview with Francis Coppola," *Rolling Stone* (Nov. *1,* 1979), p. *53.*
[9] *Notes,* p. *241.*
[10] *Rolling Stone,* p. *53.*
[11] *Rolling Stone,* p. *53.*
[12] Kinder, p. *15.*



A major difference between Marlow and Willard is that Marlow is an idealistic young man, who tends to judge the company's actions in terms of their humanity, whereas Willard is a professional soldier, who tends to judge the war in terms of its military efficiency. It is through Willard, in fact, that Coppola comes closest to an analysis of the military dilemma in Vietnam.

We should remember that the standard criticism of the French effort in Vietnam is that they never learned how to fight a guerrilla war in the countryside. Certainly one cannot say precisely the same about the American military. Khe Sanh was never on the verge of becoming Dien Bien Phu, in spite of some press efforts to portray it as such. American technology's ability to move the troops and concentrate fire power insured success in most sustained engagements. It was less successful in "winning the hearts and minds" and securing the land. The gigantic enclaves, whether military bases or relocation camps, symbolized the extent of American success and failure. With the superior depth and breadth of film, Coppola is able to portray this extent much better than television: Willard journeys through a series of large-scale beachheads or enclaves, each created by technology (up to Kurtz's compound), each surrounded by the jungle and the darkness where "Charlie" lives. (Whether this depiction arose from the director's "apparent sense that the world is seen most truthfully when it is seen as a spectacle" or his analysis of America's military effort is perhaps beside the point.) Wil-

[13] Stanley Kauffmann, "Coppola's War," *New Republic,* 181 (Sep. *15, 1979),* 24.

lard's awareness of the hostile environment and the circus-like atmosphere of each operation extends to include an indirect criticism of the culture that is so tellingly displayed in the major scenes. The few military men competent to lead find that America has given them "rock and rollers with one foot in their graves." From water-skiing to the rock show to Lance's acid trips to the electronic nightmare of Do Lung Bridge, technology's children are depicted as soft, self-indulgent, and unequal to their hidden enemy. Willard's professional dedication places him in critical opposition to the military and culture he has pledged to serve. Both create barriers to his mission.

Whereas Marlow grimly attends to the immediate necessities of running a boat up the river without breaking down or scraping bottom, Coppola's Willard withdraws into meditations on his mission and Kurtz through the dossier. What breaks in on him is not the silence of the jungle or the disorder of white men obsessed by ivory, but the crew of "rock and rollers." Like Marlow, Willard is one of the "new gang" who wants the purity of being dedicated to something apart from himself. He takes the mission, not because he has faith in its rightness, but because it is a mission. He focuses on the dossier for much the same reason Marlow focuses on his boat—to keep his mind stabilized by immediate facts so he can ignore the larger ities around him.

We reach the limits of similarity here because Willard possesses little of the consciousness of being psychically threatened that Marlow has. At no point before the very end does Willard feel the lure of the unleashed power around him. Viewers may be drawn to "go ashore for a howl and a dance" with the GIs in the spectacular USO sequence, but not Willard. He recognizes none of the kinship with the "natives" on shore that Marlow does. Like the tough-guy detective (another Marlow), Willard uses cynicism to keep the darkness at arm's length so he can preserve his solitary fidelity to the code of his profession. Just as in *The Maltese Falcon,* even when one doesn't trust the client who defines the mission, one can only come through whole and clean if he honors his commitment. If he violates what narrows to a personal, professional code and gives in to the jungle, the whole sense of darkness encompas

All three writ seem to have been aware of the Conradean possibilities the jungle presented with regard to Willard. In the opening of the original script by John Milius, the wilderness is first seen without humans, as primeval. An ambush develops in which Americans, already changed by their environment, emerge dressed as savages, "unexplainably, out of the growth" and blast away at the camera or reach toward the camera to scalp a dead Vietnamese.[14] The exposition of

[14] 'Apocalypse Now' Script Extracts," *Film Comment,* 12 (July-August, 1976), 14.



this action, then, associates the barbarism of Kurtz's army with the jungle itself. Hence, Kurtz could begin to influence Willard through the jungle during his journey up the river. As Milius puts it, "I'd have tried to give the jungle as much personality as possible, have it be . . . as much a character as the war."[15] Michael Herr, who wrote the narration, recorded the force of the Vietnam jungle in *Dispatches:* "Forget the Cong, the *trees* will kill you, the elephant grass is homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath."[16]

