

APOCALYPSE NOW [1997]

by

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The Vietnam War was, without a doubt, the most divisive national issue of the sixties, yet during that whole decade it was never referred to directly on the screen. It was there only by implication, much in the fashion that Star Trek treated the war and its attendant legal, moral, social and theological issues.

It was not until the late 70s that the war came to the screen. A number of films approached the subject in a variety of ways. The more unusual approach, typified by *The Green Berets* [1968], was to jingoistically and unquestioningly support the government position. This incredibly clichéd salute to the Special Forces, its unfunny comic relief and jarringly absurd situations are enough to offend even those on the political right. All this is capped off with the now-famous concluding scene in which the sun sets in the East.

Most Hollywood films to deal with the Vietnam War, good or bad, were a little more ambitious. They tried, often from a comfortable perspective of hindsight, to settle accounts, to resolve issues left hanging, and to put a confusing experience into some kind of perspective and context. However, almost all the Hollywood Vietnam films agree on one thing – the United States involvement in Vietnam was fraught with dread.

Historically, the Vietnam War was a quagmire of political and moral issues. To understand our involvement, we need not only to inspect the Cold War and how the major powers got proxies to kill each other for them (the Soviets were much better at it than we were), but also how the French, faced with an untenable occupation of what was then known as Indochina,

dropped the whole thing in the American lap. However, Hollywood not only did not deal with these issues, it did not even mention them.

Rather, Hollywood treated the Vietnam War as a deep crisis of the American spirit. The title *Apocalypse Now* does not exaggerate the depth of the hysteria and dread that the war and its images continued to inspire well into the 1970s:

- *Coming Home* [1978] dealt with the physical and psychological crippling effect the war had on the both the soldiers and those who loved them here at home.
- *The Deer Hunter* [1978] showed the “decent” of normal Americans to the Oriental depravity (addicting like the narcotics which were blamed on them) of Russian Roulette.
- *Tracks* [1975] used as its central motif a coffin which should have contained the remains of an American soldier which turns out to be empty, an obvious metaphor for the spiritual emptiness of the returning soldiers.
- *Who’ll Stop the Rain?* [1978] shows how degraded Vietnam values invade the US in the form of smuggled heroin.
- *Apocalypse Now* [1979] borrowed the decline-of-civilization motif from Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. And, like the inconclusiveness that worried Conrad’s narrator, *Apocalypse Now* suffers from an ethical indecision. In fact, Coppola filmed three different endings. Here we follow the inner life of villains – with no heroes in sight.

Hanging over these films like a gray cloud is a profound sense of guilt. Only *Coming Home* questions the morality of the war. Yet even here, a woman numbly remarks that her boyfriend has promised to send her a human ear as a present. In *The Deer Hunter*, a legless returning soldier cannot confront society. In *Apocalypse Now*, a young girl's attempt to save her puppy causes the massacre of her whole innocent family.

Vietnam was the first television war. It was seen nightly in the news. Hollywood had an extremely hard time topping these images for their immediacy and poignancy. This may be the reason the best Hollywood films about the Vietnam War were done as allegories, like *M*A*S*H* [1972], *Little Big Man* [1970], and *Patton* [1970]. But in these films, and many other allegorical representations of the Vietnam War, everything is perverted, from those commanding the troops to the sleazy entertainment the American soldiers “enjoy” – like talentless bodies gyrating mindlessly.

Apocalypse Now is an archetypal “river journey.” These have been with us as long as human history has included boats. We must note that river journeys are different than sea journeys, the *Odyssey* being the paradigm for the ocean journey. The Sea Journeys are cyclical, that is, the hero goes on a series of adventures, arrives at the apex location where his (or her) transformation takes place, and then the hero (male or female) returns – often enduring more adventures – to bring back to his or her home world what he or she has learned on the adventure. River Journeys, by contrast to the cyclical nature of the Sea Journey, are linear. Willard, like Moses, Huckleberry Finn, or Joseph Conrad's Marlow, goes up the river. (There are

two sub-types of river journeys that define their psychological mind-set: up the river or down the river.)

Apocalypse Now's Willard has a series of surrealistic and symbolic encounters on his journey. High on the war and suffering from battle fatigue, he begins by thinking the military sane and Colonel Kurtz, who he has been assigned to "terminate with extreme prejudice," insane. Each encounter helps him define the sanity or insanity of some aspect of the world around him; each helps detail the confusion, the violence, the fear, and the nightmarish madness of the Vietnam War.

The film begins, as the lyrics on the sound track as sung by Jim Morrison of the Doors clearly state, at the end. The explosions we see are the strike that Willard called in on Kurtz' Cambodian lair at the end of the film. The rest of the film is thus a flash-back narrated by Willard. This structure somewhat weakens the tension in a film for we know in advance that the hero will survive and is never really threatened. Psychologically, we distance ourselves from Willard; this may be what Coppola wants, for then we concentrate on what is going on around him rather than on Willard himself.

After an alcoholic bout in a shabby Saigon hotel room, Willard is spiffed up for a totally surreal luncheon encounter. Over lunch, he denies all that he has done – assassinating the other side's intelligence officers – in order to confirm it. Over lunch, the madness of war and the resulting madness in men is discussed. Finally, over lunch, the murder of Walter Kurtz is planned and hypocritically justified. This is the kind of "nutrition" on which the American effort was feeding itself.

