

American Madness

Apocalypse Now Redux, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, written by John Milius, Coppola and Michael Herr

David Walsh
25 August 2001

Apocalypse Now Redux is a remarkable film. Francis Ford Coppola's indictment of American intervention in Vietnam appeared in its original form in 1979. More than twenty years later, with the entire work re-edited from raw footage over a six-month period in 2000 and some fifty minutes added (hence the *Redux*), the film, with all its significant flaws, has perhaps more of a power to disturb the spectator than at the time of its initial release.

In its own way, this is a vindication of the seriousness of the film's critique, however inadequately worked out it may be. If, as apologists of one stripe or another for American capitalism suggest, the Vietnam War was an ugly aberration after which the country ultimately "righted itself," then *Apocalypse Now*, with its picture of a society at the end of its moral tether, would not strike a deep chord. But what has the US experienced since 1979? A continued social and economic unraveling: Reaganism, Iran-Contra, the Persian Gulf War, the impeachment crisis, the bombing of Serbia, the hijacking of a national election and more, all of this taking place in the context of a growing social chasm in the US and a lurch to the right by the entire political establishment. The re-release of the film—entirely apart from Coppola's immediate motives—and the strong response it has received have an objective, contemporary significance.

In 1969 or so, an army intelligence captain named Willard (Martin Sheen) is ordered by top US military and CIA officials in Saigon to travel up the Nung River into Cambodia and "terminate with extreme prejudice" a Green Beret officer, Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who has apparently become deranged and established an independent fighting force, of Montagnard tribesmen, in his own fiefdom in the jungle.

A patrol boat and its crew are put at Willard's disposal, consisting of Chief Phillips (Albert Hall), a black veteran; Lance Johnson (Sam Bottoms), a renowned surfer; "Chef" (Frederic Forrester), a cook from New Orleans; and "Mr. Clean" (a youthful Laurence Fishburne), a black teenager. After a nightmarish voyage, which costs most of the crew members their lives, Willard reaches Kurtz's compound in a ruined temple and attempts to accomplish his mission.

This is nothing if not an ambitious and audacious work. The opening shot: a line of palm trees, green and lush, a trace of sand or dust blown about by helicopter blades, the helicopters themselves, the trees bursting into flames. The beauty, clarity and menace of the sequence are exhilarating, riveting.

The atmosphere of menace prevails throughout. Those directing this war are obviously capable of any crime and nearly everyone has been infected. Willard, drunk and bleeding in his hotel room, asks the two soldiers who knock on his door (they are merely delivering a message from the higher-ups) what he's being charged with. We learn that he's already carried out assassinations. He receives his murderous instructions from two officers and a sinister civilian (a CIA man presumably) over a pleasant lunch of roast beef.

The film grapples with the volatile combination of arrogance, ignorance, brutality and "good intentions" that characterizes every American military adventure. The figure of Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) suggests some of these qualities. In a justly famed sequence, Kilgore organizes a helicopter raid (to Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*) and subsequently the napalming of a section of coastline both to facilitate Willard's access to the mouth of the river and make possible a surfing excursion. It is Kilgore who gets to proclaim "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." And it is the same Kilgore who, after organizing the firing on frightened and fleeing villagers, helps one of his victims with her wounded baby. Willard later thinks to himself, "If that's the way Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they had against Kurtz."

The men accompanying Willard are painted in generally sympathetic colors, although they are capable, caught up in the collective lunacy, of terrible acts (such as the panicked machine-gunning of an innocent Vietnamese family aboard a sampan). After a scare in the jungle, Chef wails that all he wanted in life was to be a cook, nothing more; the 17-year-old "Clean" receives a tape from his mother, relating the latest family news; Phillips is a no-nonsense veteran; Lance, more eccentric and remote to begin with, proves most adaptable to the conflict's more insane requirements.

The crew stumbles on a USO show in the middle of the jungle. Three Playboy "Playmates" perform a titillating routine before a crowd of restless and sex-starved enlisted men, precipitating a small riot and a near-mass rape. Later, in one of the newly-restored sequences, Willard encounters the Playmates and their agent at a dismal encampment where the latter have been grounded for lack of helicopter fuel. He offers two barrels of the latter if the women will sexually entertain his crew. This scene doesn't contribute much.

