

## PLATOON

*A retrospective by Jonathan Lighter*

An epigraph like “Rejoice O young man in thy youth...”—Ecclesiastes” must signpost a movie of unusual seriousness, and those words on a dead-black background form the opening shot of *Platoon* (1986), Oliver Stone’s harrowing, worm’s-eye account of infantry combat in the Vietnam War. The first images are those of newbie Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) deplaning from the black maw of a C-123 into the shimmering heat, blinding glare, and swirling dust of an air base in the Republic of Vietnam. To show just how muted any rejoicing will be, Stone immediately shows Taylor and his fellow innocents a flatbed trailer laden with bagged American corpses for return shipment on the same plane. And for the next three quarters of an hour, *Platoon* draws a graphic picture of the Vietnam War as seen by one unworldly young volunteer. It is probably the most shocking portrayal of Americans at war since Robert Aldrich’s almost equally stagey, and equally jolting, *Attack!* (1956), set during the battle of Hürtgen Forest. Unlike most Hollywood directors, Stone had actually fought in South Vietnam, was twice wounded, and was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious action in combat. His personal knowledge and his meticulous care for visual and auditory detail lend *Platoon* an undisputed authenticity.

For almost the first time on a Hollywood screen, the wounded in *Platoon*, like real people, thrash, cry, and welter in their own blood. An NVA soldier is blasted into a mute, jaw-working blob. Anxious, unsmiling medics (rather than George Romero’s zombies or the clown-surgeons of *M\*A\*S\*H*) get slick with gore to the elbows. A man who’s earned a medal stabs himself to get out of combat. A bulldozer rolls piles of dead into a mass grave. And there are lesser elements previously elided or at least downplayed in conventional Hollywood war epics, as though they simply don’t count: flesh-cutting saw grass, biting fire ants, humming mosquitoes, lurking cobras, and the nauseating burning in diesel fuel of latrine-loads of human excrement. (There’s also a beautiful Conradian shot of a tarantula creeping up the face of a stone Buddha in the still moonlight: the exotic, patient East, the jungle, the undisguised malevolence of nature all in one image.) Of the casual verbal obscenities, which the strait-laced found offensive (just as they had almost forty years earlier in the case of Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*), the poet Bruce Weigl, another Vietnam veteran, wrote with enthusiasm that Stone

“celebrate[d] the language by which we speak and imagine and love and hate and bless and curse daily.”

But the ambitious Stone—independently directing a screenplay he’d written in the ‘70s that was rejected by every studio—wants to make a statement about Life as well as about Vietnam. To do so he injects consuming cultural, racial, moral, and personal conflicts into his symbolic platoon, which thus becomes an artificial microcosm of the American body politic of the late 1960s. Regrettably Stone’s splendid talent for depiction gets subordinated midway through to a portentous, allegorical battle between a Christ-like sergeant of Benevolence (Elias, played by Willem Dafoe) and a merciless sergeant of Nihilism (Barnes, played by Tom Berenger). (Aldrich’s *Attack!* likewise featured the disintegration of a small unit, but in it Lieutenant Costa’s desire for vengeance on the indecisive, half-insane Captain Cooney was without symbolic overlay.) Barnes shoots Elias to keep Elias from getting him court-martialed for killing a hysterical Vietnamese woman and threatening to blow a child’s head off. (Fans of Tony Nelson’s country-western “Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley”—said to have sold 200,000 sides in a few days in 1971—may find even the possibility of court-martial inexplicable.) Taylor too, surprisingly or not given the overwrought circumstances, winds up committing murder, even if the dying and despicable Barnes has dared Taylor to finish him off. One hopes that watching the destruction of Good by Evil, then revenging himself on the latter, has taught Taylor some kind of heavy lesson. But what? That Good must take up Evil to fight Evil? That Good and Evil are sides of the same coin? Or is it that the Vietnam War functioned as an arena for some unresolved struggle between Good and Evil in America’s heart?

It’s hard to know, but that’s certainly what Taylor’s final voiceover suggests while he’s being medevacked from the battlefield:

I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there, the rest of my days as I’m sure Elias will be, fighting with Barnes for...possession of my soul.

