Apocalypse Now – 1979

Francis Ford Coppola’s film “Apocalypse Now” was inspired by *Heart of Darkness*, a novel by Joseph Conrad about a European named Kurtz who penetrated to the farthest reaches of the Congo and established himself like a god. A boat sets out to find him, and on the journey the narrator gradually loses confidence in orderly civilization; he is oppressed by the great weight of the jungle all around him, a pitiless Darwinian testing ground in which each living thing tries every day not to be eaten. *Roger Ebert*

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Hypocrisy of Western Imperialism

*Apocalypse Now* continually spotlights the ironies that accompanied the Vietnam War in particular and western imperialism in general. The film is not overtly antiwar, but it takes pains to reveal the atrocities of a war fought by the United States in the name of democracy and freedom. In the air strike, sampan, and bridge scenes, Coppola clearly depicts the death and destruction that result directly from U.S. involvement. Instead of helping innocent civilians, American troops kill them. They are strangers in a strange land, yet they act as if they own it, staking out territory and firing without provocation.

The film characterizes Willard’s mission as the epitome of hypocrisy: in the midst of scores of senseless killings, the U.S. military is wasting energy and lives on killing one of its highest-ranking military officials. While Kurtz may well have gone insane, it's not clear why killing him is a priority when U.S. troops and Vietnamese civilians are dying. Moreover, since the military seems to encourage assassination in war, as evidenced by Willard’s assignment, we may question why Kurtz is demonized for killing two people who may have been working against the United States. Willard points out a number of other hypocrisies in his narration. For instance, after killing the Vietnamese peasant in the sampan, he reflects, “We’d cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a Band-Aid. It was a lie.” When Willard kills the woman, the others’ perception of him changes, yet Clean is not criticized for shooting preemptively and killing an entire family—because he was following protocol.

Madness As a Result of War
The film is a metaphor for a journey into the self and shows how the self, in the face of war, darkens beyond recognition. As they move upriver, Willard and the PBR crew become more agitated and separated from reality. Each experiences his own kind of mental breakdown. Chef enters the jungle, has a run-in with a tiger, and is no longer the same—his temper becomes shorter, and he withdraws further into drugs. Lance turns to drugs too, but he also camouflages his face, signaling a changed self. When Clean is killed, Chief breaks down emotionally and becomes a changed man. Willard, already broken from his first tour in Vietnam, becomes obsessed with his target. What originally is a mysterious, exciting voyage morphs into a descent into hell, and the characters respond by hardening themselves, withdrawing, and transforming. The cinematography reflects their impending madness by cloaking the journey in darkness and fog, creating an increasingly hallucinatory atmosphere.

The Emptiness of American Values

While the Vietnamese are fighting for their homes, American troops are fighting to go home—and home, to them, is a combination of surfing, Playboy Playmates, and psychedelic rock. These values are what the soldiers in Apocalypse Now live for, and Willard often reflects upon their emptiness and absurdity. Kilgore’s introductory scene also features a team of American journalists ridiculously filming the soldiers and telling them not to look at the camera. The film crew essentially converts the war into popular entertainment, much as actual footage of Vietnam once dominated the airwaves, exacerbating the antiwar movement. After a senseless air strike, Kilgore orders his men to surf or fight. The priorities of the American officers seem confused, to say the least.

Perhaps the biggest absurdity appears when Willard and the PBR crew happen upon a military supply post where a USO show is about to take place. In showing the Playmates in Vietnam, the film highlights the contrasts between American and Vietnamese values. Frenzied U.S. soldiers drool over the women they can’t have while Vietnamese villagers eat rice calmly. Willard reflects on the contrast: “[Charlie’s] idea of great R and R was cold rice and a little rat meat. He had only two ways home: death or victory.” Meanwhile, as he speaks, American soldiers continue hooting loutishly.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Darkness

