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Apocalypse Now

OSCAR WINNER 1979:
Best Cinematography
Best Sound

TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide was aimed at students of GCSE English and Media Studies, A'Level Film Studies and GNVO Media: Communication and Production (Intermediate and Advanced).

The guide looks at the Film in relation to Conrad's Heart of Darkness and the poetry of T.S. Eliot, narrative structure, ideology and the language of film.

Apocalypse Now: Certificate 18. Running Time 153 minutes.

MAJOR CREDITS FOR APOCALYPSE Now

Apocalypse Now 1979 (United Artists)
Producer: Francis Coppola
Director: Francis Coppola
Screenplay: John Milius, Francis Coppola
Director of Photography: Vittorio Storaro
Editor: Barry Malkin
Music: Carmine Coppola
Art Directors: Dean Tavoularis, Angelo Graham
Cast: Marion Brando
Martin Sheen
Robert Duvall
Frederick Forrest
Dennis Hopper Harrison Ford
Oscars 1979: Best Cinematography
Best Sound
Oscar Nominations 1979: Best Picture
Best Director
Best Supporting Actor (Robert Duvall)
Best Screenplay
Best Art Direction
Best Editing
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APOCALYPSE NOW

This hasn't got much to do with Conrad's Heart of Darkness, which certainly inspired its last sequences with a mumbling Brando, nor with the Vietnam War, painted as a kind of bloody, highly-colored game. But the film remains an epic about war itself with many unforgettable sequences and a hallucinatory dramatic power that is almost palpable. The 35mm version has a different ending from the 70mm one, but no matter, each has its advantages. The experience nearly killed Coppola, caused Martin Sheen to have a major heart attack and spawned a fascinating account, in both written and film form, of its intensely precarious making in the Philippines. Despite every disaster, the film proved successful, both commercially and artistically - an object lesson in stubborn persistence, imagination and technical brilliance. It

says a lot about America and Americans too, though very little about the Vietnamese. - Derek Malcolm

INTRODUCTION

Apocalypse Now was directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The original idea for the film was conceived in 1969. Coppola had just formed his own production company, American Zoetrope. He worked with screenwriter John Milius to produce the script for a movie about the Vietnam war, based loosely on Joseph Conrad's short novel Heart of Darkness. Initial interest from Warner Bros. came to nothing and despite approaches to a number of other studios, no financial backing for the project could be found:

'People were so bitter about the war just then. We were living in the time when there really were riots on the streets. People were spitting on soldiers. Studio executives are the last people who are going to get in the middle of that thing, you know. Studio executives are not noted for their social courage.'

John Milius

Coppola shelved the script and went on to win eight Academy Awards and break all box-office records with The Godfather (1971) and its sequel The Godfather, Part II (1975). He revived the idea of making Apocalypse Now in 1975 and, with the sort of reputation he now had, he was able to raise the \$13 million dollar budget he estimated would be necessary to complete the venture.

Marlon Brando, who had worked with Coppola on The Godfather, was engaged to play the key role of Kurtz, the Green Beret Colonel. He was at the height of his popularity and Coppola agreed a fee of \$3 million dollars for three weeks work on the film, \$1 million of which was paid in advance. Robert Duvall, who had been in both Godfather films, was also brought in to take the part of the Air Cavalry Colonel Kilgore. Harvey Keitel was given the main role of Captain Willard who is assigned the mission to kill Kurtz.

The original conception had been to make the movie on location in Vietnam, presumably with the war raging around actors and crew. But by the time shooting began in 1976 the Americans had withdrawn from Vietnam and an alternative location had to be found. Coppola selected the Philippines. He negotiated with Ferdinand Marcos, then the President of the Philippines, to hire Philippine Air Force helicopters and pilots, and construction began of the main set, Kurtz's compound, deep in the jungle.

From the beginning the project was beset with problems. After the first week of filming there was a crisis over the casting. Coppola and his editors looked at the footage and decided that Harvey Keitel was wrong for the part he had been hired to play.