If you’re over eighteen, perhaps these musings are simultaneously all too dramatic and all too pat. (Stone’s difficulty in sorting his various purposes is clear: in media statements he’s likened Barnes and Elias to Hector and Achilles, Ahab and Billy Budd—with Taylor as Henry Fleming and Ishmael.) But Stone’s visceral realism—making for the most intense cinematic images of small-unit combat that had yet

been seen—surely did not need the help of a Manichaean struggle and a trace dose of cringe-worthy dialogue (“Barnes ain’t meant to die! The only thing that can kill Barnes is Barnes!” Barnes: “I am Death”).

Stone has often acknowledged Chris Taylor to be a thinly disguised portrait of the director as a young man. As played by the callow-looking, teenaged Charlie Sheen, Taylor is a soft-faced cipher who, like Stone, joined the army partly out of patriotism and partly to humble himself to life at its worst. Taylor sees, fails, suffers, succeeds, momentarily goes berserk, thinks and speaks in platitudes, learns his debt to experience, and finally asserts the blameless but unoriginal obligation “to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what’s left of our lives to find a goodness and a meaning to this life.” These banalities, however, have the intended effect of making Chris Taylor one of the most true-to-life young soldiers in film.

Stone, moreover, assured *Time* magazine that, aside from the plot devices of murder and extreme antipathy between the platoon’s “heads” (pot-smoking draftees) and “juicers” (hard-drinking professionals), all of the film’s principal occurrences really happened, though he acknowledged elsewhere that the other “fifty per cent” of *Platoon* is based on hearsay. Thus the movie is partly a pop-culture anthology of Vietnam “moments,” including what nearly turns into a My Lai-style massacre, and in spite of Stone’s later disclaimers, *Platoon* seems to have led many audiences to assume, on the basis of Stone’s personal credentials as the man who was there, that GIs murdered civilians, raped young women, and razed Vietnamese villages whenever convenient. (The Nazi ensign just noticeable on a U.S. assault vehicle after the climactic battle does nothing to forestall such an interpretation.)

Stone quit Yale at nineteen and, under the spell of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, as he has said, headed to Indochina, where he taught English to Taiwanese students in Saigon. After working his way home as an engine-wiper on a merchant ship, he dropped out of Yale a second time. Directionless and depressed, and needing to escape from his privileged background, Stone enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1967. He recalled that he was “eager to get to the war” and believed that fighting the spread of communism was a potentially “glorious” necessity. Rather like Mailer in World War II, Stone requested a combat assignment, wishing like so many humanitarian artists to “hang out with people who have no education, who come from nowhere” and “see reality in all its darkest colors, as the lowest common denominator among men.” He had felt the need, in fact, to be “reborn.” An incisive exchange in *Platoon* between the white Taylor and the black Private King has the piquancy of real life:

KING: You's a crazy fucker, givin' up college.

TAYLOR: ... I wasn't learning anything. I figured why should just the poor kids go off to war and the rich kids always get away with it? ...

KING: Shit. You gotta be rich in the first place to think like that. Everybody know the poor always bein' fucked over by the rich. Always have, always will.

Stone's own youthful idealism is reflected in Taylor's earlier characterization of his squad mates:

They come from the end of the line, most of them, small towns you never heard of: Pulaski, Tennessee; Brandon, Mississippi; Fortbend, Utah; Wampum, Pennsylvania. Two years' high school's about it. Maybe if they're lucky, a job waiting for them back in a factory. But most of 'em got nothing. They're poor. They're the unwanted. Yet they're fighting for our society and our freedom.

They're the bottom of the barrel, and they know it. They're the best I've ever seen. ... The heart and soul.

This sympathetic voiceover long precedes the crises that strip away Taylor's Whitmanesque faith in the goodness of the common man.

Combat veterans and film critics alike praised *Platoon* for being a devastating record of a time and place as well as being the most authentic-looking and -sounding combat movie ever made, a distinction not to be challenged till *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Reviewers were sometimes deeply unnerved: David Denby of New York came out rattled and "close to tears," while David Thomson of California promised filmgoers "tears of pity and wonder." In conservative circles the film was labeled "left-wing propaganda," "repellent," and an "insult to every Vietnam veteran"; more radical reviewers decried it as a vacuous "B-movie for liberals" or as a "maudlin" exercise in Reaganite self-pity for a war that could have been won. Radio Hanoi's response was to laud *Platoon* for accurately depicting "U.S. soldiers' crimes" against the Vietnamese as it recognized "the ideological struggle between the good and evil of the American GI who was still conscientious and humane."

