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Worth the Wait: *Apocalypse Now*

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Brando's face. The face of Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. The face that looks out at you from its sheltering cocoon of darkness, its envelope of night. It's a lumpy face: drawn and yellow and tallowy, and there's something horrible in the eyes. . . . And the hands move slowly, caressingly along the bald scalp, as water drips down from the bowl that the hands have held with a communicant's reverence. . . . And all around is the gathering darkness, the jungle cries, the sounds of the wind crackling the fronds, mist steaming up from the river. There is no expression on that face, none at all. It's as blank as stone, as the green idol that stands outside, where weeds crack and writhe through the stairways, where corpses are swaying in the breeze, skulls, entrails, bones, all the remnants of the night. Disease and smoke and perspiration seep out of the walls. And that face simply stares at you, and it's like eyes gazing out from a pool of ash. . . .

The face of Death. Of the Apocalypse.

There's been so much controversy about *Apocalypse Now* that I better situate myself on the film right now. I think it's a staggering movie, an overwhelming, overpowering experience—yet both times when I walked out of it, I had this strange, empty, bereaved feeling. It wasn't a feeling that had any connection with the Vietnam War itself, because, in fact, the movie operates less as a document about the war than as a phantasmagoria, a surreal reflection on things past. When Coppola started *Apocalypse Now* over four years ago, he said he wanted it to be like one of Ken Russell's movies, and he selected Vittorio Storaro, Bernardo Bertolucci's regular cameraman, to get a dreamlike floating quality out of the visuals.

At the center of *Apocalypse Now*, symbolized by Kurtz's face, shining in the shadows, there's a certain moral confusion, an irresolute wavering, a mistiness, a philosophical intangibility. I'm not so sure this is bad. The first two hours of the movie are so spectacular, so concrete, that this odd, muted ending (and Coppola remarked in *Rolling Stone* that he wanted the ending to be even more undefined) seems somehow appropriate. In *Apocalypse Now*, after all, we are traveling, just as Conrad did, to the lower region of the soul—unexplored territory. It might have been obscene to be more sure about what those regions concealed.

As almost everyone knows by now, *Apocalypse Now*, is perhaps the great "obsessional" movie project of our time. Coppola embarked on the film more than four years ago, after buying the original script from John Milius, and originally scheduling George Lucas to direct it. He took it over himself in the wake of his quantum jump in prestige after *The Conversation* took the Grand Prize at Cannes and both *Godfather* movies won Oscars. And since then, it seemed, he's been going slowly out of his mind. Some weird psychodrama kept unfolding almost daily in the pages of *Variety* and the other trade journals, all of it revolving around the volcano that the *Apocalypse* project had become. Actors were hired, actors were fired. A stock company was set up and dissolved. Typhoons delayed the production. The lead actor, Martin Sheen, suffered both a nervous breakdown and a heart attack. Forty-five million dollars were slowly consumed. Brando proved as mysterious, as intransigent as ever. The shooting, the editing, the mixing dragged on interminably. What was the name of the film? *Apocalypse Now*? Or, *Apocalypse Whenever*?

When *Apocalypse Now* finally surfaced in an incomplete version and shared another Cannes Grand Prize with the Volker Schlöndorff adaptation of *The Tin Drum*, a substantial number of writers and reporters had consigned Coppola to the insane asylum. And, indeed, in his brief appearance in last spring's Oscar Show (to present the "Best Director" award to Michael Cimino for *The Deer Hunter*) he seemed to be, well, babbling. This hostility has carried over into more than a few reviews of the movie—reviews which attack Coppola's sanity and responsibility, the movie's budget, accuracy, morality and

politics.

Granted, *Apocalypse Now* became Coppola's obsession. (At one point he told George Lucas and John Milius that they were next in line to take over the movie if he died on location.) Granted, it is pretentious and wildly ambitious. Granted, it is probably not as great a work of art as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Granted, it is not a true picture of Vietnam. But it is a staggering achievement.

Purely on the level of cinematography and action direction, it takes your breath away. Every sequence, every minute, every frame churns with violence and beauty. When Kilgore's helicopters come sweeping in over the waves in an early sequence, Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" pouring like a mad dirge from the loudspeakers, death and destruction raining down on the Vietcong-held villagers while the combat pilots crack jokes, and three of them prepare to catch the pipeline and go surfing in the center of this inferno, in the middle of the firebombing— it's such an insanely appropriate nightmare, such a deadly, crystal-clear metaphor for the entire adventure of warfare (war as it seems to impressionable kids) that it explodes inside you on several levels. Robert Duvall as Kilgore—stripping off his jacket and scarf, and preparing to plunge into the waves, ignoring the explosions around him, and grinning happily over the distant smell of napalm as it incinerates a forest (and its inhabitants)—is the macho adventurer gone wild, a crazed Leatherstocking.

Insanity is probably a metaphor for the entire film. Death, destruction, sex—everything winds out on this grand lunatic scale. And watching it all is the ultimate passive, tormented, almost "hipster" observer: Willard, played by Martin Sheen as the man tortuously following all the tracks toward the center of the cavern—toward the "Termination, with extreme prejudice" of the mad Green Beret, Kurtz, toward the mystery **at** the End of the River, toward what may, in fact, be himself. (Coppola has confirmed that the meaning of the copy of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in Kurtz's headquarters is the legend of the Fisher King who dies and is replaced by his conqueror—in this case the Fisher King is Kurtz and his replacement, Willard.)

The USO show, the night-bombing, everything in the movie keeps plunging toward some crazy paroxysm, until, abruptly, the "heroes" shoot down an unarmed family in a sampan—shoot them down brutally, relentlessly, as if it were the final answer in a cold equation. And you know that the insanity is somehow endemic . . . not contained in Kurtz, not contained in Kilgore, not contained in Willard, or the U.S. Army, or the policymakers who have set this Engine of Destruction in motion. But that the insanity is somehow universal, and that to gaze on it is somehow to gaze at The Truth. (Which is one reason, I suppose that the movie has been attacked philosophically. There is something deeply nihilistic at its center.)

I don't think *Apocalypse Now* should be approached as an analysis of the Vietnam conflict. Obviously, that's something it was never intended to be—not when John Milius, a political conservative and Vietnam hawk, originally wrote it, and not when Coppola, a political liberal and dove, began reshaping it. The "horror" of which Kurtz speaks at the end is not something which can be so easily categorized (and the movie twists in **on** itself at this point, like a collapsible labyrinth, since "The horror" is a direct quotation from *Heart of Darkness*, and since one of the poems Brando pores over intently is T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," which has as its epigraph another direct quotation, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead"). It's not about anything that direct. It's a search—a search through the bloody holocaust that is our nightmare of Vietnam (rather than its reality), a search through all the myths and motifs of Western literature and movies, a search along a glistening river surrounded by shadows, a search toward death and dissolution.

Probably Coppola, articulate as he sometimes seems, could not explain what that search was meant to find. The goal of an obsession is never really clear, most of all to the obsessed. But what Coppola and his associates—Milius, Michael Herr, Storaro, Brando, Sheen, Robert Duvall, and all the others—managed to pull from those Philippine jungles and that series of withering catastrophes is so startling and fascinating and hypnotic that its flaws seem miniscule. The fate of the gambler, the man who takes the mad plunge, is to appear ridiculous. Coppola has certainly risked that—and much, much more

—by fashioning this grandiose, scintillating nightmare. But, for me, his triumphs overmatch his catastrophes. *Apocalypse Now* is an infernally magnificent film—beautifully obsessive, beautifully mad.