Willard's first encounter on the journey is with lunatic and flamboyant Major Kilgore whose very name, a combination of Kill and Gore, defines him as an insensitive brute. His emotional immunity to what is going on around him has conferred him with a psychic and apparently physical immunity of the effects of war. He hawkishly sees Vietnam and the Vietnamese as little more than barbarians and feels that he must impose his own brand of civilization on the land about him – barbecues, beer, surfing, and macho posturing. Kilgore, a champion of Western Civilization, really does not understand it himself: he uses Wagnerian opera to “scare the gooks . . . and my boys love it.”

Each man on Willard's boat reveals a different approach to facing the horrors of war, some thereby survive, others don't. Any attempt to face the war rationally leads to death. This is demonstrated by the destruction of the Chief and Chef. Mr. Clean dies because of his cowardice and nervousness – his emotional instability instigates the massacre of Vietnamese civilians. Only Lance survives – he refuses to intellectualize the war, with the help of LSD, he floats innocent and detached. He becomes a spectator rather than a participant. A surfer, Lance treats the war as he does the water, he skims over it making every effort not to get immersed. He becomes progressively more primitive, first wearing black and green makeup that makes him look like a mask from an anthropology museum. Later he retreats further, wearing a loincloth and carrying a spear.

Willard will survive because of his fear. He is afraid of the war, he is afraid of the jungle, afraid of the enemy, and, most of all, afraid of himself.

The next encounter in their one-way journey downward (and up river) into hell is at the Hau Phat supply station where a supply sergeant is eager to sell illegal drugs, liquor, and cheap electronics – in fact, everything but what will help the war effort. Willard must pull rank to simply get gasoline for his boat. Exploitive capitalism has not only gotten us into this hellish war but is even extending it.

At the same supply station, a Playboy Bunny Road Show arrives to entertain the troops. America seems to be willing to demonstrate its exploitation of women in the most bizarre of locations. In addition, it is obvious that, like the women, the soldiers are being exploited. The Bunnies dance with toy six-shooters in a mockery of the pain, violence, and death that the soldiers face every day. Thus, the soldiers' very real experiences are degraded to a charade.

The next encounter is with a boat full of Vietnamese civilians. The inept and nervous crew take a fusillade of bullets to do what Willard does more efficiently with a single shot – kill heartlessly.

At the Do Long bridge, soldiers jump into the water, suitcases in hand, begging to be taken home. They have been tasked with a Sisyphean burden – they build the bridge during the day so it can be blown up at night. This is automaton hell for they do it because they do it . . . there is no “commanding” officer. They are in a moral darkness. This is demonstrated at the physical level when one man is seen to kill by firing a grenade launcher into the dark.

In response to this demonstration of Western civilization, nature itself seems to respond. The boat suffers an arrow attack – a response from the world primitive, from the jungle itself.

Met by Montagnard in dug-out canoes – again symbolizing the how the “locals” embrace primitive to their advantage while the “civilized” Westerners are left in the lurch. These are men covered in white ash and wearing loincloths but still carrying assault rifles. Is this the penetration of Western values into those of Viet Nam or the Vietnamese adopting Western ideas out of desperation to simply protect themselves? Jungle outpost Willard visits is in a decaying, Angkor Wat-type temple. The mutilated corpses and decapitated heads for decoration remind us of the Hindu god Kali (who destroys the evil in order to protect the innocent). Who are the enemies and who are the dissenters?

The next step on Willard’s journey is to meet a photo-journalist – the one who is tasked with documenting the war and bringing its imagery to the outside world. He seems ill-suited to the task: crazy, hyperactive, fast-talking. He says he’s a free-lance photographer, that is, unattached, even to reality. In terms of the text of the film, he is so unattached to reality that Kurtz has become a personal god.

Once Willard meets Kurtz, he reads from T. S. Elliot's poem *The Hollow Man*. A nice summary of the film's point of view:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

We now come to the real subtext of the film – the battle between the values of the Old Testament vengeful, angry god and the New Testament forgiving god. Consider: during his journey Willard keeps questions the two sets of values. Once he kills Kurtz, all becomes clear: Willard takes Kurtz' journals, in which he has written down the laws he has lived by and, in turn, wants his “son” to live by. We now realize that most of Kurtz' statements to Willard were made by fire light. And Coppola has arranged the lighting so that Kurtz himself seems to be fire – thus a talking fire. Willard then exits the temple at the top of the mountain on which Kurtz has lived and walks among the natives. They are in the process of slaughtering a water buffalo, a good stand-in for a biblical calf. They part from him like the Red Sea parted for Moses. All this points to an Old Testament God – one of blood, death, and revenge.

However, to finalize this idea we must hark back to the beginning of the film with the Doors singing “The End.” This is indeed the end of the film, the jungle exploding from the air strike called in by Willard against the natives (those worshipping the golden calf instead of obeying the laws written in the books and following the voice coming from the fire).

Ultimately, however, the film is more visually successful than philosophically. Certainly, war is pointless and horribly inhuman. Here *Apocalypse Now* scores points with its devastating accuracy. Yet we lack any human being through which we can enter the story. There is nothing here a normal viewer can relate to in terms of love, humor (outside the madness), understand, reason, or humanity. We get only the look of war, no *feeling* of the war, no idea why thousands of Americans died in Vietnam, or what the war was all about.