Like *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stone's *Platoon* ends as an ambiguous coming-of-age tale. Stephen Crane's pervasive, nearly obsessive, irony in the *Red Badge* makes us wonder whether Henry Fleming, after battle, is now truly a "man," even if the narrator says so and Henry is bathed in glorious sunlight. In a similar vein, Stone, with the wisdom of maturity, airlifts Chris away from the battlefield as a young man who thinks, perhaps naively, that he has learned more than he apparently can express.

Aside from the highly colored tales of Ambrose Bierce, cynicism and bitterness were rare American literary attitudes in the days of Stephen Crane, particularly in regard to the Civil War. In the iconoclastic twentieth century, however, *Platoon* in the '80s put on screen much of the deep cynicism and profound bitterness about Vietnam that had arisen in the 1960s and that had been explored in '70s novels by veterans like Larry Heinemann and Gustav Hasford. As for Stone himself, he seems far more than his alter ego Chris Taylor to have been embittered by Vietnam. Twenty years after he left the Army in 1968, Stone recalled that "I went over to Vietnam right-wing. I came back an anarchist."

## APOCALYPSE NOW

### *A retrospective by Jonathan Lighter*

The *Washington Post* reported that a preview showing of *Apocalypse Now* in 1979 left an audience of filmgoers “ashen” and “shell-shocked.” For so unconventional a movie, that sounds like praise indeed. But two days later, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* was writing it off as “an adventure yarn with delusions of grandeur.” In theaters everywhere many were baffled, others exhilarated (or bored), not a few outraged. It was like a mass premiere of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.

Exactly ten years earlier screenwriter John Milius had sucked the soul from Conrad’s ruminative *Heart of Darkness* (1899), replaced it with notions of Vietnam inflated from Michael Herr’s contemporaneous reporting in *Esquire*, and turned the result into a lurid action script he cheerfully called *Apocalypse Now*. It was a nihilistic travesty of the Vietnam war, climaxing with a local Armageddon between armies of the God-crazed and the Marx-crazed. Though that script was never produced, Milius’s film-school friend, director Francis Coppola, saw in the conjunction of Conrad’s *Darkness* and Vietnam the potential for something lofty and deep. Coppola and Milius eventually revised the 1969 script, with Coppola chiefly responsible for a new weightiness of intention as well as for the musings of Conrad’s enigmatic Kurtz in the guise of a psychotic Green Beret colonel, eventually played by Marlon Brando. In 1978, in the final stages of revision, Coppola hired Michael Herr himself to write internal-monologue voiceovers for Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), Milius’s uningratiating stand-in for Conrad’s Victorian pillar of the community, Marlow. (Herr, in his recently published *Dispatches*, had invoked Conrad independently, describing journalist Sean Flynn as sometimes looking “like Artaud coming out of some heavy heart-of-darkness trip.) Sometimes Herr’s film-noir dialogue was trenchant (“Charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500”), and sometimes it wasn’t (“Everyone gets everything he wants; and for my sins, they gave me a mission”).

Well, that always-gratified “everyone” certainly did not include Francis Coppola, co-writer of the hit *Patton* (1970), which had appealed to hawks and doves alike. It would be indecent not to list—once again—the director’s worst trials during nearly two years of filming overseas: first came Typhoon Olga to sweep away his sets in the Philippines; next, star Martin Sheen suffered a nearly fatal heart attack in the jungle; Coppola went bankrupt, then began coming apart at the seams; incredibly, he and his wife were briefly hospitalized for malnutrition. No one can say that Francis Coppola was not an *auteur’s auteur*.

The years of development and the misfortune that dogged production, along with Coppola's ungodly budget (conservatively said to have exceeded \$12,000,000) had made *Apocalypse Now* an industry *cause célèbre* even before its 1979 release. It was no secret either that Coppola desperately wanted to create more than a mere blockbuster. He wanted his work, he said, to epitomize the "Vietnam experience" as a vision of America foundering in Asia. "I had a list of things that made the Vietnam War," Coppola said; "use of helicopters, use of drugs, black guys, young guys in the front lines...and I checked them off as I conceived of scenes." In other hands, this marshaling of random clichés might have been a recipe for outright disaster. But though Michael Herr had covered the war for nine months in '67-'68 and penned its most highly acclaimed classic, neither Coppola nor Milius had been in it, and it's likely that the farther one had been from Vietnam, the better the movie seemed to be. But so potent is its sorcery, the bad-trip realism that foregrounds brilliant images of the commonplace, the conceivable, and the absurd, that romantics find in it the definitive artistic interpretation of the Second Indochina War. (Only philistines will be deterred by the fact that much of what's on screen is preposterous.) And so deeply has *Apocalypse* etched itself into the pop culture of the world that in 2001, two decades after its premiere, Coppola released a new version under the title *Apocalypse Now Redux*.

