

ROBERT LaBRASCA

Two Visions of "The horror!"

(From *Madison Press Connection*, November 17, 1979. Revised 1986.

in Kimbrough, Robert, ed. *Heart of Darkness: Norton Critical Edition*. New York: Norton & Company, 1988.)

By the time *Apocalypse Now* was completed, it was little more than inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad was never mentioned in the picture's credits, which is probably as it should be: Conrad would not likely have been flattered by the association—his themes having been deserted for a thinner, more "intellectual," less resonant vision. But it may be worthwhile to lay one against the other, not to measure *Apocalypse Now* as cinematic art (that's another matter entirely), but to get an idea what the vision really is, bearing in mind that one work is the product of a single consciousness in reflection, while the other required an army of creative minds, functionaries and drudges, along with \$31 million of the world's resources.

*Heart of Darkness* was the work of a Pole (born Josef Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski) writing in 1898 in his third language. He was an adventurer who had spent 20 years at sea before immersing himself in the literary profession. Somehow, all that wandering about the earth, his national displacement (he'd lived most of his teen years in Russian exile with his nationalist parents), and the sudden lurch—in his 30s—from plying the sea to furious writing give special weight to his work, add credence to the notion that he wrote down what his mind saw clearly, rather than what his prose could adequately decorate. This applies especially to *Heart of Darkness*, some eighty pages of slightly enhanced reminiscence of a journey Conrad had made eight years before up the Congo River. It remains one of the most haunting tales in modern literature—a trip by sea, land and river steamer, straight to the desperate void at the core of the human soul.

Conrad's vehicle for the journey is his narrator, Marlow, a seaman who recites the anecdotes on the deck of a pleasure yacht at anchor in the mouth of the Thames. Marlow is the most worldly of men, possessed of a bitter wit, an ounce of humility—not much more—and a vivid, insistent rhetorical style. There is nothing cryptic in his words; he speaks with the authority and clarity of someone who has glimpsed the *facts* of what others might only gossip about. Conrad paints him buddhalike, as if instilled with the wisdom of successive lives, but he is primarily an eloquent voice, one filled beneath the sarcasm with humanity. As he recalls his "inconclusive experiences," he unrelentingly judges the European mission of "progress" in Africa as a transparent disguise for greed.

"The conquest of the earth," Marlow explains, "which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Marlow predicts early on in his narrative the gradual exposure of "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." It is the devil of what has come to be called "colonialism" or "imperialism," and is summed up in "blind ambition." It is incarnate in the man who becomes the object of Marlow's pilgrimage: Mr. Kurtz.

Kurtz is the other anchor of the book: a "remarkable man," a painter, a poet, a musician, an orator—"a universal genius," the very flower of European civilization. This, at least, is what Marlow, as he travels upriver, hears of the man—and that Kurtz is a boon to his employers, shipping out more ivory than any other agent on the river. As we encounter with Marlow the succession of petty, avaricious Europeans who populate the "civilized" outposts, we begin to yearn with him for the presence—the words—of Kurtz. Amid the grotesque oppression of the mysterious, defeated natives, the flies, the heat, and the jackals bearing the Hag of progress, Kurtz becomes a vestige of hope.

And finally, after death visits the steamer and we emerge from an opaque fog (a Dantean passage to an inner world), we approach at last the citadel of Kurtz's empire: a shed bulging at the seams with ivory, a clearing filled with battalions of unquestioningly obedient Africans, and the shack of the "universal genius" surrounded by a crude row of posts, holding high the severed heads of "rebels." The man himself appears: "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory," diseased, delirious, nearly eaten alive by the jungle and his own ambition. Kurtz, acquiescing to threats and coercion from Marlow, departs on the steamer where, sinking toward death, he rants, "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river. ..." And Marlow responds in an aside, "[Everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places."

Kurtz issues the feeble cry, "The horror! The horror!" and the man of vision, of poetry, the "emissary of pity, and science, and progress" is gone. The jungle closes 'round.

There's more, but that's the guts of it: a tale whose darkness perpetually illuminates the grim emptiness at the limit of personal and national ambition, the vanity of power's claim to civilization, and the frail evil that lurks in even the *best* of its emissaries. *Heart of Darkness* virtually predicts Vietnam.

Now Coppola has brought us *Apocalypse Now*, the end product of five years of his life—a powerful movie, a technical triumph, a tour de force of style, and so much less than the little book that gave it the spark of birth. Coppola removed Marlow, the lens through which every dimension of Conrad's darkness was made vivid, and gave us Willard, an inarticulate assassin lacking the empathetic quality that might have made him engaging and the irony that would have made the distance comfortable. He replaced "Kurtz's last disciple," Conrad's foolish but still credible innocent, with Dennis Hopper as a burned-out photographer who seems a virtual refugee from the Manson family—thus eliminating the last character witness and leaving poor Kurtz (Marion Brando) to speak for himself. Coppola diminished the spell of the jungle—the surrounding, encroaching darkness—and gave us instead a claustrophobic sense of the river, interrupted frequently by an almost carnival atmosphere.

All of this might be forgivable, even praiseworthy, if in the end the film had its own center from which these new elements radiated, or toward which they converged. But it doesn't—or its gravity isn't strong enough to hold them all.

