

Hearts of Darkness: Making art, making history, making money, making 'Vietnam'.
Kim Worthy, *Cineaste*, Dec 92, Vol. 19, Issue 2/3

"Apocalypse Now is not a movie about Vietnam. My movie is Vietnam," says Francis Coppola addressing a Cannes audience through a translator, in the opening shots of *Hearts of Darkness*, Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper's documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now*. "We had too much money, too much equipment, and we went insane." Coppola's words produce a giddy response in the liberal and radical art film audience. The first moment of *Hearts of Darkness* recalls the Vietnam War, as well, with its hyperbolic rhetoric for the media, intertwining American and French. In fact, the reverberation of present with past and fiction with fact throughout *Hearts of Darkness* helps communicate a self-criticism verging on contrition which has everything to do with the audience's pleasure in viewing the film. But this pleasure comes at the cost of historical understanding.

Hearts of Darkness is a revisionist response to the Vietnam War that is the liberal answer to the conservative revisions, the 1980s Rambo and P.O.W.-rescue films: Francis goes back to Vietnam and loses, thereby making closure to the war available for a liberal audience. While there are surprising parallels between the making of *Apocalypse Now* and America's involvement in Vietnam--a guerrilla war was going on in the Philippines during filming, Coppola kept pouring money into the project--it is also easy to come away from *Hearts of Darkness* with the sense that Coppola himself, standing in for the entire body of people who had a hand in making *Apocalypse Now*, is a metaphor for an unbalanced and tragically doomed America. The documentary weaves a pattern of comparisons between Coppola and Kurtz, and, one might add, LBJ, primarily through the director's all tunnel-no-light frustrations (typhoons, Martin Sheen's heart attack, Marlon Brando's obtuseness) while making *Apocalypse Now*. The narrator of the documentary Francis Coppola's wife, Eleanor, repeatedly calls the making of *Apocalypse Now* a journey into Coppola's inner self. Coppola, like Kurtz, is regarded as a deity. Moreover, while Willard stalks Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola stalks himself, raising questions which he feels compelled to answer but cannot, finally announcing his desire to "shoot himself." He means suicide, but the cinematic connotation of the term, "to shoot," jointly criticizes both the U.S. and Coppola's film for exercising a demented self-absorption.

Of course, *Apocalypse Now* 'is' neither Vietnam nor the Vietnam War; the film's 'Coppola' represents only a Coppolistic America. But the convergences which *Hearts of Darkness* builds between *Apocalypse Now* and the war, between Coppola and Kurtz and the United States, are more than narrative conceits or psychological insights. The self-interrogation in *Hearts of Darkness* arising out of the making of *Apocalypse Now* is an appropriate model for the U.S. "experience of its experience." As in most Vietnam War feature films, the U.S. experience of Vietnam is in this documentary the central lesson of that war, and as Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe warn in their essay, "The Vietnam War and American Memory," in *The Vietnam War and American Culture* "As soon as we...talk about Vietnam--the culture, peoples, their history--as our war, then even the issue of political responsibility for that war [is] simplified and historically contained."

In *Hearts of Darkness*, the war is yet another identity crisis for Americans--a "journey into self"--a "transmutation," a "renaissance," a "rebirth," as Coppola says of his experience in making *Apocalypse Now*. Moreover, the information provided after the conclusion of *Hearts of Darkness*--that *Apocalypse Now* won three Golden Globes, two Academy Awards, and grossed \$150 million--affirms both Coppola's status as hero in the classical narrative tradition, and the economic practices and institutions underlying the Vietnam War. In the end, 'America' wins in this documentary just as surely as it does in any Rambo movie.

The power of historical containment in both *Hearts of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* is deceptively simple. While speaking for a radical audience by confronting, to a degree, the inconsistency of American policy and of American culture, both films rely upon conventional cinematic strategies to present their 'progressive material.' Compared to the Vietnam War films of, for example, Jean-Luc Godard (*Letter To Jane*, 1972) and Emile de Antonio (*In the Year of the Pig*, 1969), whose views on the war are expressed by unconventional stylistic techniques--anti-narrative structure, silence, a blank screen, and especially the inclusion of the North Vietnamese point of view--both Coppola's and Bahr and Hickenlooper's films seem to be products of an idea of history that is purposive and which centers the masculine hero within that world view. The white middle class male is axis of the representation; the unity of the white male and the American nuclear family, with, as its goal, the acquisition of money, is the determining value. Another important point of reference for both films, which locates the American identity crisis at the center of the war, is the emphasis on 'madness' as a result of 'Vietnam.'

