

Coppola misses the heart of darkness

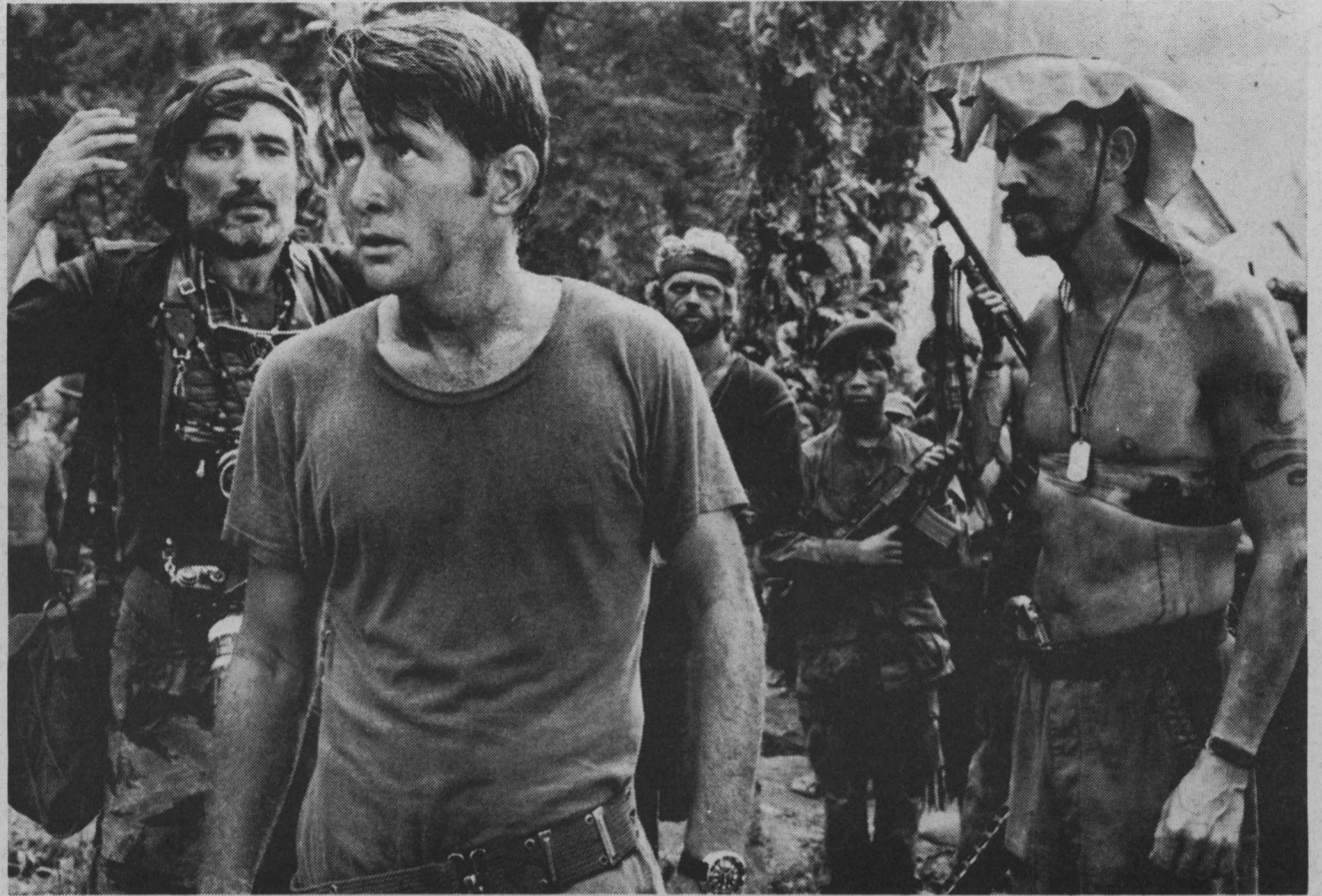
Movie review by Marni Stanley

Apocalypse Now opens on to a wide, serene expanse of jungle which is suddenly bombarded and then consumed by flame. It is a recurring image of the film — everywhere the green and the black are destroyed by the red. The green is the vegetation or the uniforms of the men and the black is the seemingly endless darkness. The red is simply the fires and the flood.

This movie is basically the tale of Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen) trip up river to assassinate Kurtz (Marlon Brando) who is, in Army Intelligence terms, "unsound." It is a highly stylized, classical journey and Coppola, the producer-director, tends to belabor that point. The film is loaded with implied and explicit literary allusions. It takes its structure, many of its characters, and the literary style and content of the narrative from the text of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The director also takes pains to focus in on a copy of Fraser's classic study of the heroic journey, *The Golden Bough*, which Kurtz has supposedly been reading. He even has Brando read "The Hollow Men," a poem that T.S. Eliot prefaced with the line, "Mr. Kurtz - he dead."

