

Apocalypse Now

(1979 , Coppola, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL) Component 1: American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study & narrative

- Francis Ford Coppola is renowned as a leading figure of New Hollywood and an auteur; along with the *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990), *Apocalypse Now* represents his greatest work. It is also significant as one of the greatest anti-war movies and one of the first films to critique the Vietnam War. A film renowned for its production excesses, it remains evidence of a cult film phenomenon which nearly destroyed its producers and some of its principal cast and crew.
- The mainly linear narrative takes place at the peak of the Vietnam War (1969) and concerns a battle hardened USA special forces soldier, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), who is secretly sent upriver, into the depths of the jungles bordering Vietnam, to assassinate a charismatic, rogue American Colonel, Kurtz (Marlon Brando) who is waging his own private war and embarrassing the USA Government.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences - beginning and ending

- 02.18 - A composite image of the film's anti-hero protagonist, Captain Willard. He is significantly shot in an intense BCU and upside down – his world is literally and metaphorically inverted. The central image of a hellish fire

consuming beautiful nature reflects how his mind is trapped in the horrific jungle war taking place across Vietnam and the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia. To the left the impassive all-seeing eyes of a Buddhist statue, contrasts his personal chaos with the inner peace of Eastern philosophy. The music accompanying this hypnotic dream-like sequence is the epic song by *The Doors*, 'The End'. The lyric accompanying this particular set of images is 'in our desperate land': referring perhaps to both America and Vietnam

- 03.01.16 - Kurtz's dying words: '*The horror...the horror...*'. A quote from Marlow, the character whom Kurtz is based on, from Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*. The words refer to the dark centre of human nature that is unleashed in barbarous conditions like those found in an isolated jungle or a chaotic war zone.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- 02:35:25 - Willard finally meets Kurtz in his jungle hideout. This is the first close-up of Kurtz other than archive photographs seen earlier in the film. Whilst talking to Willard, Kurtz emerges out of the darkness like a monster or a dead person – lit with ghoulish yellow, LK light the effect is disturbing. Centrally framed Kurtz seems imposing and dismissive of Willard; a powerful man but one who is both spiritually and physically diseased.

Mise-en-Scène

- 00.35-01.13 - The first line of *The Doors*' song *The End* has the mournfully sung lyric, '*This is the End*'. The lyric echoes the onscreen destruction of a beautiful and untouched Eden by the devilish nightmare of Napalm (an explosive petroleum jelly).

- 47:19 - Robert Duval as Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, a tough, brutal, and charismatic officer in charge of an Air Cavalry regiment consisting largely of Helicopter gunships. The regiment is summoned to attack a Vietnamese village by bugle call and Kilgore sports a Union officers stetson – the connection to the genocidal destruction of the indigenous Native Americans is made. Kilgore is a surf loving maverick, so convinced of his indestructibility that he strips to the waist as the counter-attack rages around him. After calling in a napalm attack on the jungle treeline he utters those eerie, iconic lines: *'I love the smell of napalm in the morning. ... It smells like victory. Some day this war is going to end.'* It's interesting to think who Kilgore would have blamed for the eventual fall of Saigon in 1975 and the ignominious retreat in defeat by the USA on Helicopters. In Vietnam the cavalry did not turn up at the last moment to save the day.

Editing

- 37:13-37:14 - The dramatic cut from a noisy and bombastic air cavalry attack, accompanied by diegetic Wagnerian music (see below) is contrasted in a shocking manner with the peaceful scenes of village life (consisting largely of women and singing schoolchildren).
- 00:10 - 07:16 - See the opening sequence with its brilliant use of composite cross-dissolves to communicate Willard's broken state of mind. The sequence is also very useful to explore in terms of all micro features – especially mise-en-scène and performance.