Probably no director's cut of any film had been so carefully overhauled. Coppola and editor Walter Murch reintegrated some fifty minutes of excised scenes and spruced up existing ones with alternative shots from different angles. More ponderous than the original, *Redux* adds, among lesser moments, a dreamlike, historically charged episode at a ghostly French rubber plantation and another (a little off-topic) revealing the ultra-hot Playmates of the film's riotous USO show to be vapid, sexually commodified people enslaved by the glitz of show biz. Also added is a meaningful scene of Kurtz (Marlon Brando) sarcastically intoning optimistic reports on the light in the tunnel from *Time* magazine. These self-deluding articles are entirely genuine. (One of them asserts that the war is going so well that the Johnson administration is afraid to tell the skeptical public how bright the future truly is.) But there is also a distracting, useless sequence of Willard stealing a surfboard, which unfortunately edges out the extraordinary "Monkey Sampan" scene, with Kurtz's Khmers ritually chanting "Light My Fire." ("Monkey Sampan"—which is said to condense the theme of the entire movie into three minutes of imagery—is fortunately available on the Blu-Ray release *Apocalypse Now: The Full Dossier*, as well as on YouTube). Obviously *Redux* provides aficionados with plenty to talk about.

But either edition of Coppola's film well exemplifies the phrase "problematic masterpiece." Many reviewers in 1979 admired Vincent Steraro's stunning cinematography while expressing their uncertainty and irritation about the whole package. *Apocalypse* was a ravishing spectacle, yes, but what kind of a war movie *was* this that rejected every formula of the genre? What kind of a Hollywood hero was Captain Ben Willard—a CIA assassin whose very name combined those of two horror-movie rodents of the '70s? Were the ramblings and recitations of the giant outlaw Kurtz really more than hot air? Did all the sound and fury signify more than *nada*? Or, as suggested by novelist, later senator, James Webb, a former Marine officer with thirteen months in-country, was Coppola's Vietnam above all a greed-driven ego-trip that slandered veterans and trivialized an international tragedy?

Most the continuing popularity of *Apocalypse* among audiences too young to recall the era must come from its visuals and its sheer stylistic craziness. For no one who was not an American adult during the war can fully appreciate how well Coppola (and Sheen) manage to suggest, through the continual look of disbelief in Willard's hard eyes, the dread of impending and endless chaos that the war engendered. Plans backfired, ideals were contorted; there were weekly body counts on TV and nightly blastings and blood, a suddenly yawning "generation gap," the once popular LBJ renouncing office. There was "Love it or leave it!" American military and diplomatic power stymied, accusations of cowardice on one hand and war crimes on the other. Then came Tet, My Lai, Kent State, Jackson State, GIs throwing away their medals, Nixon's "secret plan" to end the war that mainly kept it going, and on and on, all played out against a seething backdrop of assassinations, riots on the left and on the right, LSD, and radical denunciations of Western culture and cultural imperialism. As for Hollywood *The Green Berets* (1968) had tried to make the conservative case for the war, John Wayne-style. After the fall of Saigon, it became the liberals' turn.

Believing that American involvement in Vietnam perfectly exemplified the moral quicksands of war in general, Coppola also spoke of trying to create an archetypal, mythopoeic narrative applicable to every war. His success in that regard is questionable, but retrospect makes one thing clear. Coppola's *Apocalypse* is one of the bitterest and most elaborate *satires* ever filmed, an epic of American folly—political, military, cultural—made tangible and terrible through events in Southeast Asia. Some reviewers went beyond Conrad to see in *Apocalypse* a resemblance to (God save the mark) *Huckleberry Finn*, because it had white guys

and black guys sailing on a river. But surely the most appropriate template is *Gulliver's Travels*.

