

## FILM

### *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

by John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola

## ANALYSIS

*Apocalypse Now* opens in silence with a long take, facing a jungle. Nothing happens. The view of a jungle treeline becomes a motif in the film, evoking the recurrent situation faced by American troops in Vietnam, fighting a hidden enemy. A helicopter comes thumping into view, close up. We see only a portion of the chopper passing by, as though from the perspective of a soldier hiding in the tall grass. The unusual photography is impressionistic in the style of literary war fiction by Stephen Crane. Helicopters pass routinely through the frame, back and forth, monotony that increases tension.

In a voice of doom the apocalyptic rock star Jim Morrison, who destroyed himself at an early age, begins to sing "*This is the end...*"--the mood of many troops going into Vietnam. The jungle fades to a sweaty face upsidedown, a soldier waiting for orders in a hotel room in Saigon, staring up at a ceiling fan with blades like a helicopter that reinforces his tortured thoughts. His narrative voiceover is an ominous low near monotone that is sustained with increasing tension throughout the film. He cannot escape the war. He completed one tour in Vietnam, went home, then felt compelled to return for another tour. The jungle is inside him now. The shot introducing him upsidedown suggests that his moral values have been inverted. He is willing Captain Willard of Army Intelligence, Special Operations, formerly in the CIA. Covertly, he has assassinated at least six people. He provides the only authoritative perspective in the film, which avoids the politics of the war. Instead, Coppola conveys representative experiences of those who were ordered to fight it, with sympathy and understanding. President Johnson is mentioned and individual officers are criticized, in particular staff officers for being too remote from the realities of the battlefield, but Coppola respects the military. Under extreme pressure, Captain Willard gets drunk in his room and punches a mirror, shattering his image and injuring himself.

Willard's mission is to travel up a river into the jungle, to cross the border into Cambodia where American forces are not supposed to go, and to assassinate Colonel Kurtz, a special operations officer who has gone too far. Thereafter, the question is whether Kurtz has actually gone insane. One of Willard's recent predecessors committed suicide and the most recent one joined up with Kurtz and his Montagnard tribe. To persuade Willard that Kurtz is obviously insane, his commanding officer plays a tape of him using poetic language. On his way up the river by patrol boat, Willard learns more about Kurtz from reading his file. In some ways a mirror image of himself, the Colonel returned for a second tour in Vietnam and his perspective turned upsidedown. Kurtz was a family man, outstanding in every way, first in his class at West Point, a Green Beret and a highly decorated hero of the Korean War. He had such a brilliant record that he might have become Chief of Staff one day, but he sacrificed his future to go into Special Operations. Now the Army has accused him of murder for executing three South Vietnamese officers and a woman. Eventually, however, Willard learns that the victims were actually double agents. Kurtz was right. In fact, Kurtz has adapted so well to the jungle war that he is winning, though using methods that are deemed unacceptable by civilized standards. Consequently, it appears to Willard that it is the Army that is insane for wanting to terminate Kurtz. By civilized standards, all war is insane.

Captain Willard and his patrol boat get a lift from the Air Cavalry, a squadron of attack helicopters commanded by the flamboyant Colonel Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall. On the way, Kilgore assaults a village stronghold of the enemy, motivated mainly by a desire to surf. Willard sees Kilgore as just as insane as the Army sees Kurtz. A bugler sounds the charge, wearing a hat that recalls the U.S. Cavalry fighting Indians in the Old West. The chopper swarm attacks out of the rising sun like a band of Apaches. They approach the village playing very loud opera music by Wagner to scare the enemy, the thrilling and exhilarating theme of the Valkyries, warriors who rode to battle through the sky on horseback. Children playing in the village courtyard run and take cover. Viet Cong gunners run to their weapons. The furious intensity of the assault dramatizes the reliance of the American military on technology in an effort to

overwhelm the enemy with firepower. When a chopper lands in the courtyard, a Vietnamese girl tosses a grenade inside and blows it up, illustrating the horror that in this war, women and even children were often combatants, a fact that contributed to racism expressed in references to gooks and slopes, and to the methods of Kurtz.