Sound

- The helicopter attack to Wagner's stirring, *The Ride of the Valkyries* (see above): the music starts as diegetic but becomes non-diegetic. The choice of music by the anti-Semite Wagner plays on the idea of a racist agenda at work as well as adding to the realism of the scene.
- Only seconds after listening to a tape recorded letter from his Mum, Mr Clean (Washburne), a young boy of 17, (19 was the average age of Vietnam conscripts), lies dead. The terrible diegetic, contrapuntal sound design as the crew cradle Clean's corpse and the tape keeps playing is heart-breaking.
- Willard provides voice over narration throughout the film. His first words – stream of consciousness – occur as he wakes from the nightmares that introduce the film and peers through his room's blinds (a trope of entrapment)

at a busy street scene below: (04:10-05: 47) *'Saigon. Shit! I'm still only in Saigon. Every time I think I am going to wake up back in the jungle. ...when I was home after my first tour it was worst ... I'd wake up and there'd be nothing ... I hardly said a word to my wife until I said 'yes' to a divorce. When I was here I wanted be there. When I was there all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I'm here a week now. Waiting for a mission... Each time I looked around, the walls moved in a little tighter.'* His delivery is dead pan, resigned and depressed. He is a man who has fought so much he has forgotten why he is fighting; all he knows is that he fights. As a representation of a dehumanised soldier the performance is electrifying. His last voice-over monologue (02:57:48) suggests that despite having killed Kurtz, Willard will remain as conflicted and alienated as ever: *'They were going to make me a Major for this and I wasn't even in their fucking army anymore'*.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

Gender

- Gender is clearly treated in the film through a lack of female representation (see below.) The war is presented to us as a Western man's war. However there are many unnamed Vietnamese women portrayed – some playing brave gun toting fighters as well as the more conventional victims of war. Their purposeful and serious identities contrasts with the idealised and sexually objectified Western *Play Girl* centrefolds.

Age

- Age is treated largely through the naivety of Mr Clean and Lance, two teenage grunts into dancing, rock music, drugs and surfing. The tragedy of the junk boat massacre, where the Americans slaughter a Vietnamese family, is intensified by the fact that they're scared trigger happy kids spooked by a young girl's attempt to rescue her puppy – the young slaughtering the young. Otherwise the young Vietnamese we see are conventionally presented as helpless victims.

Ethnicity

- The film sets up from the very beginning the binary opposites of East v West. The film

however is presented to us from only the West's perspective. Even when Willard finally makes it to Kurtz's jungle hideout we learn about the man from Dennis Hopper's drug addled American photojournalist and not from the mouth of one of his indigenous soldiers. The Vietnamese are largely silent throughout this film (see below).

Women

- 3 real 1973/4 *Playboy* Playmates, entertain the troops deep in the jungle on a surreal set overseen by phallic replicas of missiles. The girls are dressed as a cowgirl, a native American squaw and a Union cavalry officer and dance sexually with guns. These representations are referencing a mythic and violent part of American history where an indigenous race was effectively exterminated by a technically superior white force – an obvious parallel with the fighting in Vietnam. Equally the sexualisation of the women is a critique of the obscene values imported from the West into the East – one where the phallic power of the gun is fetishized. Local Vietnamese villagers look on bemused through the fencing around the site. The show descends into farce and riot as the soldiers try to mob the girls who fly off in a helicopter. A war zone is no place for fantasy and idealisation.
- These representations of women are the only ones given lengthy screen time in the film's first release. Coppola addressed this with the *Redux* release with the inclusion of two further scenes. The first is with an embittered and embattled enclave of French colonials and an opium smoking Colonist who Willard joins in a pipe and then sleeps with. The second is of two of the Playmates. Their helicopter has been grounded due to lack of fuel. Their tour manager barter time spent with them for fuel. The attempted sex with Lance and Chef is clumsy and awkward and the girls talk in a distracted way with the men as if they are not quite present. The effect of the scene, particularly when one couple accidentally upends an occupied coffin and displays the corpse inside, is very unnerving and distressing. There is no love in their lovemaking: even Willard's sexual encounter takes place through a gauze of opium and netting. War, it seems, distorts all beauty and feeling – even that feminine feeling offered as a conventional counterpoint to male brutality.
- Willard arrives in the battle zone, only to discover a camera crew is there before him – Coppola is playing the director of course. The