Since Coppola decided to form his film around the quest-journey of the PBR up the river, one can hardly blame him for not showing the war of the foot soldier, where snipers and the fear of ambushes would make the jungle a kind of force. He dramatically establishes something of this aspect early in the film when Chef, the Louisiana "saucier," is scared witless by the sudden appearance of a tiger out of the forest. It demonstrates just how "tight" Chef and the rest of the crew were "wrapped" and relates that tension and the resultant craziness to the enclosing environment. Willard echoes Chef's key line,—"Never get out of the boat"—enlarging it to include what you might become if you did leave the boat: "Kurtz got off the boat. He split from the whole fuckin program." Unfortunartely these connections are not reinforced in subsequent scenes. Instead, Willard turns again to the dossier history of Kurtz. Up to the Do Lung sequence, the jungle is merely a setting against which battles or napalm drops are staged. It is the impersonal, surrounding green or part of the darkness in the USO and bridge sequences. After the latter, a high angle long shot establishing the boat's slow progress up the snaking river and a subsequent eye-level long shot of the boat moving directly away from the camera—optically *not* moving—between high canyon walls again suggests the pressure of the environment. The two attack scenes that follow are modelled on the attack scene in Conrad that so effectively impresses Marlow as an attack of the jungle itself, with disembodied arms, legs, eyes, and spears seeming a part of some greater beast. But the context or staging of both in the film prevents a similar impression. The more dramatic machine-gun-tracer attack, which seems to explode out of the jungle, is somewhat isolated and undercut by the oddity of a long banner and the red smoke ("purple haze") that Lance spreads around. Lance, the California surfer, looks around and concludes, "This is better than Disneyland." The arrow and spear attack is somewhat comically staged, with men running on the shore and Lance making a hat of the arrows. The deaths in these incidents are further separated from the jungle by an ironic tape recording in the first case and a rather grotesque attempt to impail Willard in the second.

[15] "John Milius Interviewed by Richard Thompson," *Film Comment,* 12 (July-August, 1976), 15.
[16] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 66.

Willard's statement about Kurtz, just before he kills him indicates that Coppola may have intended a brooding personality for the jungle: "Even the jungle wanted him dead and that's who he really took orders from anyway." Perhaps the superimposed faces of Kurtz and temple idols at the en are to suggest this personality. Certainly, a more continuous emphasis on the power of the jungle could have strengthened the Kurtz character and Willard's attraction to him much more than did allusions to Charlie Manson, the General's analysis, or Kurtz's own explanations.

Even if Coppola had stressed the mysterious and unconquerable power of the jungle, those who sought a realistic representation of the Vietnam war would have trouble accepting Kurtz. *Dispatches* mentions special agents who operated freely, without contact with headquarters, but no even attained the kind of power and immunity from attack of a Kurtz. Nor does Coppola intend for the viewer to "read" him that way. Instead, he seems to have conceived Kurtz as a kind of objective correlative: "There it is. [Brando's face] And that's the way I felt about Vietnam." Once we make appropriate adjustments for Kurtz's fictionality, however, we become more aware of problems with his aesthetic credibility. A major plot problem is that there is too little to discover about him. Rather than approaching him gradually, coming at him through layers of opinion and hearsay, as Marlow does, Coppola strips much of his mystery away in the briefing session. He is never the genius, the man who had ideas and, at the same time, was more successful than anyone else in the "company." Kurtz is introduced as a man who has gone "totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct." This judgment is delivered by an authoritative source, quite above the self-interested bunglers who presume to judge Kurtz in Conrad's novel. Moreover, Kurtz himself witnesses to this judgment, courtesy of a Sony tape recorder: "must kill them. We must incinerate them—pig after pig, cow after cow, village after village, army after army." The general even analyze in fine study guide fashion-- How it happened and What It All Means: "Out there with these natives, there must be a temptation to be God, because there's a conflict in every human heart between the rational and irrational, between good and evil. . . . Sometimes the dark side will overcome the better angles of our nature." Hence, the heart of Coppola's darkness is explained at the very beginning. Willard and the viewer are reduced to corroborating the charges with their own eyes by encountering the man and his atrocities before carrying out the sentence upon him. There was still some opportunity for an exploration of character, but given an overweight Marlon Brando, who hadn't read *Heart of Darkness* before he arrived on the set, who didn't like Coppola's original conception of his character, and who, more or less, worked up his character while the cameras

'*Rolling Stone*, p. 56.

