

Francis Ford Coppola's *APOCALYPSE NOW* (1979)

### War as Schizophrenia

"...the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth ...seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." Joseph Conrad – *Heart of Darkness*

*Apocalypse Now* is not a friendly movie; one wouldn't want to watch it too often. As a matter of fact, some movie goers may not want to watch it at all. Its inner violence is almost unbearable. With unmerciful grandeur, Coppola throws a schizoid portrait of the human race at us. After watching it, the public has only two choices: to arrogantly hate it while implicitly being offended because it is so inconveniently true; or to humbly accept it, admire the genius behind the camera, and seriously question our species' right to exist. Both choices lead to a zone of acute discomfort. Aside from being difficult to watch, *Apocalypse Now* has a complex plot which is not easy to follow. However, despite all of the above - and regardless of where one places him/herself - an honest viewer will immediately identify *Apocalypse Now* as a masterpiece.

The intrigue, albeit convolutedly told, is rather simple: U.S. Army Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) is sent to carry out a mission that, officially, 'does not exist - nor will it ever exist'; that is, to seek out a mysterious Colonel, Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando), whose army has crossed the border into Cambodia and is conducting hit-and-run missions against the Viet Cong and NVA. The army believes Kurtz has gone completely insane and Willard's job is to eliminate him. Willard will discover later that his target is one of the most decorated officers in the U.S. Army. Coppola turns Willard's mission and voyage on the river into a haunting philosophical journey, deep into the hidden and somber vaults of the human soul and mind.

The film is based on Joseph Conrad's acclaimed novel *Heart of Darkness*, a work about the alienating fascination of power and violence. It is also a novel about slavery, de-humanization, and Western arrogance in a God-forsaken place – the jungles of Africa. Coppola brilliantly changes the African settings of the novel (Congo) to Asia (Vietnam). The American director could rightfully see the potential of Conrad's novel revitalized in Vietnam – a political obsession of the 1960s and 1970s. He also replaces the ivory trade Company doing business in Congo with another kind of corporation – the American Army 'doing business' in Vietnam. Consequently, this entails the change of profession for the main characters – from traders, they are turned into soldiers. The dramatic changes stop here however. Truthful to the novel almost *ad-literam*, Coppola even keeps the names of the main characters: Marlow (Martin Sheen) and Kurtz (Marlon Brando).

*Apocalypse Now* is one of the very few movies through which the original text gains depth. By placing the action in Vietnam, Coppola expands the meaning of the novel, making it not only contemporary but also universal – it doesn't matter what kind of war one wages, death has the same pestilent smell everywhere and inevitably degrades the human condition forever.

The movie was filmed in the Philippines at the time of Ferdinand Marcos' autocratic rule and during the growing tensions which would explode into a civil war years later. Adding to this inherent pressure, the production was also plagued by other problems. Here is the account given in June 1979 by Jim Watters, an executive of Universal Studios, in *Life Magazine*:

"... corruption, typhoons, illness, near death (Sheen suffered a heart attack in an isolated cabin) and script problems stalked Coppola and his colleagues. In many ways the story began to reflect [Coppola's] own journey into self-doubt and fear. Adding to the pressure, his marriage was in trouble and he ultimately had to put his Godfather-spawned fortune on the line to keep the picture going. As with the *Godfather* epics, Coppola will tamper with this one until release time in August. His dedication, anguish and attention to every detail will help make *Apocalypse Now* the most expensive movie to date [1979]. » (*The Private Apocalypse of Francis Coppola*).

Eventually, Coppola's "journey into self-doubt and fear" turned into an astounding avant-garde film. It masterfully combined the world of Tarkovsky with that of Fellini in a hypnotic and surrealistic voyage of devastation. On one hand, the scenes from Kurtz's camp seem cut from the Trakovskyan canvass of *The Stalker* with their unreal white-painted guards, chopped bodies in the background, and ancient South-Asian temple buried in vegetation. In fact, the feeling of a godforsaken 'Zone' in which no natural, divine, or human laws apply anymore persists throughout the rest of the movie: debris, fog, malignant yellow skies, and people walking around – some with purpose, some without - all thrown on the screen with savant randomness. On the other hand, the uncanny Night Show for the troops: coming out of nowhere on an unreal stage; surrounded by an open-air amphitheater; bursting with light, hysteric joy and half-naked women dancing lasciviously amongst barbed wire, tanks and fire-launchers. The Show is also witnessed by the stupefied eyes of some Vietnamese locals and then it suddenly vanishes into the night's fog. Fellini has never been so close in spirit (*E la nave va, La dolce vita*) in an American production. The same Fellinian touch surfaces again when a military radio station broadcasts the famous Rolling Stones' hit "Satisfaction" while the boat sways its way through the muddy waters of the river, passing groups of Vietnamese laborers and pulling one of the members of the commando on an *ad-hoc* surfing board under the stunned eyes of Willard. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" keeps unfolding while Willard returns to the browsing of Kurtz's file – a very unsettling testimonial that adds ominous tones to the whole atmosphere.