"We bit the bullet and did what is a very, very unpleasant thing that is replace an actor in mid shooting. Not only unpleasant but expensive since we had to throw out several weeks of work and start over. Fred Roos: Co-producer

Keitel was replaced by Martin Sheen and filming started again. Unfortunately the Philippine government was engaged in fighting terrorists in the south of the country and the helicopters and pilots who were crucial to the shooting of many scenes were frequently called off the set to take part in real combat. The attack by Kilgore on the Vietnamese village was technically difficult enough in the first place but was constantly delayed by the disappearance of the helicopters to fight the rebels. Halfway through shooting, a typhoon hit the Philippines and destroyed the main set. Filming had to be

suspended for two months while a new one was built. At a later stage Martin Sheen suffered a major heart attack and was away from the set for two months recovering. In addition to events like these which were beyond Coppola's control, there were also artistic alterations which pushed the movie further and further over budget. For example, one scene was to be set in an old French Plantation. French actors were engaged and expensive costumes and props flown out to recreate exactly an authentic look for the scene. Once it was finished Coppola decided it did not work and all the footage was thrown out. Another difficulty emerged when Marlon Brando finally came on set. Coppola had already re-written the ending and he and Brando spent hours discussing how it should be played - an expensive business at \$1 million dollars a week.

Coppola appeared stoical about the mounting budget crisis. As speculation in the media centred on the project collapsing and bankrupting him, Coppola likened making movies to constructing bridges and buildings:

"They're huge projects. They always go over budget."

But as he grappled with financial and artistic difficulty it was apparent to his wife, Eleanor, that the film was putting immense stress on Coppola. She wrote in her diary: ***"Francis is making a film which is a metaphor for a journey into self He has made that journey and is still making it. It's scary to watch someone you love go into the centre of himself and confront his fears: fear of failure, fear of death, fear of going insane. You have to fail a little; die a little; go insane a little."***

It is tempting to draw parallels between Coppola's own crisis and the fictional journeys towards confrontation with profound moral questions made by Marlow, the narrator of Conrad's novel, and Willard, his counterpart in *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola survived the experience of financing and directing the project and *Apocalypse Now* was eventually released in 1979, winning the Palme D'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival and Oscars for Best Cinematography and Best Sound.

HEART OF DARKNESS

In his introduction to this guide Derek Malcolm says that *Apocalypse Now* "hasn't got much to do with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". In one sense this is true; it is certainly not the conventional 'film of the book'. Nevertheless there are some interesting similarities between the two texts and Francis Ford Coppola was intent on making his film a contemporary rendition of the novel. Although it is obviously not necessary to have read the Conrad book to make sense of the movie, (to Coppola's infuriation, Marlon Brando had not read it when he arrived on set to play the part of Kurtz), it may add to our enjoyment if we compare the way the two texts operate.

Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* in three instalments for *Blackwood's* magazine in 1899. It was published in book form, along with two other stories, *Youth and End of the Tether*, in 1902. It drew directly on Conrad's own experience of sailing up the Congo river in 1890. At that time the Congo was part of the Belgian empire. Conrad was deeply disturbed by what he saw during his voyage. As an imperial power, Belgium had annexed the Congo, a large territory in central Africa, in the name of Christianity and Progress. In reality the annexation had more to do with plundering the raw materials which the African country possessed. In an essay called *Geography and Some Explorers* Conrad described the colonial exploitation that he saw as:

"the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration."

Heart of Darkness tells of the voyage up a great African river by a sailor Conrad

calls Marlow. At one level it works as an action adventure set in an exotic location. However, Conrad's purpose in writing it was to expose the moral corruption of colonialism in Africa. In his journey towards the Inner Station to confront its chief, Kurtz, an ivory trader who has begun to act in an unacceptable way in his dealings with the natives, Marlow encounters various examples of incompetence and barbaric cruelty on the part of the whites and appalling deprivation among the blacks. In a letter to his publisher Conrad expressed the view that "the subject is distinctly of our time", yet the description of starving Africans at the first Company Station Marlow visits could well be a report from a newspaper of the 1980's or 90's: ***"They were dying slowly - it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in greenish gloom...I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly."***

The Africans Conrad describes here had been brought from other parts of the region to work at the trading post. The description, however, is hauntingly similar to those of Africans who are now herded into feeding stations to receive aid from the countries who were plundering their natural resources a hundred years ago.

The Vietnam war is commonly seen as an example of American imperialism. The US intervened to prevent the spread of communism in South East Asia and thus retain their own influence in the region, with devastating effect on both the people of Vietnam and the United States itself. For those like Coppola and John Milius, who saw the war as senseless and corrupt, Heart of Darkness seemed to have a contemporary relevance. The B-52 bombers which unloaded tons of high explosives on Vietnam from miles up in the air resembled the French man-of-war ship described by Marlow as "shelling the bush":

"the muzzles of the six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull...In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent... There was a touch of insanity in the proceedings."

So both novel and film express views about imperialism. They also, centrally, deal with the "journey into self" that Eleanor Coppola spoke of in her diary. It is here that we can see the greatest similarities. For Marlow, the experience of confronting Kurtz makes him reconsider his own system of values and beliefs. Captain Willard goes through the same process as he, too, travels ever nearer his twentieth century Kurtz. And, of course, it is no coincidence that Coppola chose to retain the same name for the brooding character who embodies human savagery and despair in both texts. Marlon Brando utters the words written by Conrad for Kurtz as he dies, having recognised the awful darkness at the centre of his own heart:

"The horror! The horror!"