Part of the problem is the use of Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel *Heart Of Darkness* as a loose basis for *Apocalypse Now* by Coppola and original screenwriter John Milius. Conrad wrote of the relationship between white men and nonwhites through Mr. Kurtz, who went into King Leopold of Belgium's Congo (where fifteen to twenty million African people were killed or starved to death in the course of the ivory rush) as "an emissary of pity, science and progress." Conrad's Kurtz felt he had to "breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated." The disconnection between the opening words of Kurtz's report--"By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded"--and the note on the last page--"Exterminate all the brutes!"--illustrates the progressive externalization of Kurtz's fear of "contamination," the personal fear of loss of self which colonialist whites saw in the "uncivilized," seemingly regressive lifestyle of the natives. A number of postcolonial writers view this fear as the source of the political need to split the world into white and native, self and other.

Conrad confronts and questions ideas no other conservatives questioned. But Conrad in his honesty revealed more than he intended about the Europe that formed him. The hero-centered narrative form 'contaminates' Conrad's own representation of Africans with the very one-sided perception of reality which he condemns. The agency which Conrad created for Kurtz's madness was a nonwhite feminine other, the "savage and superb" woman, the very soul of darkness, of wilderness, of "the whole sorrowful land."

What drove 'us' insane in Vietnam, as represented in *Apocalypse Now*? (the 'we' in the opening shots of *Hearts of Darkness*--Coppola, his crew and cast, his co-writer John Milius, his wife Eleanor- but also the U.S. and the U.S. audiences of *Apocalypse Now* and *Hearts of Darkness*). What madness does the U.S. audience identify with in terms of the war when, in *Hearts of Darkness*, Coppola says, "We went insane?" And why is it funny?

The 'dementia' interpretation of the Vietnam War promoted in some literature about the war, such as the 1978 bestseller, *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr (technical advisor to *Apocalypse Now*), and Gustav Hasford's 1979 *The Short-Timers* (upon which Stanley Kubrick's 1987 *Full Metal Jacket* was based), is, in James Wilson's view, an evasion which "further obscure[s] an event already obscure in the minds of most Americans." Wilson agrees that the war was hard to make sense of but the problem, says Wilson, is "not that [these books] call the war insane but that they let it go at that." They accept a mystification of the war which perpetuates the idea that it was part of the human condition.

Much political and historical analysis has been written about the war's 'insanity.' Specific details of *Apocalypse Now*'s representation of U.S. 'insanity' in the war range from, on one level, Captain Willard's reflection that "charging a guy with murder out here was like handing out tickets at the Indy 500," and the opportunity which the war afforded bored such as Lance and Colonel Kilgore to engage in water sports, to, on another level, the film's vague references to the war's origins. Certainly the quotidian culture shock, and more importantly, the shock of immersion in death, must be considered. But because *Apocalypse Now* was modeled on Conrad's story and expresses in its narrative structure the novel's white European fear of self-loss, it and *Hearts of Darkness* also imply that being white men in the nonwhite jungle, both literal and figurative, drove cast and crew "insane," as Coppola himself expresses it.

The story Kurtz tells Willard in *Apocalypse Now* about the Special Forces going into a village, inoculating the children for polio and going away, and the communists coming into the village and cutting off all the children's inoculated arms, is the main evidence for this implication in that film. This is when Kurtz begins to go mad; Kurtz "wept like some grandmother" when, called back by a villager, he saw the pile of little arms, a sophisticated version of the "escalating horrors" trope in anticommunist movies from John Wayne's 1968 *The Green Berets* to Lawrence D. Foldes's 1986 *Nightforce*. The immanent metaphorical meaning of representations of the escalating horrors of torture, decapitation, and the like, seems to be the fear of castration. Considered in this way, the trope implies the hero's unconscious concession of power to the other to validate his identity. The agent for this terrifying vertigo of self is, in Conrad, a "savage and superb" African woman; in *Apocalypse Now*, the iron-willed Vietnamese cadre filled with love. Both utterly alien personae combine in one body the opposing passions of the stereotypically masculine and the stereotypically feminine, a superhuman other but also one that is subhuman.

