

An excerpt from "The Power of Adaptation in *Apocalypse Now*"
Marsha Kinder¹

The film opens with quiet jungle sounds and a graceful line of palm trees, waving gently in a breeze. Smoke drifts upward from the foreground, and a faint sound (that could be either modern electronic music or some kind of engine) fades in from the background. As a whirling propeller arcs across the top of the screen, we know the sound is made by an army helicopter. As another chopper streaks across the sky, the smoke and noise become more intense. Suddenly the jungle bursts into a fiery hell of napalm, and the sound track assaults us with Jim Morrison singing "This is the end, beautiful friend." The camera pans right as another chopper crosses the screen in the opposite direction, further disorienting us with these counter movements. A huge upside-down close-up of Willard's head is superimposed over the jungle on the left side of the screen. This dissolve moves us inward to the Saigon hotel room where Willard is having a mental breakdown and inward to his mind which is projecting these jungle memories and nightmares. On the right side of the screen we see an overhead fan superimposed over the image of the helicopter, dissolving the boundaries between the hotel room and the jungle. As the jungle background turns to night, the right side of the screen dissolves into a huge statue of Buddha's head, which is neither in the room nor the jungle, but is pure imaginative projection. This head not only matches the huge close-up of Willard, but also mysteriously foreshadows his obsession with Kurtz. When Willard opens his eyes, he stares at the overhead fan, as if recognizing the specific image that triggered the nightmare. But the sound of choppers continues in the room. He moves to the window and looks out at the sunny Saigon streets, where helicopters buzz overhead; then he begins the voice-over narration that dominates the film, "Saigon...shit!...I'm still only in Saigon." We soon learn that this narration is told from the perspective of the future. Then follows a strange montage of bizarre images from Willard's mind and external shots of his freakout, which are linked by dissolves.

This opening sequence, which was not in Milius's original script and has no parallel in the Conrad story, dissolves all boundaries between inner and outer experience, between past, present and future. It introduces a visual style that is strongly marked by superimpositions and cross dissolves, suggesting the multilayered nature of experience. It also introduces the recurring images of fire and smoke, which obscure vision with their terrifying beauty; helicopters, which are more omnipresent and dangerous than any jungle creature; and detached heads, which lead us inward to the focus on madness and horror. The sequence strongly suggests that all footage in this film is filtered through a subjective consciousness.

¹ *Films Quarterly*. Vol 33, No 2. (Winter, 1979-1980) p12-20.