As all masterpieces, *Apocalypse Now* is best remembered by two great scenes that had such an impact on the modern cinema that they became idiomatic. First, the enormous explosions that set ablaze the Vietnamese fields. Second, the famous helicopters attack with enormous speakers almost hanging out from their cockpits and pouring Wagnerian music (“The Ride of the Valkyries”) on the Vietnamese army. The Valkyries – choosers of the slain, half-goddesses who decide who will die in battle and who will live - and the barking of machine-guns – their tools, their *true* voice. All recognizable strokes of a genius.

Clenching on his small floating universe like a spectator in a moving armchair (the boat), Marlow continues to witness degradation and destruction on a colossal screen – life itself. The panoramic view of the true magnitude of the conflagration, sometimes from the vantage point of an eerie helicopter flight, makes Marlow doubt everything, including the reality of the outside world and his own self. Reality settles in with insidious brutality – the universe is ablaze, and the universe is the burning Vietnam. In this context, the words of Hubert de Marais (“You are fighting for the biggest nothing in history!”) fall like an axe on a scaffold. Willard himself adds to the absurdity of it all: “This war was fought by a couple of four-star clowns... Charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets.” It is only later on, when Willard fully understands the truth of General Corman’s words (G.D. Spradlin), spoken while he was outlying the mission for his young subordinate: [“ In a place like this ” ] “Every man has his breaking point... Walter Kurtz has reached his...” This line became so well-known that it was repeatedly used since 1979, most famously in Frank Darabont’s *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994).

The film combines long shots and spectacular war sequences in a unique way, thus presenting the leading actors with the challenge of mixing minimalist pieces of acting with larger than life or epic ones. One brilliant example of the first is the dialogues between Willard and Kurtz during which both Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen masterfully blend harrowing pauses and tremendously expressive facial micro-expressions. They seem to have wished to emulate Joseph Conrad’s lines: “It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence... There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases ...It was very simple... it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying...” It is during those discussions – almost whispered in semi-obscurity by quasi- invisible lips – where the full truth about war and de-humanization emerges. And the truth is more horrible than anything the viewer could think of. For it is not about the killings, not even about torture or physical degradation. It is about shock, fear, dismay and the anxiety of not being in control. It is about how the human psyche frantically looks for a way out of

this nightmarish reality, in order to reach the necessary balance for survival. Kurtz is the one who explains it all:

Horror has a face... and ***you must make a friend of horror***. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared. You have to have men who are moral... and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling... without passion... without judgment... without judgment! Because ***it's judgment that defeats us***.

Thus, according to Kurtz, by forcibly de-humanizing oneself, a witness of unimaginable tragedies may survive. In order to avoid becoming a victim, one must turn into a perpetrator.

\*\*\*

In a documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now* Francis Ford Coppola asserted that his film "is not about Vietnam, it *is* Vietnam" (*Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*). After 33 years from the original release, one may even go further and argue that this movie is not about humanity at war, it *is* humanity at its worst. Perhaps this is why this production was met with prolonged standing ovations at its first screening during the Cannes Film Festival where it won the *Palme d'Or*. Even that savvy, sophisticated, and sometimes cynical audience was swiped up to its feet by the sheer force of this movie. *Apocalypse Now* bluntly throws in our faces the truth about what we may become.

"Exterminate all the brutes!" writes Kurtz in his journal from Conrad's novel. From Coppola's perspective, it may be the most somber appeal ever written. For if "every [human being] has a breaking point" than the ultimate solution to violence and war would be only self-annihilation.

In spite of being such a complex work of art, *Apocalypse Now* doesn't give us the ultimate answer. After leaving Kurtz's camp, we have no way of knowing if Willard's boat will float back to whence it came or will just lose itself in the jungle's meanders. We have no way to know if Willard will return to 'civilization' trying to cope with the trauma or he will continue to carry the flag of Kurtz's horrendous philosophy, secluded somewhere else in the tropical labyrinth.

There is no ultimate possible answer to all that madness. The only thing that remains behind Willard's boat is Kurtz's last whisper:

"The horror! The horror!"

It is a whisper that will follow the viewer long after the lights will be turned back on. The horror of what humanity has done... the horror of what we all may become, any time...

No, *Apocalypse Now* is not a friendly movie; it is simply a masterpiece.

**Dr. Phil M. Ovie**