The film's strengths lie in the dazzling cinematography of Vittoria Storaro and in the dramatic tension of the first ninety minutes — beyond that it quite mercifully falls apart. Coppola tries to show us hell on screen, to make the pathetic irony of this war's insanity come alive and he comes close. In fact, if you believe and if you immerse yourself in this film he probably comes about as close as you can stand. The battles are reproduced with an obsessive attention to detail and there is no shortage of graphic deaths and haunting images. Unfortunately for the director, the film's most dramatic moment, an encounter between Willard and his crew and a boat of Vietnamese, occurs in that first section of film. That brief scene does more to expose the horror of war and the impotency of civilization in the face of it, than could any of the pagan symbolism or graphic mutilations that occur at Kurtz's stronghold.

Coppola goes awry in the end because the task is beyond him. The ruin he has contrived for Kurtz is a classic chamber of horrors and Brando himself is unconvincing as the insane officer who "takes his



Capt. Willard (Martin Sheen) and Chet (Frederick Forrest) meet the crazy photographer (Dennis Hopper) and the Montagnard Warriors.

orders from the jungle." Basically Brando looks as trivial playing at God as any man would and the endless vague shots of him emerging from murky darkneses do not improve his status.

As Willard, Martin Sheen gives a moving performance of a man who has long since lost any sense of motivation and now fights only to keep some semblance of perspective. Unfortunately he depends too much on wide-eyed looks of anguish or dismay. The film's most memorable performance is that of

Robert Duvall as Lt. Col. Kilgore, the cavalry officer who "likes the smell of Napalm in the morning" and who plays Wagner operas at full blast when attacking Vietnamese civilians.

Coppola has released this film as a self-proclaimed classic but it falls short of fulfilling his goal of a "universal-film-myth." As Kurtz says, we have "seen the horror", but we don't ever come to know it and Vietnam remains mercifully unfathomable to those of us who were not compelled to experience it.

All this and no popcorn?

"Non-commercial cinema" is a term often used to describe foreign or "art" films, or films of any nature generally not accessible to the public. In Edmonton, non-commercial theaters like the National Film Theatre and the Edmonton Film Society have traditionally been the outlet for this type of cinema. A new outlet this year has been the Varscona, a theater that bills itself as a "Fine Arts Cinema". Ironically, it is attempting to prove that non-commercial cinema can be commercial.

Films for the NFT and EFS are distributed by New Cinema Enterprises of Toronto. Last winter this small distributing company decided to see if Edmonton audiences would support its films in a commercial theater. Previous experience with two commercial theaters in Toronto had shown that the idea could be successful. New Cinema leased the Varscona from Odeon Theatres for one year, from March 1979 until March 1980. They acquired the distributing rights to the Varscona, but retained complete financial control. Next March the financial success of the Varscona and New Cinema will be reviewed. If the Varscona has pulled enough money out of the pockets of moviegoers, then things will probably remain as they are.

Besides distributing for the Varscona, New Cinema has also provided a change in image for the theater. The lobby was redecorated: director's chairs were installed and permanent glass encased movie posters were hung on the wall. In a touch reminiscent of the old Hovel, the theater now sells foods like carrot cake, apple juice and coffee: expresso or capuccino. Popcorn and candy are absent.

Peter Roberts, publicity director for New Cinema, says that reaction to the change in image has been favorable, perhaps too favorable: "Lots of people come in here just for the coffee". Most people don't mind the absence of popcorn, but Roberts does tell of one well dressed gentleman who, upon hearing there was none available, rushed out the door and up to the Garneau. A few minutes later he returned carrying two large buckets of popcorn.

Roberts is not exactly comfortable with the word "art" that is attached to the Varscona or its films. However it is probably the best adjective "in that anyone knows it's a different kind of cinema." Up until now, the theater has attracted a somewhat regular audience with about 60% of it returning for every film. Most of the patrons are from academic life, although the theater has not attracted the number of university students that Roberts had hoped for. However, the Varscona would like to appeal to people from all walks of life: "The idea ultimately is that we're trying to say our films are not that much more obtuse for someone to watch than, say, *Apocalypse Now*."

One of the problems in attracting audiences in Edmonton, is that many people are still reluctant to

attend a sub-titled film. Many of the Varscona's films are in foreign languages and are not dubbed, so subtitles are necessary. Another problem is that "Edmonton is pretty conservative. A lot of people hang back until something proves itself."

Roberts credits the Edmonton Film Society for establishing the credibility of "good films" in Edmonton. However, he says, in doing so they may have hurt themselves. New Cinema would probably be more enthusiastic about distributing a film to a successful commercial theater than to a successful non-commercial theater. The Varscona and the EFS do work closely together so that they do not show the same movie at the same time.