APOCALYPSE NOW AND T.S. ELIOT

An additional literary element which Coppola includes in the film is Kurtz's reading of poetry, and particularly the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The photographer, played by Dennis Hopper, whom Marlow, Chef and Lance encounter as they first sail into Kurtz's compound, tells them that Kurtz often walks around quoting poetry. He gives the example:

***“I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas***

This comes from Eliot’s poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, about a timid man who fails to confront an “overwhelming question”. Kurtz seems to have aimed the quote at the photographer, who readily admits to Willard that he is a “little man” whereas Kurtz is a “great man”. Unlike Prufrock, both Kurtz and Willard are men who are forced to confront themselves and ask “overwhelming questions”.

At the end of the film, when Willard is incarcerated with Kurtz in the gloom of his inner sanctum, Kurtz reads extracts from another T.S. Eliot poem, The Hollow Men. This poem is a series of images of frustration, lack of purpose and contradiction. People are hollow, with nothing at their core. For the epigraph of his poem Eliot took a direct quote from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the words spoken by the manager’s boy when he discovers Kurtz’s body:

“Mistah Kurtz - he dead”

So Eliot borrowed from Conrad -invoking the “lost/Violent soul” of Kurtz in contrast to the “hollow men” of the twentieth century. In turn, Coppola completes a circle by borrowing from Eliot and gives Marlon Brando’s Kurtz the words from a poem which had derived from his counterpart in the novel.

We might also suggest that Coppola tries to create a filmic equivalent of another device which Eliot called the “objective correlative”. The term refers to using an external equivalent to suggest an inner emotional reality. Thus a scene, action, image or other artistic device may be understood by the audience as relating to its objective correlative. In Apocalypse Now, an example might be the inter-cutting between the killing of the cow by hacking it to death and Willard’s assassination of Kurtz.

FILM LANGUAGE

By ‘film language’ we mean the ways in which camera movements and positioning, lighting, soundtrack and arrangements of elements within the frame influence our understanding.

The director will have made a series of deliberate choices about each shot. He/she needs to have made decisions about:

TYPE OF SHOT: Big Close-Up

Close- Up

Mid Shot

Medium Long Shot

Long Shot

Extreme Long Shot

FRAMING WITHIN SHOT

CAMERA ANGLE: High Angle

Eye Level

Low Angle

CAMERA MOVEMENT: Pan

Tilt

Track

Crane

No movement

CAMERA POSITION

LENS MOVEMENT: Zoom In

Zoom Out

No movement

FOCUS: Wide depth of field

Narrow depth of field

Soft focus

Focus “pulled” (move from one subject being in focus to another)

LIGHTING: Natural light

Artificial light

Coloured filters

Use of light and shade

LENGTH OF SHOT IN SECONDS

Shots are then edited together to produce sequences.

CREATING A SEQUENCE

A film is made up of individual shots which have been put together in a fixed sequence. The art of the filmmaker is to take shots filmed at different times, from different angles and sometimes different places and put them together to create a coherent sequence which the viewer will interpret as a coherent narrative. Our minds are so geared towards narrative that unless the filmmaker makes it clear, for example, that what is being seen is a flashback or a dream, the audience will be misled into thinking that the first shot appeared chronologically before the second, the second before the third, and so on. If two quite unrelated images are edited together, an audience will tend to create a link which makes sense of them.

LIGHTING

There are two main objectives in lighting a film.

The first is to create realism. If it is successful then the viewer will not notice it at all, the figures and sets acquiring a ‘natural’ look. The standard set up for lighting film sets is called three point high-key lighting. This produces a brightly lit scene with few areas of shadow. As the title suggests, It uses light from three positions:

* The **KEY LIGHT** is set just to the left or right of the camera and pointed towards the figure to be lit.

* The **FILL LIGHT** is placed on the other side of the camera to the key lights, also pointed towards figure to be lit. It is slightly less powerful, its purpose being to remove the shadows created by the key light and add detail.

* The **BACK LIGHT** is placed behind the figure and faces towards the camera. It defines the outline of the figure and separates it from the background, supporting the illusion of a three dimensional image.

