

# Apocalypse Now

by Frank McGinn

In the case of Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" the facts are now well known to the viewing public. Like the fact that the Pirates took the World Series this year, it is a socially accepted fact that "Apocalypse Now" is an important film event, a major director's ambitious but uneven attempt to characterize the American experience in Vietnam. Words like spectacular, messy, deep, disturbing and derailed come to mind.

These are good words and, now that the movie is finally playing in Halifax, we can see that society has not been deceived. "Apocalypse Now" is truly a magnificent failure, one would even say a Pyrrhic defeat. (meaning that it goes down with such glory in a struggle between its literary and cinematic elements that great credit is reflected.)

The literary element in the film, in case you missed the 333 reviews preceding this one, comes from the Joseph Conrad influence. Although no credit is shown in the titles, it is generally accepted that the story is an adaptation of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness". The framework of the

plot is similar, although the Vietnam slant is new, and the film invokes such Conradian themes as the nature of duty and honour, and the study of fear, madness and death. The cinematic element is Coppola's sweeping visual mastery of the wide screen. He is as great an artist in this medium as Conrad is in his. Here is what it looks like when the two come together.

In the beginning, at the outset, the elements of literature (lit.) and the cinema (the sin.) are functioning in dialectic harmony. A man is having a nightmare. It is realized with majestic menace and then, while we watch, the action of the dream merges into the surroundings of the dreamer. The mood has been set and, as the dreamer awakens, the funeral tones of Sheen's voice pick-up and maintain the pace.

The film plays primarily like a nightmare. The atmosphere throughout is unrelievedly sombre and oppressive. Ominous silences broken only by crazed outbursts or violence or both. Insanity. Murder. It's understandable.)

Moving right along, a narrative situation is set up which lends

suspense and direction to the film. It is a very simple and basic one, structurally, for the movies. Conrad or not, it's a movie about a man on a mission. A warrior story. Again, lit. and the sin. work together. There is a double excitement in realizing that we are about to be stimulated on both cerebral and sensuous levels. Here is a movie with the sustained, thematic depth to organize lots of action and adventure shots—let's face it.

And it takes off well. "Apocalypse Now" is a film with a good body and there are some tremendous sequences on the journey upriver. The helicopter attack to the strains of Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" stands supreme. This is such an exciting visual spectacle, music and thunder, that we are swept along in a tide of savage joy such as a genuine ride of the valkyries would inspire. But, of course, in its real life context it is an act of criminal insanity. And the thematic concerns find other moments of great visual expression. The incongruity of the American's being there at all is nicely caught in a shot of the gunboat chugging up the steamy, jungle river, the young soldiers on deck

writhing to the Stones. And there are shattering combat scenes, American hardware burning up the jungle, American soldiers shell-shocked and firing crazily into the jungle.

The enterprise begins to nosedive when the gunboat enters the Cambodian sector of the river, close to Brando. The character of Col. Kurtz, the model soldier who takes the war into his own hands, has been promulgated throughout by the narrative presence. Sheen's commentary, slow, self-conscious and remorselessly intellectual, absorbs the experience of Vietnam and tries to fathom an answer, or at least reasonable question. More and more, he comes to believe that the solution lies at the end of the river, in the person of Kurtz/Brando.

Thus both Coppola and, one bets, Brando, attach considerable thematic importance to this character. He will tie the movie together for us. As it happens though, he sinks it instead. The great director and the great actor becomes so involved in expressing the metaphysical weight of this guru that they lose all sense of proportion, and there is a complete split between lit. and the sin. Lit. takes over the screen, to the embarrassment of one and all. Kurtz/Brando is invested with great trappings of profundity. He intones hollow nothings, pausing often to show how serious it is meant to be. He reads T.S. Elliot aloud. We are even shown that he keeps a copy of James Frazier's "The Golden Bough" by his bedside, perhaps indicating a mythological referent, if only we knew where to look. It is poorly conceived and ludicrously acted.