director is yelling at Willard not to stop and not to look at the camera – just like a movie director! This is a self-reflexive critique of the media's parasitic approach to war – seeing it as a slick spectacle to entertain the masses rather than a grim and confused reality.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- War is beautiful - Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro shot the principal photography of the film for which he won an Oscar in 1980. Many critics and fans have remarked on the beautiful cinematography – yes, it maybe glorifies something that is hideous, but equally it transforms the real into the surreal which was clearly something Coppola wanted to achieve.
- War is surreal - See the scenes involving the *Playboy* girls and then the Media. The scene involving the fighting (dealt with below) at the Do Lung Bridge; the 'Charlie don't surf' scene and the helicopter attack and its use of Wagner's music are equally strange. Throughout the film river mists and smoke from flares and fires seem to be permanently presenting disorientating barriers in time and place, creating a dream-like atmosphere. Coppola commented on the madness of the film and its theme: '*My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam,*' he said. '*The way we made it is the way Americans were in Vietnam. We had too much money, too much equipment and little by little we went insane.*'
- War is pointless – The Do Lung Bridge scene (01:44:33) - The Do Lung Bridge – the arse-hole of the world. Chief (the boat's captain) comments on the futility of war as Willard decides to move on, up river, away from the carnage, derangement and chaos at the Do Lung Bridge: '*...like this bridge, we build it every night, Charlie blows it right back up again. Just so the generals can say the roads open.*'

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- A counter-culture classic – anti-war, anti-government, humanist and bleak. As a document of the Vietnam War (1955-1975) it is peerless.

Historical

- One of the first films about a war still fresh in people's minds. Vietnam was an unpopular

war in the USA and around the World; it was also the first TV war so negative coverage predominated in what became a war of attrition involving huge civilian casualties as well as just over 360,000 USA dead or wounded. At least 2,000,000 Vietnamese civilians died.

- See the boat search scene which ends in tragedy when Willard's trigger happy crew get spooked and kill everyone on board only to find that one of the little children was trying to protect a puppy.

Political

- Anti-war and clearly offering a counter-culture view of American interventionist foreign policy and a hypocritical and ineffective military.

Technological

- The Oscar Winning sound design and editing by Walter Murch was ground-breaking – using synthesisers to mimic helicopters amongst other sounds – all helping to create a hallucinogenic aural atmosphere that perfectly complements the film's visuals. The film was the first to be mixed using a computer and is the first to credit anyone as a Sound Designer. The film is also notable for being one of the first released with surround sound or 'Dolby 5.1': a stereo format that is now standard.

Institutional

- The film was re-released in 2001 with an extra 49 minutes' worth of footage – so hardly a Director's Cut but rather a film with missing sequences added by the director from the many hours of footage originally shot.
- The film won numerous awards, such as the 1979 Cannes Palme D'Or for Best Film and with 8 nominations at the 1980 Academy Awards it won Best Cinematography and Best Sound. It also did well at the box office on both its initial release and its *Redux* release.
- The film is also interesting in seeing two generations of 'method actor' (Brando and Sheen) playing opposite each other – although by all accounts neither actor was as focussed in terms of their method as they needed to be: Brando turned up on set overweight and without having read Conrad's novel; Sheen had a nervous

breakdown and a near fatal heart attack.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur

Starting points

- Counter-culture - Aside from the film's alternative take on the Vietnam War and America's interventionist policy overseas there are many scenes of drug taking (hash, LSD, Opium) and the liberal use of counter-culture music by artists such as *The Doors* and *The Rolling Stones*.
- The film is a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's anti-colonial and pessimistic novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Playing on this book's similarities with the production process, Coppola's wife released a 'making of documentary', called *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* in 1991. Coppola is clearly content to adapt existing literature for the screen, revisiting Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1992 and Mario Puzo's contemporary bestseller, *The Godfather*, in 1972. All of these films and *Apocalypse Now* have a Catholic's vision of human nature corrupted (the fall of man), good and evil in battle, and an epic scale.
- Brando can also be seen as an auteur in this film – inflecting with his literal and metaphorical weight the whole project. As one of Hollywood's first wave of method actors and certainly its most famous, Brando soon gained a reputation for being a difficult performer to work with. The intensity of his performances was, it seems, matched by an intense working relationship. This is clearly evidenced in his work in *Apocalypse Now* for in the few scenes he appears in he is magnetic despite having weight issues necessitating the use of a body double in some long shots. Brando's eventual obsession with the character of Kurtz also contributed to the film's budgetary problems. These started when a storm destroyed sets, the Philippine army requisitioned the helicopters they had loaned Coppola in order to fight insurgents and culminated with Martin Sheen's near fatal heart attack. The arrival of a bloated and under-prepared but subsequently obsessed Brando

was the icing on a rapidly crumbling cake.