Producer-director Francis Coppola discusses a scene with his star, Marlon Brando (left) on the set of *Apocalypse Now,* a United Artists release. (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

ran, all during a stay of two weeks, it's not surprising that the photography strikes the viewer with more force than the acting.

The original beginning of Milius's script thrusts Kurtz on the viewer quite early. Few would disagree with Brooks Riley that a change was needed: "To have shown us Kurtz first, only to abandon him for the next two-thirds of the film would have proved an unforgivable betrayal of the character and a dilution of the film's carefully planned unveiling of the man behind, under, or above the myth." Horror film fans will recognize the principle operating here: Don't display your monster too early in the film. As it turns out, the dossier's increasingly blurred photos of Kurtz may be more important than the information on his background. When we encounter the man, it is a powerful visual encounter. His bald head and huge body slowly emerge and melt back into the shadow, creating a drama more interesting than anything he says. Certainly Coppola felt that the character was "in place" when Brando shaved his head. The film celebrates that moment for the director: "I think it's wonderful that in this movie, the most terrifying moment is that image: just his face."[19] Kurtz's presence is primarily

[18] *Filnr Comment,* 15 (September-October 1979), 26.
[19] *Rolling Stone,* p. 54.

Guided by a crazed freelance photographer (Dennis Hopper), left, Capt. Willard (Martin Sheen), foreground, and Chef (Frederic Forrest) warily survey a temple compound guarded by Montagnard warriors in *Apocalypse Now,* a United Artists release. (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

physical, a piece of the spectacle of the film, a meditative object around which everything else should form into incantation or ritual. That object, first cleansed, then blackened, then bloodied is played off against other disembodied heads, human and stone, against the tangled masses of living and dead bodies, against light, explosions of light, and surrounding darkness. It finally becomes a mental projection on the black screen of Willard's mind. This is to give Coppola his due.

But I would agree with the "majority" critical position: "the film succeeds in forcing us to experience the horror of the war and to (perhaps) acknowledge our own complicity in it, but it fails illuminate the nature of Kurtz's horror." [20] For all of Kurtz s rationali izing and quoting, we do not reallygo to the moral origins of this darkness. In fact, the quotes and book titles suggest texts external to the film that make much better *sense* of Western man's loss of civilized values. At its most powe rful, the film egates words and analysis to a musical status: Kurtz's controlled fugue of literary fragments and isolated memories separates him even from his own operations and has the power of a closed, complete, paranoid structure; his disciple, the photo journalist, rambles through a romantic scherzo of enthusiasm, aspiration and pseudo-analysis which betrays his instability and im-

[20] Kinder, p. 13.



mersion in a new cult (with his old cult objects, Nikons, hung round his neck). Neither of these men explains or can explain; and Willard lacks the distance and moral intelligence to explain.

Unfortunately, perhaps, film is a moving picture. The director cannot completely reduce environment to images formed around the head of Kurtz (or Willard). Whereas the meditator needs a more or less constant sound and image so he can move his mind to new perspectives of the object and new levels of consciousness, the film supplies its own order of perspectives as it changes angle, lighting, scene, etc. This is an order which tends to disrupt or preclude the movement of the mind, at least while the film is being shown. Hence, not the most dramatic shots of heads at the end nor the echoed resonance of Kurtz's last words move us much past perception. The hard rock sound and light show that detonates behind the credits in the 35 mm version seems to ratify a state of dazed receptiveness.