The only effective lit. device at this point is the introduction of Dennis Hopper, a photo journalist turned disciple of the man-god. His sincerity and madness, expressed in an incoherent stream of psycho-babble, provide an effective contrast to Brando's empty posturing. Unfortunately, he has not been invested with the thematic clout that Brando allegedly wields, and his character remains incidental. The movie rambles, nothing happens and the sin. expends itself on shots of mutilated bodies, and the play of light on Brando's dome.

Finally the movie winds down, a ritual killing (one last terrific image, Sheen the assassin rising from the mud) and everybody goes home. Too soon, though, there is an impressive light show of flame and fire over the credits, it reminds one of the fact that this has been an intended apocalypse. Check The Concise Oxford to find—Apocalypse: revelation; grand or violent event. "Apocalypse Now" has high ambitions. The fact that it falls somewhat short of realizing them does not prevent it from still being the largest movie around.

## Apocalypse Now: Another View:

A warning to all cinema buffs: Francis Ford Coppola's latest film opus is not a film; it's an opera. The great director's use of Wagnerian music in one scene where American helicopters swoop, Valkyrie-like, down upon a Vietnamese village, is no mere whim. It sets the tone for the film. Like Wagner's overblown and overpraised *Nibelungen* cycle, **Apocalypse Now** is dramatic compellingly full of the broad gesture and sweeping vista. Coppola has laboured long on his film, cutting and snipping at it to get it right. He even entered it in the Cannes film festival (where it shared top honours with the West German film of Grass **Tin Drum**) as an "unfinished work". His indecision at releasing the film, in light of the (presumably) finished product, is understandable. The movie is dour, and like the **Ring**, **Apocalypse Now** is strong on style, but finally falls flat on its "message". Pity. One wants Coppola, a filmmaker of proven talent, to succeed.

There is much to praise in his work—very much. Coppola is a virtuoso orchestrator of his themes. His talent at organizing scenes of mass destruction into effective statements about the insanity of war

is spell-binding. It is a study in the contradictions that inevitably exist in times of war: A Texaco sign juts incongruously out of a rice paddy. A radio announcer greets a war-torn country in cheerful disc-jockey jargon ("Hello Vietnam! It's 82 degrees in Saigon today . . .") Soldiers landing in a war zone are urged to keep on moving for a reporter's camera. Coppola has a fine eye for such absurdities, and their effect is cumulative. One doesn't know whether to laugh, to cry, quit the human race, or march in the streets.

The first two hours of the film are a build-up to a fateful meeting in Kurtz's jungle hideaway, and the film's grip on us is firm. It is an emotional bath that raises our pulses and our expectations. Just as Willard is progressively mesmerized by his upriver course while on his mission to "terminate, with extreme prejudice" the errant Colonel, we, the audience are drawn along in an ever-rising tide of expectation.

The problem is scope: **Lord of the Flies** told in a **Sunset Boulevard** manner. The last half hour of the movie, full of Brando's melodramatic philosophizing, seems to belong to a different movie. After the dramatic

build-up we are faced with a broken man, dying a slow death of some tropical disease, lying for the most part on his back spouting T.S. Eliot. It is a good point, but stated badly, out of place in the overblown movie. The personal vision Coppola attempts just doesn't gell with the apocalyptic treatment of the first hours.

Art should simplify, not confuse. A smaller movie would have better served the theme on a fraction of the budget; something along the order of an Ingmar Bergman, who can say more or less the same, with less. It is never apparent, for example, how the derelict Kurtz sways the masses of "natives" who worship him.

What remains is virtuoso filmmaking. The film is worthwhile, if only for its brilliance of execution, its depiction of the effects of war and a foreign culture imposed on another. If Coppola's philosophizing rings hollow, his style is terrific. **Apocalypse Now** is harrowing, breath-taking, a 'veritable roller-coaster of a movie' (as Norma MacLean Stoop might say) but at core—confused. Coppola's vision is blurred, and his movie is off the mark but its flight is riveting.

by Glenn Walton