Kilgore's name, black hat, dark glasses, strutting bravado and comical preoccupation with surfing define him negatively. At the same time, he is clearly a great leader of men in combat, reminiscent of General George Patton in World War II, but more likeable. His attitude of invincibility inspires the confidence required for victory. Willard observes that Kilgore has a kind of magic about him, as if he can never be hurt, a characteristic of legendary warriors such as the great chief Crazy Horse. Yet he is not an aristocratic officer. He clearly loves his men and sits around a campfire with them like a regular guy, singing and joking. He respects the bravery of his adversary and he even gives a wounded enemy soldier a drink from his canteen--after blasting the hell out of his cadre. Kilgore also illustrates the influence of popular culture on the war, the need for distraction from the horror and the bizarre incongruities that Americans brought to Vietnam. In a scene on the beach, with the battle still raging behind him, he ignores the shells exploding all around and strips off his uniform to go surfing. Under the circumstances, the surfers among his men, including one from Los Angeles, are a bit reluctant to join him. Kilgore orders them as a matter of national pride and personal honor, yelling "Charlie don't surf!"

By civilized standards, Kilgore is foolish and irresponsible to expose himself and his men in this way. He seems insane. As psychological warfare, however, his conduct defies and intimidates his enemy while inspiring his men to be fearless. He has driven the enemy back into the jungle, beyond the treeline, while suffering minimal casualties. He has called in an air strike. The jets come streaking in low above the jungle and drop napalm on the enemy retreating beyond the treeline. The apparent insanity of surfing is topped when Kilgore inhales deeply and exclaims with joyful satisfaction, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning!" As he appreciates what napalm bombs do to the enemy, he is by civilized standards a heartless monster. Naturally, however, in this jungle war, as a dedicated soldier he loves the smell of napalm because it means he has done his job, led his men well and fulfilled his mission. If he allowed himself to feel more compassion he would risk what has apparently happened to Kurtz.

During the battle, Coppola appears briefly as a television reporter with a cameraman, directing soldiers who come along and get distracted to pay no attention and go on fighting. The moment recalls the Wizard of Oz, his head absurdly enlarged as he manipulates special effects like a movie director, saying "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." The journalist appears to be directing the war. Coppola suggests that the distractions of Hollywood on the battlefield and its perspective in reporting on the war at home influenced and to some extent determined the outcome, implying that liberal media access in some combat situations was an insane policy.

The patrol boat takes Willard up the river. About half the troops who died in Vietnam were too young to vote. Willard's boat crew is composed mainly of teenagers. In another display of insanity, the kids smoke dope and rock along with the raucous Rolling Stones loudly pounding out "*I can't get no ohhh...saaaatis-faac-shuuun...*" as they water ski along through the jungle. Then one night Willard and one of the young sailors venture out into the jungle to look for a mango tree. In the blue darkness, huge tropical leaves look menacing. The jungle is terrifying. They pick their way around the base of what appears to be a giant banyan tree over thirty feet in diameter, its roots so enormous the men look small trying to climb over them. They get surprised in the dark by a prowling tiger and run back to the boat. After that, the sailors are afraid to go ashore. Willard and the white surfer from Los Angeles begin wearing mud smeared on their faces for camouflage like tiger stripes.

One night deep in the jungle, they come to a supply depot along the river, lit up brightly. It looks carnivalesque, a place of fantasy and fakery, like an entertainment center in Hollywood. They approach a supply clerk who is also a drug dealer. There is a big open air stage here with pillars standing around it like phallic rockets set to launch. Troops pack the seats of the amphitheater, raucous with anticipation. Drums are pounding like hearts. A helicopter descends from the sky to the stage with a Playboy bunny painted on the nose. Playmates in skimpy outfits emerge and dance for the men like strippers who do not strip. The scene recalls USO shows during previous wars, featuring Bob Hope and a few gorgeous stars, but here

there is no Hope. This show is all just a sleazy tease, with no jokes. There is no goodhearted mutual respect, no patriotic unity nor honoring of the troops. Morals have degenerated. Decorum collapses into chaos. The show turns wild. In one way or another, everybody tries to escape. The troops charge the stage and the girls barely get away and are lifted up out of the jungle with men hanging on to the chopper underneath and dropping off into the river. They all look insane.