Somewhere in the colossal process of this project, Coppola lost the unity; he found himself making two pictures instead of one. Most of the episodic journey upriver in Vietnam is straightforward action footage, but its content is bizarre: consumer America dropped like phosphorous bombs into simple agrarian villages and wild forests—Jimi Hendrix in the trenches, water skiing on the Mekong, Playboy bunnies lowered from helicopters under sideshow lights. It's a brilliant updating and figurative translation of Conrad's vision to Vietnam, and it works.

But then . . .

As we approach Kurtz, things begin to go awry, because Coppola was apparently never able to decide who Kurtz was—victim, hero or madman—or what to do with him. It's almost as if Conrad's "universal genius"/"hollow sham" had come back to haunt the production—demanding a larger role, exerting his unyielding will, without knowing precisely his own intention. And the director, it seems, tried to cover for the confusion with a flourish of style: grotesque, deathly tableaux; shadowy figures; everywhere drifting smoke and dramatic, stagey lighting. The final segment, culminating in the ritual killing of Kurtz intercut with the bloody ceremonial sacrifice of a bull, is masterfully done, but it's also puffed up. We get Brando reading from T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" with Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* on the coffee table, so to speak—hints of deep stuff, credentials for admission to the Academy.

Is there any more to it than that?

Ancient, archetypal regicide is the obvious notion (hence, Weston and Frazer), implying the succession of Willard to the throne (a suggestion that Coppola's ultimate ending seems to want to retract). The king is dead; long live the king! But of what? Of all this carnage to no purpose?

In Conrad, Kurtz was at least driven by greed for ivory and the ambition "to have kings meet him at railway stations," but Coppola offers us only some vague issue of human will, of absolutely raw power—an ideology of terrorism plain and simple. Coppola's Kurtz (or is this the Kurtz of John Milius, the original screenwriter, whose later credits include *Conan the Barbarian* and *Red Dawn*?) has come to the crystalline revelation that there is some ultimate truth in the willingness to employ absolutely ruthless means in the accomplishment of one's will. It is a sociopathic insight and, unfortunately, the strongest viewpoint articulated in the film.

I've heard it argued that this is brilliant fascist art, woven closely around themes that can also be found in Nazi mysticism. The argument goes something like this: the unity of *Apocalypse Now* centers around that abstract question of Will, intertwined with the Grail legend. Symbols are scattered throughout to tip us off that the Will is an abstract, something out there, beyond history, beyond ethics, virtually beyond human context. But you could also map it as a liberal anti-war picture—with its sympathetic images of Vietnamese villagers and ruthless portrayal of the military, the obvious madness of Kurtz, and Willard's apparent choice to return to his own world after slaying the tyrant. It's probably neither and tries to be apolitical, though the political and moral questions linger like the bodies hanging from the trees around Kurtz's compound. Coppola seems to poke at them now and then as the picture approaches its end, unsure whether he should bury them or leave them to rot where they hang.

In light of what Coppola told *Rolling Stone* interviewer Greil Marcus, if he'd had his way, this might have

been the best fascist document of all time. He wanted an idealized image of Kurtz—"a Gauguin figure, with mangoes and babies"—but Brando wanted no part of it. That kind of presentation of Kurtz would have made him more sympathetic, and probably more believable. The director also wanted a different ending on the picture. He wanted it ambiguous, with the possibility left open that Willard stayed to inherit Kurtz's domain—which would have left the viewer with that question of choice, of power (perhaps wondering, "Will we have the guts to nuke the gooks next time?").

Coppola submitted to Brando—he couldn't have him walking off the set—and swallowed an ending he didn't want. He probably did so because creditors were hounding him and he needed to get the \$31 million back. "If I feel that I'm a real lone opinion," he told Marcus, "and I don't feel disposed to really fight for it, I'll go with what the bright people I have working with me are saying: . . . everyone wanted—even the computers wanted" the ending we ultimately saw, an ending Coppola told Marcus **he** considered "a lie." The ending on *Apocalypse Now* is the one that would have been the right answer on "Family Feud," the one the computers told him the majority of preview audiences preferred.

Later, when it looked like *Apocalypse* was going to make its money back, Marcus met with Coppola again, and the director had decided the ending was right, even it *was* "a little bit of a lie."

Many of his changes from Conrad are understandable. Coppola couldn't, for instance, use greed as a central motive because Vietnam wasn't as surfacely simple as that. Henry Kissinger's idea of "our interests" was something vaguer than ivory, and, in a way, Kurtz's abstract engagement with the question of will is an appropriate analogy for the motive of our involvement in Southeast Asia. But Coppola doesn't expose the folly of American ambition there; he ennobles it in the mullings of Brando's Kurtz—and I wonder why.

Could it be that in five years of struggling with this project—risking his fortune, getting sick with jungle rot, and trying to maintain authority over platoons of Hollywood types and primitive Ifugao tribesmen by the hundreds—Coppola found himself identifying with Conrad's Kurtz? Coppola was, after all, off on his own, risking his future—his ambitious plans for Zoetrope Studios—on something that was constantly getting out of hand. As Kurtz was point man for the ivory trade, Coppola was an agent of the movie industry. And, as Kurtz embodied the spirit of a parasitic enterprise, Coppola's film betrays the ambiguities of Hollywood: the enormous technical and sensual power of film, the desire of many of its artisans to turn that into something like art, and the business and marketing factors that perpetually militate against any fully realized achievement.