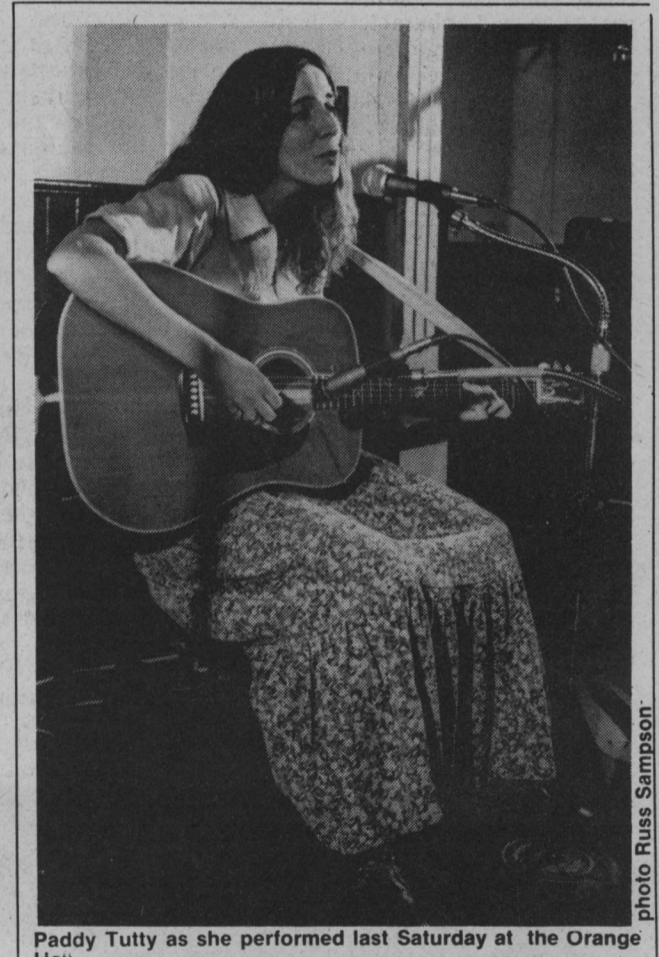
And what about the competition from down the road? "The Princess is not really in competition with us. What we're trying to do is show first run films. Also what we're trying to do is keep the films commercial rather than repertory which is the basis for the Princess."

Roberts is surprised that the Odeon hasn't come down hard on the Varscona for not making more money. They don't have a say over what films will be shown, but they do decide how long a film will run. Just recently, *Pouquoi Pas*, a popular film from the summer, was pulled after only a week because of small crowds.

Pouquoi Pas was only one of many films featured in the Varscona's "Festival of International Films" held in August. This festival not only put the Varscona on the international cinema map, it probably also convinced Odeon that things were working out at the theater. For two weeks the Varscona reeled with near full audience capacity as it featured the films of established directors like Truffaut, Chabrol and Herzog, as well as lesser known directors like Alain Turner and Diane Kurys. Many of the films that were popular at the festival will be brought back and shown this fall.

The films that the Varscona acquires are the products of many different cultures. Established filmmaking countries like United States, Germany, France and Italy are represented as well as newer contenders like Spain, Switzerland, Canada and some South American countries. Lest it be mistaken that all their films are serious or cerebral, the Varscona's program "totally endorses the fact that film should be entertaining." With this in mind they are presenting the best movies of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers during the Christmas holidays.

Besides the carrot cake, perhaps the Varscona is like the old Hovel in another respect. They are trying to provide good but not always accessible entertainment to the public. As Peter Roberts said: "New Cinema is trying to prove to the film going public that there are good films out there they don't usually see."



Paddy Tutty as she performed last Saturday at the Orange Hall.

Scottish poetry

It's a long way from Glasgow to Edmonton, but that won't stop Liz Lochhead. She is one of Scotland's finest young poets and she will be reading her work this Thursday in the Humanities Centre.

Lochhead comes here by way of a special exchange programme between writers from Scotland and Canada. Last winter Canadian novelist Graeme Green spent the year in Edinburgh, while Lochhead was in Toronto. Now, at the end of her year in Canada, she is completing a tour of the country before returning home.

Lochhead's poetry is fresh, direct and invigorating. She writes with clear insight and sharp articulation about her own experiences as a woman growing up in the industrial west of Scotland. Within the last year she has added to her work the wry and sympathetic observations of a Scot living in Canada.

Liz Lochhead is a writer and a reader of great sensitivity and charm. She will be reading this Thursday, October 18 at 12:30 in Humanities Centre AV-L3. Admission is free.