Moving on upriver, Willard's patrol boat comes to a small houseboat along the shore. At any moment, the hidden Viet Cong might open fire on them from the jungle or toss a grenade from the houseboat. Their radio designation is Street Gang. This place is worse than the South Bronx. The sailor who got chased by a tiger is ordered to board and inspect the houseboat. His fear is contagious. A black teenager from the Bronx is manning the big patrol boat machine gun. He sees movement on the boat and opens fire--freezing in terror, firing until a whole Vietnamese family on the boat has been slaughtered! The movement was a puppy under a blanket. The scene evokes the many atrocities committed by accident during the war. Horribly, they save only the puppy. The surfer from Los Angeles carries it along inside his jacket, a stock image from movies about previous wars, back when Americans in battle could still feel innocent, caring and humane. Downriver soon afterward, confirming that his terror had been well founded, the sailor who gunned down the innocent family is shot dead from the shore.

They pass bodies displayed along both riverbanks. At night they reach the border, a bridge outpost barely lit in the dark jungle. The illumination is increased at random by the sporadic dwindling light of flares descending overhead, and by explosions from incoming mortar rounds. The defenders are dispersed in the darkness, apparently lost, some hiding like rats in holes. Black soldiers are wearing claw necklaces and whites are wearing war paint. The tigers are loose. Men are freaking out. The surfer from Los Angeles drops acid. The place is like an insane amusement park that blew a main generator, yet this is real. Willard cannot locate any commanding officer. There is no one in charge, everything here is out of control and beyond command. Somebody refers to the murders by the Manson gang back home. Helter-Skelter. Wierd noises and agonies articulate through Jimi Hendrix on the sound track making his guitar scream and crates of artillery shells are labeled "canned heat" in satirical reference to acts at the peace festival of *Woodstock*. They lose the puppy.

The patrol boat moves on, deeper into the darkness. At daylight, the creepy river is shrouded by drifting smoke and mist. Something huge looms above them out of the fog. The silver metal and sharp angles make it appear to be an alien spacecraft that crashed into the jungle. The fighter jet makes everything modern seem as alien here as outer space. The mist thickens.

Suddenly they are attacked by showers of little arrows that might be poisoned. The black Navy Chief, their helmsman, is killed by a spear. Poignant in grief, the white surfer from Los Angeles holds him in his arms and eventually lowers him gently into the river, an act of brotherhood and tenderness that implicitly characterizes American troops at their best. Emerging from the mist, they pass human skulls piled along the shore to terrorize intruders, like those the Communists were leaving all over Cambodia. At the end of the river, in a density of primeval rain forest so tall no sky is visible, the warriors of the Montagnard tribe are waiting for them, hundreds of almost naked men standing in their dugouts with their weapons, their warpaint as pale as death. They allow the patrol boat to pass through them and dock at the base of a hill covered by crumbling pagan shrines and enormous trees, with hanged men dangling about at random, severed heads in niches and an atmosphere of swinging machetes. The stench of death seems visible.

They are welcomed by a journalist from Hollyworld. Aptly cast, hip Dennis Hopper plays a nervous counterculture photographer, wearing dark glasses in the dim jungle, a red handkerchief sweatband and several big cameras hanging from around his neck. He is not judgmental. He hails Kurtz as a genius, publicizing him regardless of moral considerations, because Kurtz is sensational news. "You don't judge the Colonel!" The hip photographer dismisses the severed heads all around—"Sometimes he goes too far"--reminding us that counterculture radicals have supported tyrants such as Fidel Castro and have tolerated, used and glorified violence in furthering *their* aims. With his paparazzi perceptions, the hipster appears to be just as insane as anyone. Kurtz sits in the shadows of his dark chamber, a menacing bald recluse played by Marlon Brando. When he reads aloud from "The Hollow Men" by T. S. Eliot, he seems to refer to the hipster from Hollyworld, who takes it as a threat and disappears.