So accustomed have we become to satire as farce—*Mad* magazine, *Catch-22*, *Doctor Strangelove*—that we can miss the deadpan irony of the Swiftian kind. Like Swift, whose Houyhnhnms judged human wars to be insane, Coppola prefers straight-faced hyperbole as the vehicle for his symbolist mock-epic. Thus *Apocalypse's* wild air assault on a VC village, though lacking gunships and impossibly backed up by heliborne Wagnerian strains of “The Ride of the Valkyries” that are audible on the ground, looks *just* authentic enough, and is violent enough, to distance itself from outright farce. One purpose of the assault, however, is farcical indeed: to secure a temporary surfing beach—and soldiers are then ordered to surf under fire. Black humor appears in the figure of the charismatic, invulnerable, ingenuous, and unhinged Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), resplendent in his Custer-era campaign hat, who famously thinks (as, apparently, did many DoD strategists) that napalm “smells like victory.” (Custer, of course, no longer the “Murat of the Plains,” now usually represents both the destruction of native cultures and disaster from reckless self-assurance.) Yet the intentionally absurd details of the assault play second fiddle to Coppola's perfectly conveyed (and perfectly appropriate) sense of murderous chaos, a sense already imparted by the preceding land, sea, and air battle, whose coordination of forces might persuade anyone that American firepower and know-how really were unbeatable. As sheer cinema, the wide-screen combat sequences in *Apocalypse* were the most masterfully staged and directed since Darryl Zanuck's seamless crane shot of the assault on Caen in *The Longest Day* (1962).

In *Apocalypse Now*, and even more plainly in *Redux*, Coppola lampoons the crassness and blind destructiveness that he sees as the source of America's sins in Asia and as primary blots on the American character. Some of his attack resembles Siegfried Sassoon's mordant buffeting of the British public in World War I. But while Sassoon imagined himself driving a battle tank over a music-hall show and audience, Coppola brings *Playboy* Playmates to a forward supply base (with a lit-up Vegas-like stage on a deep-jungle riverbank, of course) to cheer up the troops. Whatever the corporate intention, the gyrating Playmates in skimpy cowboy-and-Indian-and-cavalry costumes that implicitly (if obviously) suggest the victimization of Native Americans, torment the sex-starved GIs into a riot, with the show's personnel barely escaping in a chopper sporting a Playboy logo. Meanwhile, theoretically uninvited Vietnamese hang on to the perimeter fence to get a good look at yet another aspect of the American way. Even the nation's record of achievement as personified in Kurtz (top of his class at West Point,

doctor of philosophy, model officer), dissolves in madness for being powerless to shape recalcitrant nations to American desires, no matter how pragmatic or even legitimate those desires might seem to be. The superficial Kilgore has embraced the war's madness: the deep thinking Kurtz has succumbed to it. And much of it is simply incomprehensible to the boat's enlisted crew: the callow and panicky Clean (a young Laurence Fishburne), the frustrated Chef (Frederic Forrest), the spaced-out Lance (Sam Bottoms), and the tough, believable, by-the-book Chief (Albert Marshall).

Long immersion in Vietnam has transformed Colonel Kurtz from a smart-looking officer in a beret ("brilliant...outstanding...a humanitarian") into his precise antithesis, a featureless, enigmatic hulk in a mysterious photo only "believed to be" of him. His "unsound" methods—elicited by the success of calculated Communist brutality (hyperbolic in this case)—are part of (and here is where Coppola gets murky) an atavistic return to the era of savage priesthoods examined in James G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). (Coppola places both books by the colonel's bed as a hint to observant academics, though to most people it can mean only that Kurtz has inscrutable tastes in reading.) Frazer's account of ancient priest-kings who must be ritually killed and supplanted by their killers has greatly influenced Coppola's vision of Kurtz, while Weston's search through pre-Christian ritual for the origins of the Grail leads unmistakably to the hinted transformation of Willard into some kind of Fisher King at the French Plantation-Grail Castle. Unfortunately Coppola can't make Arthurian motifs clearly relevant to Vietnam, even with a supporting character named "Lance" whose initials are "LBJ."

Affectations from Conrad's Kurtz aside, Colonel Kurtz's conclusion that ceaseless low-tech atrocity is the only way to defeat the Communists does suggest the bedrock issue that tormented American policy-makers and public for a decade: at what point is the treatment worse than the disease? Like countless ordinary Americans, the crazy ex-genius Kurtz cannot reconcile the declared beneficence of Washington's defense of South Vietnam with what he sees first-hand in Southeast Asia. Indeed, the maddening disconnects between policy and result, between American failures and Communist successes, not to mention between West and East, have turned Kurtz as genocidal as an Old Testament prophet: his taped voice calls for the "incineration" of "Pig after pig. Cow after cow. Village after village. Army after army." It prefigures the paraphrase from Conrad that Willard finds among Colonel Kurtz's scribbblings: "Drop the Bomb! Exterminate them all!" And that doesn't mean just the "brutes" of Conrad's Kurtz: it means everybody.