Kurtz's tale is also *Apocalypse Now*'s conclusive statement of political meaning. Both Conrad's and Coppola's Kurtz, as he experienced his epiphany of horror, was an officer--a sane, successful, brilliant leader. All America contributed to the making of Colonel Kurtz, just as all Europe produced Mr. Kurtz. Both Kurtzes are idealized in their function as eyewitnesses to the atrocities. What is reflected is the threat of loss of self, loss of centrality,

and the displacement of Western culture from the perceived center of history by those whom it has enslaved and oppressed.

What was 'insane' in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was a paradox. On the one hand, the very structure of Western narratives, including classical Hollywood moviemaking, requires a successful, white romantic hero at its center, on the other hand, that same narrative tradition despises the superior technology, sense of authority, mission, and brute force that is America's heritage. It was insane to despise (again necessarily as a narrative convention) the 'enemy's' brutishness, abstract ideology, and authoritarianism while at the same time idealizing the closeness to nature ("Charlie's idea of R&R was a little rat meat and some cold rice"), intuitive philosophy, pragmatism, and prodigiousness of the Vietnamese communists. Coppola, and the U.S. as an audience of the war, had constructed a noble savage Vietnamese, in the Conradian tradition, and in the tradition of American films from Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) to Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990).

As a product of American culture, Coppola's 1979 film should reproduce a mostly-white-U.S.-self/others hierarchical opposition, just as it should reproduce a male/male hierarchical opposition. And it does. But Coppola also plainly disdains these contradictions in a declared democratic society. His ironic stance toward American escapism in *Apocalypse Now's* water-skiing and surfing scenes, and the Playboy Bunnies scene, is dryly humorous about, and critical of, the irresistible sex appeal of technological power (phallic missiles are a prominent part of the set). Likewise, the connection between the mythical American West and U.S. involvement in the war (the women wear frontier costumes) signal the filmmaker's, and America's, self-examination. In the latter case, however, the filmmakers are unable to avoid putting in what sells: close-ups fragmenting the dancers' bodies, and, yes, the male gaze.

The helicopter attack scene reveals *Apocalypse Now's* political location in greater depth. At sunrise, just before the men set out, Kilgore asks a young soldier, "How you feelin', Jimmy?" "Like a mean motherfucker, sir!" the boy cries. The Hueys assume attack position, arrive at "Charlie's point," and Colonel Kilgore calls for "the music" (Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries") to begin. Here, however, the film's position splits, literally and figuratively. Just as the freight train momentum of the helicopters' advance becomes almost irresistibly loud and aggressive, the film cuts suddenly to a virtually silent Vietnamese village shot at ground level and centering upon the peaceful elementary school courtyard that is about to become the target of those "mean motherfuckers."

The action scene that follows is one of the most exciting ever made, in its sex appeal of God's country and American knowhow along with its pace, its violence, its spectacular explosions, snappy dialog, and intense volume. (In *Hearts of Darkness*, Coppola tells photographer Vittorio Storaro, correctly, that it is "part of the major American fantasy"). But the frenzy of winning and the concurrent team compassion for horribly wounded GIs, are repeatedly undercut by shots taken from the Vietnamese point of view, as well as by Kilgore's bigotry ("Fuckin' savages!"). The ambiguity of the dual point of view in the helicopter scene manifests a political and philosophical collapse which characterizes the film as a whole. The craziness of making *Apocalypse Now* very likely arose in part from the fact that its makers were in the middle of Philippine guerrillas and Marcos's U.S.-backed regime, of an actual war and a war movie--one result of which was the departure, in midshot, of Coppola's rented helicopters and pilots, on their own mission to fight communist rebels.

As it attempts to confront the 'insanity' of the war through Kurtz's madness, that of the filmmakers, and the madness of U.S. culture, *Hearts of Darkness* exposes the contradictions between the inherent hierarchy and inequality within the cultural forces of the United States and official democratic principles, which led to the perception that it could waste what it viewed as insignificant little people and preserve its own image in the world. Along with that is the growing realization, since the Tet Offensive of 1968, that the U.S. was somehow way off the mark.

Having turned metacinematic, *Hearts of Darkness* elaborates on the blurring of limits between lived experience and representation. The tension in *Hearts of Darkness* between the humor of loss of control and the horror of it, in fact, reveals the film's preoccupation with the politics of a collision between imagination and existential reality. The expressionistic woodcuts by Hans Alexander Mueller from the 1942 *A Conrad Argosy*, filling the frame with a gaunt Kurtz dying by candlelight; the RKO studio art sketches for the movie version of the novel which Orson Welles planned in 1939 but failed to make; the voice-over excerpts from young Welles's Mercury Theatre radio broadcast of Conrad's story--all give this segment of *Hearts of Darkness* a sense of Kurtzian doom.