When his mental state became an issue, Kurtz described his frustration and vulnerability on a tape recording by saying that he feels like a snail crawling along a straight razor. Our first view of him emphasizes his shaved head. Quietly he questions Willard and finds they are from the same place. Either one is capable of killing the other at any moment. Sounding profoundly depressed, Kurtz explains what happened to him. He once floated down the Ohio River, an innocent boy like Huckleberry Finn. Here in the jungle, he had tried to do good. He inoculated the children in a village against Polio, then came back later to find that in retaliation, the Communists had cut off all the inoculated arms. They left behind a pile of little arms. Such horrors traumatized Kurtz, as he realized that terror made the enemy stronger than he was. He started resorting to terrorist methods himself, like the American tankers who collected ears off enemy bodies and skewered them on their antennae like shish kebobs.

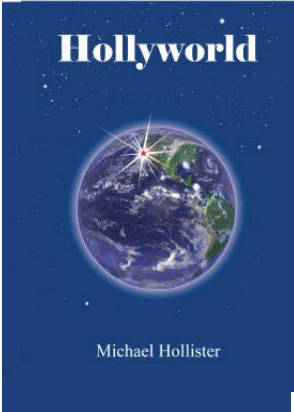
Terror is the way of the jungle. Adapt or die. Kurtz hates what he has been forced to do, but he also has contempt for people who condemn his methods and impose civilized standards on men they send to fight terrorism, those who never have to cope with such horror themselves. He hates the soft Americans who are too naive to understand what is necessary to defeat terrorists. He thinks liberals are insane. He hates the lies that politicians and staff officers tell about the war and he makes the general complaint of officers in the field, that they are not being allowed to fight the war effectively. In his view, the Army is insane to require that he follow the chain of command and get approval before he reacts in dire emergencies. Nor could he maintain his role as god to the tribe if he submitted regularly to orders from a commanding officer.

Always filmed in shadow, in the heart of darkness, at the deepest level Kurtz is the shadow in every human psyche, the part of us we hide and deny, the suppressed killer instinct and potential terrorist. Studies have shown that students playing the role of jailer or offered the opportunity to be hidden and punish others with electric shocks are soon inclined to be abusive and even sadistic. The shadow lurks in the hearts of men, as Orson Welles used to intone on the old radio series, including the heart of a frustrated President Johnson. To nuke or not to nuke, that is his question.

By necessity, Kurtz has become barbaric, smearing tiger stripes on his face and taking his orders from the jungle. The insanity of Kilgore is his inhumanity, his extreme dissociation from horror, made possible by technology. The insanity of Kurtz is caused by his inability to dissociate completely from horror, especially his own acts. While serving his country as a terrorist, he remains a sensitive man with moral awareness and a soul. His mind is clear but his soul has gone mad. He has photos of his family pinned on his wall and a *Holy Bible* among his books. Feeling damned, he is suffering so much he has become suicidal. He asks his assassin to tell his son all he knows about him, hoping the truth may survive him. His death is a reference to the end of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," the famous line about the way the world ends. He expresses a horrified view of human nature as he sacrifices himself for humanity nevertheless. Hacked repeatedly by machete, he dies with a whimper, not a bang, whispering only, "The horror!"

He leaves evidence of his insanity scrawled in his notebook: "DROP THE BOMB. *EXTERMINATE THEM ALL!*" Kurtz wants apocalypse now. If the frustrated President Johnson had resorted to nuclear weapons in Vietnam, as we did to end the war against Japan, the Soviet Union might have retaliated by launching nuclear missiles against the United States.