To his publisher in 1896 Conrad expressed his “puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw” of cultural hypocrisy and moral corruption in the Congo, and of his consequent “indignation at masquerading philanthropy.” Coppola’s Kurtz is equally disgusted with what he now sees as masquerade. But instead of turning him against the war, as it turned Conrad against colonialism, the political masquerade, which is less philanthropic than it is strategic, sends him to the opposite extreme. To his son Kurtz has written, “Ruthless action...may, in many circumstances, be only clarity. Seeing clearly what there is to be done, and doing it directly, quickly, awake.” He assumes that a declared geopolitical goal cannot be altered, and all levels of violence are acceptable in achieving it—an axiom more usually associated with expansionist totalitarian regimes than with the “American way.”

“They call me an assassin,” says Kurtz. “What do you call it, when the assassins accuse the assassin?” One thing you might call it is hypocrisy, and another is scapegoating. Kurtz on the one hand must be “terminated” because, as the general has told Willard, he and his multicultural tribe of followers have gone murderously out of control. But as Coppola shows by intercutting Kurtz’s slaying with the ritual killing of a carabao, Willard is carrying out more than a mere covert operation. Kurtz believes he is being scapegoated for the sins of corporate and political America: his lunatic slaughter merely concentrates in a small corner of wilderness what Coppola sees as the indiscriminately destructive American policy in Indochina. And as Clausewitz knew, it is the nature of war to tend willy-nilly towards unrestrained destruction, but it is the responsibility of civilized powers to contain that tendency. That explains the decision to eliminate Kurtz. But in Coppola’s mythologized context, the military-industrial complex is also trying unconsciously to expiate its own guilt in going too far in Indochina.

While Conrad’s Victorian gentleman Marlow (educated, restrained, eloquent, capable, and decent) was a fitting reporter of vain and inhuman events in the Congo, none of Coppola’s three main characters—the disenchanting Willard, the obtuse Kilgore, or the fanatical Kurtz—can provide Marlow’s unifying moral perspective. That function is left by default to writer-director Coppola, who depicts the war (“all wars” as he has often insisted) as compounded of chaos, cruelty, stupidity, and self-deception. This conviction has rarely been made with such flair, as Coppola sends Willard up the fictional Nung River. It is a mission that begins at a soft-spoken general’s headquarters, decadent with amenities and moral platitudes, and ends in the heart of Kurtz’s Cambodian stronghold, which is as far from reason as it is from Saigon. (Nothing could keep those suspended corpses and severed heads fresh in a tropical jungle.) Willard sails through a literal and figurative wilderness

marked by at least seven deadly military and political sins, each one of them especially seductive in wartime: murder, ignorance, excess, egoism, expediency, hypocrisy, and arrogance. The dreamlike scene at the French plantation in Cambodia—one of the film's great preposterous episodes—begins with fog and ends in opium. In between is a dinner-table argument (nearly impossible to follow because it's in French and heavily accented English) about the meaning of both Indochina Wars, France's supposed moral justification for trying to retain her prize colony, the foolishness of the United States, whether America "invented" the Viet Minh, and who's a Communist and who isn't. It all amounts to blather, because no fully consistent, sensible explanation is possible for any of it. The background of America's involvement is lost in a tangle of vanities whose contemplation leaves Willard (and us) exhausted.

The movie's sense of doom begins at the beginning in a surreal scene of shadowy, circling helicopters and a distant tree line erupting in flame while Jim Morrison sings "This is the End." The confusing, oppressive mood finally becomes one of desperation and moral collapse: in Morrison's words, "a wilderness of pain [where] all the children are insane." Coppola clearly thinks the craziness of the Vietnam War and Kurtz's capacity for evil are heralds of worse things to come. Perhaps coincidentally, the word *apocalypse* originally meant not the End of the World itself, but a prophetic revelation of its hidden and terrible details. As armed chaos perpetuates itself in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, Coppola's cinematic apocalypse of futility and unreason becomes only more and more artistically relevant.