Shortly after "Clean" is killed by a brief burst of gunfire from the riverbank, Willard and his crew come upon a French family and its private army at a remote rubber plantation. This scene, which Coppola eliminated in the 1979 version from fear that it slowed down the boat journey (although it had taken weeks to shoot), now seems quite dramatically and ideologically critical. Willard and his hosts sit down for an elegant meal. The head of the family (Christian Marquand) provides his version of Vietnamese history. He denounces the US for helping to create the Vietminh (forerunner of the "Vietcong,") at the end of World War II and, after cursing the "communist traitors" at home, asserts that French families like his have a reason for staying. "We stay because this is ours. You Americans are fighting for the biggest nothing in history." The embittered monologue, written by Coppola, points in its fashion to one of the contradictions of US foreign policy in Vietnam and elsewhere: the insistence that America's actions are not motivated by economic interest or geopolitics, but by the desire to see democracy and freedom prevail.

The final scenes at Kurtz's encampment are, in general, the film's least

convincing. Brando is charismatic, but his character's philosophizing (some of it improvised) about freedom, violence and the absurdity of existence adds up to relatively little. Dennis Hopper is simply irritating as a burned out photojournalist and Kurtz admirer. The strongest moment comes when Brando sits in the doorway among a group of local children and reads to Willard (at the time his prisoner) from *Time* magazine, exposing the mendacity of the administration in Washington. This scene was also newly added.

Apocalypse Now conveys less the "insanity of the war in Vietnam," which one has heard so much about, than the degree to which the violence endemic in American society was projected into Vietnam. There are scarcely any Vietnamese in the film. America largely supplies the insanity in Vietnam. It supplies Kilgore, his napalm, his Wagner and his surfboard. It supplies "Death from above" and "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" and "Terminate with extreme prejudice." There is madness in the behavior, in the very relationships of the Americans. The havoc arises organically from a psychotic state of society. When the chief insists that the sampan must be searched, a bureaucratic formality, Willard objects. It will delay his mission, but also he senses that it will not end well—as it does not. One has an uneasy feeling that every time a group of Americans forms, violence will erupt. And Kurtz is the crowning figure in this universal mayhem.

In inflicting itself on Vietnam, American capitalism at the same time projected its crisis and failure as a society on a screen in such a fashion that they became visible to the entire world. And the war not only embodied that crisis and failure, it deepened them. This is another truth that radiates from *Apocalypse Now* like a beam of light—no country, one realizes, could ever possibly be the same after an experience like this. "Peace" and "normalcy" may return, for the time being, but this is a society heading for disaster.

The weakness of the Kurtz sequence, largely an anti-climax, is bound up with the intellectual dichotomy at the heart of his film, which Coppola never resolved or even seriously addressed. At its most valuable, *Apocalypse Now*—in any of its versions—is a concrete and passionate condemnation of American conduct in Vietnam and, by extension, a devastating picture of the society capable of perpetrating such a monstrous series of crimes. At its murkiest and least coherent, the film is a trite meditation, worthy of a third-year English major, on the supposedly bifurcated human soul.

The latter notion is introduced early in the film by the deceptively soft-spoken general (G.D. Spradlin, a wonderful "character" actor) who presides over the meeting at which Willard receives his orders. He pontificates about the "conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil." The French patriarch's widowed daughter-in-law (Aurore Clément), who takes Willard to bed, tells him "There are two of you. One that loves and one that kills." The theme is returned to a number of times.

Some of this is inherited from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the novella that served loosely as an inspiration for John Milius's screenplay (Coppola, as noted, and Michael Herr also had a hand in the final script). In Conrad's work Kurtz is a Belgian ivory trader who journeys to the depths of the Congolese jungle and "reverts" to a state of savagery, succumbing to the basest temptations. In fact, one is encouraged to believe, he has discovered the beast that lies just beneath the civilized veneer. Marlow, the narrator, recognizes an aspect of himself in Kurtz and, at the same time, the possibility of controlling his own "heart of darkness."

A corollary perhaps of Social Darwinism, this type of argument, taken to its logical conclusion, functions as an apology for the abuses and cruelties of the existing social order. After all, the reasoning goes, brutality corresponds to the "natural" human state. Each man or woman is a killer or potential killer at heart.

Milius, a *Retributive Dantism* (1984) (and manly individualism (*Conan the Barbarian*, 1982) no doubt contributed his own confusion to the mix. As Willard examines Kurtz's record and writings en route to the jungle stronghold, we are led to believe that the Green Beret officers has certain insights into the nature of the US war effort. But of what sort? Initially at least, the filmmakers paint Kurtz as a "hard-line" military man, disgusted by the refusal of his superiors back in Saigon ("four-star clowns") to wage a total war. At moments the film seems to suggest that the US might have prevailed if only its forces had had more determined and ruthless leadership. This is the "we were stabbed in the back by the liberals" argument of the paranoid right wing. (Milius is currently a member of the board of directors of the National Rifle Association!) Brando in person seems to steer the character in another, although not all that clear-cut, direction.