In Coppola's immediately preceding pictures, *The Godfather* series and *The Conversation,* the protagonists have attempted to separate themselves from American culture while living in its midst, to seek order, stability, and fulfillment in an independent network of rules and values. Michael Corleone and Harry Caul both operate according to professional codes in a world where the rules—based on loyalty to family, religion, company, or country—have broken down. In this sense, both are "code" characters whose conflicts involve the effort to live by the code they have chosen to follow, while others—even those closest to them—often live without a code, by a different code (Kay Corleone), or violate their supposed loyalty to the main character's code (Fredo Corleone). Many viewers, especially of *The Godfather* series, found much to admire in the characters' integrity and commitment to order, as if these characters had, like their Hemingway predecessors, almost managed to separate themselves completely from the societal breakdown around them. Such viewers indicate more about the culture than about the films involved; in the cultural context of Coppola's pictures, there is no "separate peace" available. First, the creation of a separate system of professional values is, properly seen, not really a rejection of the culture. A number of artists and sociologists, from Thomas Pynchon to Theodore Roszack, have charted the breakup of a moral consensus and society itself into technocratic-professional, cultural, or ideological groups. The members have loyalty limited by such groups, whether job, life-style, or belief groups, and will often act in ways contrary to generally accepted mores and laws to gain their ends. Indeed, this is the second feature that distinguishes the characters of Coppola's films from Hemingway's code heroes: their ac tivities actually help promote a breakdown of society's mores and loyalties. Ultimately, their own systems of value and behavior are breached and "turn on" the characters, to isolate them in a small paranoid space. The final shots of Michael alone in a room or Harry destroying his room in search of

a transmitter show the extent to which each character's professional behavior has stripped him of the very things (family, order) that his
was to secure in the first place.

Willard begins *Apocalypse Now* in a hotel room, divorced from his wife, waiting desperately for another mission, any mission so he can pull himself together. Unfortunately, his mission involves killing a man who seems to embody the very professional values he finds so lacking in the rest of the operations he encounters. What's more, Kurtz has formed his own efficient system of war, outside the American effort. He has "cut himself loose" in a way that Willard finds admirable, although his lack of method or the madness of his methods ultimately leads Willard to carry out his original mission. But Kurtz seems to have directed him since his savagery in murdering Kurtz enacts Kurtz's methods.

"The horror, the horror" hardly creates an impact comparable to Conrad's novel for several reasons. In willing his own murder, Kurtz does not seem to have reaffirmed the civilized values that the outsider has brought into his world. Instead, he has transformed the outsider into one of his own kind, presumably fitting him to either lead or destroy his whole world. Those, in fact, are the two endings that Coppola filmed—either of which would have been logical. After such premeditation are we to accept Kurtz's words that evidence of some hidden conversion, a renunciation of everything he has accomplished, including his own murder? The words echo in Willard's mind after the moment, just as they echo in Marlow's mind, but with what a difference! Unlike Marlow, Willard has not restrained himself; he has "cut himself loose" from his own professional code. Kurtz's words, as remembered, could indicate repugnance, but again there is nothing else in Willard's behavior to indicate that a conventional moral sensibility has returned. The final destruction of Kurtz's compound in the 35mm version would seem to indicate otherwise. Above all, the horror of Kurtz's fall from moral and professional grace is muted because there is no consistent, dramatic representation of those values in the film. The war, American culture in Vietnam, the behavior of those involved, especially Willard, do not represent ideals against which Kurtz can be judged.

The most dramatic sense of abysm at the end of the film is aesthetic, not moral. *Apocalypse Now* begins with personal futility and destruction and enlarges the scope in each ensuing major scene. Each scene becomes "worse," but, as in Dante's *Inferno,* not as emotionally intensifying as the first encounter. Paradoxically, each more horrible scene tends to be more spectacular and thus more exciting in visual-aural effects. Can the viewer really enlarge a sense of moral horror against the visceral impact of better and better pyrotechnic displays?[21]

[21] My attempt to reconstruct and analyze that process is entitled *"Heart of Darkness* and the Process of *Apocalypse Now," Conradiana,* 13.1 (1981), *45-54.*



The pressure of the television war seems quite apparent in *Apocalypse Now.* After all of the newsreel fragmentation of experience and the disillusionment with logical explanation, any filmmaker would have been hard put to make cinematic sense of the war. For a lesser director, the spectacular battle sequences would have been enough. But the humanist in Francis Coppola would not let him simply portray the waste or futility or black humor of Vietnam. So he attempted to follow the example of Joseph Conrad, whose journey into the heart of imperialism exposed the frailty of Western cultural and moral values. Unlike Conrad's world, however, Coppola's America does not offer the stable consensus standards or ideals against which the actions of a Kurtz or Kilgore will seem horrible. The standard left is represented by Willard, the much narrower one of professional discipline. When that standard is breached, the grounds for judgment within the work of art are soon gone. One is left with an aesthetic of intensities. Contrary to the old saw, experience of a journey, of the processes of filmmaking, of a Vietnam will not always gather itself into a moral perspective.