The omnipresent darkness in the film emphasizes the absence of civilization. Much of the film is shrouded in shadow, and it gets progressively darker as the PBR ventures farther into the jungle. The cinematography transforms the river from a broad, gleaming waterway to a dark, narrow stream overpowered by dense vegetation. The scene of the arrow attack is bathed in blinding fog, while
the bridge scene is bathed in darkness, lit only by flares and what appears to be a searchlight. The erratic light adds to the sense of confusion and conveys the idea that the crew is now totally beyond the comforting glow of civilization. The dark/light contrast is heightened when Willard reaches Kurtz’s compound. Kurtz’s face is almost always hidden in shadow; only rarely is it seen in full, and it is never filmed in daylight. The climax of the film heightens the contrast to an extreme, as Willard slaughters Kurtz in a scene backlit so that the figures are silhouettes. While the action takes place in darkness, the presence of light suggests a way out of madness.

Escape

The intensity of war leads the characters in Apocalypse Now to seek escape. For some, escape comes in the form of drugs or alcohol. When we are introduced to Willard, he is intoxicated to the point of delusion—he practices martial-arts moves as if he were fighting some imaginary enemy—and his intoxication is his mask against the world. Chef and Lance also seek solace in intoxication, with marijuana and LSD. The photojournalist’s mania suggests he too is hopped up on something. Escape figures in the film not only through drugs but also through frenetic lighting schemes and surrealistic sets. Often, lighting schemes, especially in the slaughter scene, suggest that despite the cloying pervasiveness of darkness, there is a bright light somewhere, always some way out.

Home

The soldiers’ longing for home permeates the film, and several scenes depict troops seeking reminders—any reminders—of life in America. At Kilgore’s camp, Kilgore strums a guitar by the fire. Willard reflects that “the more they tried to make it just like home, the more they made everybody miss it.” Music and women, especially, serve as symbols of home. Clean dances around to psychedelic rock blasting through the radio. The Playmates shimmy and strut to an emblematically American 1960s song, “Suzie Q,” reminding the troops of home and how far they are from it. The PBR crewmembers get mail at the bridge site, and they read their letters out loud. The film emphasizes that home exists as a faraway paradise for the troops. They are constantly missing it. Invariably each reminder of home makes them miss it even more but also serves to harvest further resentment for the forces that keep them in this strange, dangerous place, rather than enjoying the comfort and safety of the places they know best.
Symbols
Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Masks
Masks are used at key points throughout the film to symbolize the anti-self—the new identity each character assumes in order to deal with the war, an act that requires a symbolic killing of the old self. Willard’s smashing of his reflection in the first scene suggests such an act of self-destruction. By the end of the movie, numerous characters have donned masks or painted their faces with camouflage, signs that they are no longer themselves. When Lance seems finally to reach his breaking point, he drops acid and hides his face in camouflage paint. Kurtz’s face is often obscured by shadow or darkness, and when Kurtz throws Chef’s severed head into Willard’s bamboo cage, he does so wearing face paint. Finally, when Willard prepares to kill Kurtz, he covers his face in mud. These masks underscore the dramatic transformation of the human self during wartime.

The River
The fictional Nung River is the setting of a literal and metaphorical journey. As the river takes the boat up to Cambodia and Kurtz, the crew moves beyond civilization to the heart of darkness within themselves. After Chef and Willard venture into the jungle, Chef screams that he should not have left the boat. “Never get off the boat,” Willard muses in narration, for the river is a sanctuary from the primal darkness that lies in the jungle. The river also symbolizes transformation, as when Willard, hidden in the water, rises up from it as the new Kurtz before the assassination scene. While the river leads Willard to a place of death and despair, in the final scene it is also Willard’s escape route.

Fog
Fog suggests confusion and alienation for Willard and the rest of the crew, as they journey upriver into the unknown. By cloaking scenes in fog and mist, Coppola emphasizes the fear of the unknown, the perils of venturing too far into the subconscious, and the supremacy of the wilderness. The PBR is an easy target for anyone or anything hiding in the depths of the jungle, and fog makes this vulnerability and dislocation even more evident.

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