Intellectual unclarity lies at the root of many of the film's problems. Coppola can be taken to task (and has been) for a number of sins. There is a good deal in *Apocalypse Now* that is pretentious or banal (including virtually the entire narration), and much that is unrealized. And, frankly, the drama that was made of the legendary difficulties involved in shooting the film (Martin Sheen's heart attack, the typhoon that stalled filming, various episodes of drug-taking, love affairs, Brando's supposed antics, a budget that climbed from \$13 to \$30 million as filming lasted 238 days instead of 150, etc.) was not merely tiresome, it seemed to function as a means of diverting attention from the essential muddiness of the filmmaker's conceptions.

There is, for example, the question of the film's "literary" and classical references. On the one hand, journeying by river is legitimately resonant of motifs in American literature (Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi* in particular). Indeed there is something almost comforting in the story's *structure*: the crew, a haven of relative stability, encountering and leaving behind a succession of mostly unhinged characters on its voyage upstream. On the other hand, however, the effort to fashion the film's narrative into some sort of archetypal warrior's quest (a "philosophic inquiry into the mythology of war," Coppola calls it today) is merely a distraction, in my view, or worse. There are echoes of *The Odyssey* (the three "Siren"-Playmates and so on), Norse mythology (the Valkyries) and the Arthurian legends ("Lance," as in Lancelot; "Mr. Clean," who dies a virgin like Sir Galahad), among others. Kurtz (himself a character out of a work of fiction) is shown to be reading J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), the comparative study of magic, folklore and religion that demonstrated parallel beliefs in primitive and Christian cultures. The simultaneous ritual slaughters of Kurtz and an ox, as well as the subsequent behavior of the "natives" toward Willard (he who kills a god becomes a god), presumably refer to certain of Frazer's anthropological findings.

The latter sort of abstract and empty "universalizing" (universals without content) would also tend to dissolve the elements of social and political critique if it were wholeheartedly pursued. After all, these two perspectives work at cross-purposes. If Willard's activity (and the activity of all involved) accords with the ineluctable in human destiny, a voyage that "every man must make," so to speak, then how can a distinct, identifiable group of officials in the US government and the ruling social stratum more generally be held responsible for their actions?

Fortunately, this element of the work is not wholeheartedly pursued. Other—more mundane and intellectually healthier—concerns are also in operation. (Although the inability to fully reconcile the two arguments, reflected in Coppola's failure to come up with a satisfactory ending, nearly wrecked the project.) In a director's statement concerning the new version of *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola observes that virtually every war film is an "anti-war" film and continues: "My film is more of an 'anti-lie' film, in that the fact that a culture can lie about what's really going on in warfare, that people are being brutalized, tortured, maimed and killed,

and somehow present this as moral is what horrifies me, and perpetuates the possibility of war.” This element, that US policy in Vietnam was based on a great lie, retains its force.

Coppola began to work on the film in 1975, the year of the South Vietnamese forces’ final defeat at the hands of the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese army (shooting took place in 1976). *Apocalypse Now* carries with it, however transformed and transmuted, something of the hatred then felt by wide layers of the US population for the war. Three million Vietnamese were dead. Tens of thousands of mostly working class American young men had died, millions in the US had been cruelly affected by the conflict. For many young people in particular, hostility to the bloody war in Southeast Asia, as well as the lies, hypocrisy and brutality of successive Democratic and Republican administrations, had become the starting point for a wholesale rejection of capitalist society. The general mood of opposition nourishing Coppola and his colleagues (cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, production designer Dean Tavoularis and the others) and their overall artistic honesty, propelled the work forward beyond the filmmakers’ own limited and often half-baked conceptions.

Apocalypse Now represented perhaps the high-water mark of 1970s’ radicalized, critical filmmaking in the US. By the time it reached movie theaters, to considerable success, other trends were at work. Against a background of growing political reaction, American cinema was about to enter a sharp decline from which it has not yet emerged.

It must be said that while Coppola deserves full credit for the strengths of *Apocalypse Now*, the lack of clear historical perspective reflected in its weaknesses did not permit him to weather the storm to come, the Reagan years and beyond. He did not turn out to be another Orson Welles, after all. His filmmaking deteriorated, for the most part, along with the rest (*One From the Heart*, *The Cotton Club*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Tucker*). *Apocalypse Now* stands as a rebuke to its own director based on his recent work, as well, of course, as it does to the vast majority of contemporary American filmmakers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)