A second objective of lighting is to do with creating a mood or emphasising aspects of a character or their motivation. This is to do with the expressive quality of the film rather than the realist aspect. Much expressive lighting illuminates only a part of the screen and makes use of areas of deep shadow. Referred to as low-key lighting, the key light will sometimes be moved from its usual position and set to one side of the figure, throwing half of their face into darkness, or creating a distorted effect by lowering the light to shine up at the figure from below. The fill lighting is also greatly reduced to create sharper, darker shadows. Filmmakers of the German Expressionist school of the 1920’s like Fritz Lang frequently used low-key lighting in their films. Later, in the 1940’s, the cycle of crime thrillers which came to be known as ‘film noir’ (from the French, literally meaning “Black Film”), also made constant use of expressive lighting to suggest hidden, dark motives at work in the characters.

Although most narratives build up to an ending which in some way resolves the developments of the plot, Coppola struggled with the way he should end *Apocalypse Now* right through until he was actually shooting the scenes with Marlon Brando.

George Lucas, who was to have directed the movie when it was conceived in 1969, describes the way that he and John Milius had originally scripted the end:

‘At that point we had an ending with a very large battle. Willard and the Kurtz character are fighting off the Viet Cong. When they finally bring in a helicopter to take him out, he (Kurtz) says ‘No, I have fought too hard for this land’ and shoots down the helicopter.’

Coppola says that he was never convinced by the way that version of the narrative was closed:

“I never cared for that ending so much. I always felt it was weak... It didn’t answer any of the moral issues, it got into a real gung-ho kind of macho comic book ending. My choice was to take it much more back to *Heart of Darkness*.”

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Although there was a fixed point to be reached - Willard kills Kurtz - the build up to that climax was eventually worked out on set. In business terms, this was hardly a sensible way to operate, as co-producer Fred Roos makes plain.

“The clock was ticking. We had to finish in three weeks or we went into a very expensive overage. So the whole company was sitting up on set around the camera waiting to shoot and Francis and Marlon would be talking about the character. Whole days would go by. This is at Marlon’s urging - but he’s getting paid for it!”

For Coppola, business had given way to his desire to get the film artistically right. He eventually worked with Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando on improvisations which would capture an ending to reflect Kurtz and Willard’s struggle with themselves rather than write a script which they simply acted out. Even beyond shooting and initial post production, uncertainty remained about the end, with the 35mm version finishing in a different way from the widescreen print. Given the sweat and toil which went into this part of the movie we might detect a hint of irony in the choice of music which opens the film; The Doors track called “The End”.

FILM IDEOLOGY

In talking about the ideology of a film we are concerned with the values and beliefs that the narrative presents.

Another contention in Derek Malcolm’s introduction is that *Apocalypse Now* doesn’t have much to do with the Vietnam war. Though it is certainly arguable whether the main concern of the film is about that conflict, the fact that the narrative is set during the Vietnam war means that inevitably certain things concerning that experience will be represented to us. Certainly both George Lucas and John Milius considered that *Apocalypse Now* was a film about the Vietnam war when they originally scripted it:

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“The war was taking on an interesting character then (1969). It was becoming a psychedelic war. The culture was seeping into South East Asia; this strange US culture that was going on, where you really get the feel that it is a rock ‘n roll war. Things had gone a little further than anyone had realised.”

John Milius

“At the time that we were developing this no-one knew about all the drugs that were over there, no-one knew about all the craziness that was going on, a lot was being kept back. So it was a chance to make a movie that could reveal a lot of things. If/hat we’d done was to string together a lot of John’s anecdotes and things he’d got from his friends who’d served out there. It was like a quest or a trek or something that would take us through the various aspects of the Vietnam war and we would see it for the insanity that it was.

George Lucas

Apocalypse Now was one of the first movies made in Hollywood about the Vietnam war. As the war is now seen as a defining moment in 20th century American history it has spawned numerous other films: The Green Berets, The Deerhunter, Full Metal Jacket, Platoon, Hamburger Hill, the Rambo movies, Born on the Fourth of July, Casualties of War. These films constitute a distinctive sub-genre within the ‘war film’ category.

Just as American public opinion was deeply divided over the war, so conflicting ideologies can be traced in the messages of the films listed. Different inflections will be apparent in each one. Some glorify the violence of war. Others present it as a necessary and justifiable cause. Another group see it as a tragedy, an “insanity” as George Lucas described it. What all of them have in common is a concern for the effects on Americans, usually the individual Americans who are focused on in the narrative. The viewpoint of the people of Vietnam, from either the north or the south, is not represented in anything other than a cursory way by any of these movies.

Finally, you need to realise that ‘ideology spotting’ is not a simple process. You are unlikely to be able to sum up in one cogent sentence the ideology of any film. There are likely to be conflicts and contradictions as well as some more easily identifiable points of view.

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