This mood spills over into a segment on the making of a French colonialist rubber plantation scene, which Coppola originally shot for *Apocalypse Now* but furiously rejects, on camera, as deficient. An interview with Sam Bottoms (who plays Lance) evokes My Lai when he describes the sampan scene in *Apocalypse Now*, in which trigger-happy Americans slaughter a group of Vietnamese men and women on a sampan. A dip from this scene is followed by black and white news photos of Philippine guerrillas and of a U.S. soldier, presumably in Vietnam, crying. The language of decoupage and of raw footage in this series of historical struggles and ruin, join together universal imperialism and the universal activity of creating beautiful things. The language of a developing psychological individuation--the "inner journey," the "rebirth" both Francis and Eleanor Coppola speak of; Bottoms admitting that he took LSD while filming; and Frederic Forrest (who plays Chef) talking about how terrified he was of a tiger--meanwhile fills the segment with reflective personal meaning. The belief in white middle class masculine American culture as the highest achievement of civilization comes face-to-face with the repugnant truth of its exclusionary violence.

Most importantly in this regard, Martin Sheen's life-threatening breakdown leads to a visual meditation on mortality. It is as though the theory and practice of Western individualism, coming face-to-face with a universal human value through a wisdom identified with the East and with the feminine (represented by the jungle) has produced death--reflected ironically, by the fact that Martin Sheen suffered a severe heart attack during the making of the film. As artifice and reality gradually merged for the two Kurtzes--one in the Congo and one in Vietnam--so it does in *Hearts of Darkness*. The ceaselessly repeated cultural coordinates, whereby masculine/feminine and self/other have specific segregated roles, could not be sustained in the Congo, or in Vietnam. For the Americans in Vietnam, as for the colonialists in Africa, madness is the result of the disintegration of abstract boundaries held to be absolute.

This disintegration, this madness, has a funny side to it in *Hearts of Darkness*. At a point in the making of *Apocalypse Now*, when Coppola's conviction about the film has begun to unravel, he begins making March Hare statements such as (to Dennis Hopper), "It's not fair to forget your lines if you never knew 'em." *Apocalypse Now* staffers hold umbrellas to protect from the sun extras who, buried up to their necks all day in mud, perform as Kurtz's army's severed heads. This scene brings to mind Comte de Lautreamont's phrase, invented at the time of the discovery of evolution, "The umbrella on the operating table"--an image which defies logic to express the collapse of what one had supposed to be fundamental.

The montage, from Welles's voice-over to Sheen's heart attack, links Conrad's dread intimations of the truth about Europe, Sheen's near death, Coppola's desperation--and America's. "Francis," as Eleanor Coppola calls her husband, is at the "threshold" of artistic collapse. His "greatest horror" is to make a pretentious movie; his movie is pretentious. His salvation is, in his words, to say, "Fuck it," to let go. His letting go--his release of the film despite its failure and his acknowledgement of its failure--was for Francis to yield to, and to create, the myth of "transmutation", "life and death." In other words, allowing the movie to be "shitty, embarrassing and pompous"--an "idiodysey"--brought it new life, "renaissance, rebirth." "When you stop looking for something you see it right in front of you," says Eleanor, and although it is not directly stated in *Hearts of Darkness*, what Francis "stopped looking for" and instantly comprehended was the admission of defeat. *Apocalypse Now* mystifies rather than confronts the opposing passions, acculturated within the Western sensibility, toward white heroes and nonwhite enemies. Nonetheless, the prospect of recognition and the prospect of a reborn, nonexclusionary 'multicultural' culture--which such a recognition would make possible--has troubled the U.S., and its war films, for twenty years.

But in *Hearts of Darkness*, intimations of a recognition of elements previously hardly visible in U.S. culture leak through the cracks: women (Eleanor Coppola is the film's narrator, its Marlow), children (the Coppolas' are seen, if not heard, in the film's beginning, middle, and ending), insurrection (the Philippine guerrillas), labor (the revelation of how much money is paid is a perceptible pattern, as in Godard's 1972 *Tout Va Bien*), and the environment (the history of the scenes in *Apocalypse Now* involving the water buffalo's destruction, and the tiger's performance, are at least deemed worthy of attention). Taken together in *Hearts of Darkness*, these usually peripheral elements recover a considerable bit of territory from the hegemonic darkness of white male capitalist culture.