All this was too much for movie critics. People who watched as many movies as they did had little time to read poems or books. Consequently, they could not read literate films. They were essentially blurb writers, hoping to be quoted. The critic for *The New Yorker*, known for her eccentric snobbery, reduced this picture to "pulp adventure fantasy." *Time* magazine called it "emotionally obtuse and intellectually empty," while other critics found it "incomprehensible." A pan shot displays the small library of Kurtz, including *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance*, works made famous among the literate by their influence on T. S. Eliot's religious poem "The Waste Land," the most influential poem of the twentieth century. Kurtz submits to a machete at the same moment that his tribe outside is engaged in the ritual sacrifice of a docile water buffalo, also by machete. The camera cuts back and forth. Kurtz became a god of the tribe and knows they want him to die now like the gods in pagan vegetation myths, a theme in "The Waste Land" expressing an arid soul and the need for redemption. After all the tribe has done for him, Kurtz feels a duty to die for them as well as for America.



Movie critics seldom gave evidence of any familiarity with literature, mythology, anthropology or symbolism. They appeared to be unequipped even to interpret their own dreams. In this instance, had they consulted the books cited in the film, they might have understood it. Words evolved with the human mind from grunts and cave paintings to civilized standards expressed by laws and poems. Words and pictures complement each other like the hemispheres of the brain. The insane photographer is more wise than most film critics when he says, "I wish I had words." He knows the limitations of pictures, the vision of Hollyworld. Kurtz has words, his own and those in his books, the words he needs to understand himself and to decide what to do.

Many in Hollywood ridiculed Coppola for investing so much time and money in his project. By prevailing standards there, he took himself, and his art, too seriously. When word got out that he was using the name Kurtz and the journey upriver from *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, movie town observers called the parallel pretentious. Literacy was only one of many affronts. Coppola made a dark movie with no love story and an unhappy ending. Furthermore, it appeared to contain more than one idea. It was complex and pitched to a comprehension level higher than age twelve. Worst of all, it was politically incorrect: It did not clearly oppose the Vietnam War, it did not side with the Communists, it sympathized with the American military, its view of human nature was not liberal, it honored as a source of wisdom a conservative poet and it contained a *Holy Bible!* Toward that book Hollywood had the perspective of a vampire toward the Cross. To top it all off, Coppola had the gall to criticize Hollyworld.

*Apocalypse Now* received only two Oscars, for photography and for sound. Five of the top awards that year, in an industry dominated by divorced men, went to a sentimental domestic melodrama whose one idea was that divorced men should be treated fairly in child custody disputes. The year before, the Communist revenge movie by Jane Fonda was given more Oscars than Coppola's film, demonstrating that Hollywood people valued dishonest enemy propaganda more than a complex work of art. Sarah [fictional film critic] compared Coppola to Orson Welles and called *Apocalypse Now* a more impressive film than *Citizen Kane*, often voted the best ever made by an American. Kane is not as complex as Kurtz. He does not attain the tragic stature that Kurtz does through knowledge of himself and the stakes are very much higher in *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola defines a more urgent set of current moral challenges, includes more cultural history, offers more insights and ironies, elicits more diverse emotional responses and deepens his story more with literary content....

Davin [Sarah's son, a Vietnam vet] pointed out that the United States did not lose a single major battle during the Vietnam War. He thought our cause was just, but that it had been a mistake for a President without military experience to commit to a land war in Asia when we had not been directly attacked, that the costs were too high, in lives lost and in the longterm effects on society. Men like Kurtz and Kilgore could have stopped the Communists as we did in Korea. Instead, men like them were stopped by civilized standards, by politicians responding to a public demoralized by pictures and polls from Hollyworld. Sarah hoped a time would never come when we had to fight a terrorist enemy in our own country, and that our survival would never depend upon adopting terrorist methods ourselves.

When she said that, Davin did not reply.

Michael Hollister

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# Hollyworld



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