
a masterpiece

apocalypse now

by rené balcer

"Cinema is the most potent force in modern times, especially so when you begin to consider that cinema as we know it is going to change radically. We must realize that the world cinema will be electronic, it will be digital, it will bounce off satellites and it will create the dreams and hallucinations of the future."

Francis Coppola

"Mistah Kurtz – he dead."

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

"From my point of view, I feel that I'm a fifth-grader living in a third-grade world and anxious to get to high school."

Francis Coppola

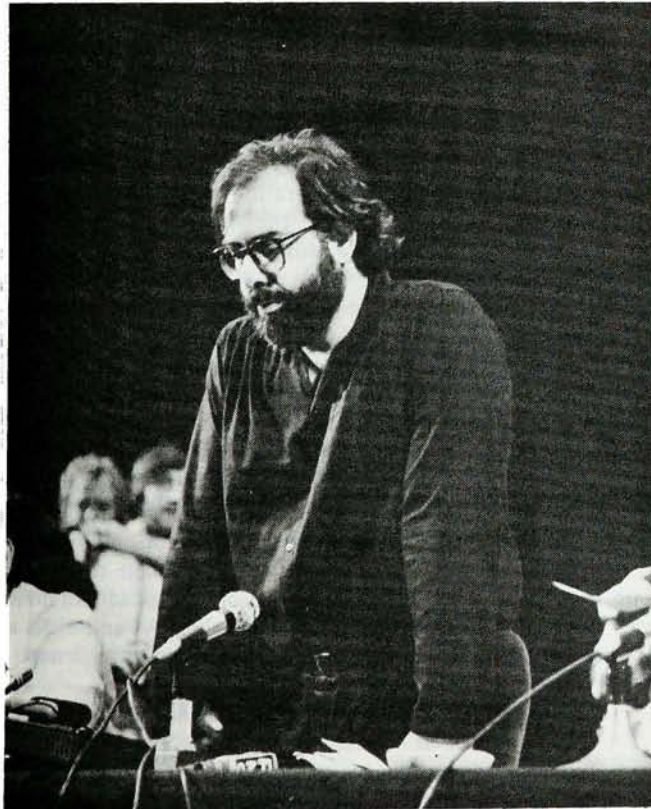


photo: CineMag

Francis Coppola, here at the Cannes press conference, is back in L.A. on his own terms

«I wanted America to look at the face of horror and to accept it,» declares Francis Coppola. He won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for his brilliant **Apocalypse Now**, a film whose scope has rarely been equalled.

It is nighttime in Laurel Canyon. Dogs bark free and dodge the halogen headlights that wind their way up the twisting canyon roads. The air is misty and filled with the dizzying fragrance of lilac and Eucalyptus. Inside a dishevelled house, Britten's **The Rape of Lucretia** joins with the barking, unleashed choir. In a back room, a softly-whirring Betamax unfurls a grizzled **Casablanca** in polka-dot schemes. Dog-eared scripts lie pell-mell on the floor, cast in an unholy glow. In a far closet, a sepia-toned Buster Keaton stares forlornly into his own shadow, a silent and shattered reminder of all the bad days Los Angeles would sooner forget. The Betamax clicks to a stop and leaves a blizzard on the archaic cathode-ray screen.

In the early morning outside Mann's Bruin Theatre in Westwood, a fifth-grader is answering nursery-school questions. The last of three previews of his work in progress, a film called **Apocalypse Now**, has just finished and those who completed the journey are ever so slowly finding their equilibrium in the cool air. A few of them hold their preview cards as an agnostic might hold a rosary. They look at the fifth-grader, envying the power of his knowledge. Preoccupied with his next high-school project, Coppola answers one last question and slips into the dying night. The third-graders are left shocked and marvelling at their first glimpse of higher education. The dawn is almost breaking in L.A. and a wind of change is blowing in from the west. It is a wind that will shake and rattle the most basic assumptions the film community has of its own medium.

Solemn prophecies and grandiose predictions are common currency in L.A. town. Accordingly, whatever pronouncements that have slipped out of tinsel lips in the past thirty years have been treated as either chill winds or sudden gusts of hot air. But the strong and steady blow now gathering on the coast is one that will sooner or later, and no less intensely, make itself felt wherever celluloid flickers through music lanterns.

*"The film changed everyone who worked on it. It was like a group of grunts, of soldiers on an expedition and, after a while, everyone was saying, 'Well, Francis is crazy, but what else can we do? Let's follow him.' I'm a much different person from who I was before starting **Apocalypse Now**. And the films I want to make are much different from what they would have been had this thing not happened to me. I think that I'm a more interesting person and I'm going to do more interesting films."*

Francis Coppola

René Balcer is a scriptwriter living in Montreal and Los Angeles

People come to Los Angeles to re-invent themselves and indulge in form at the exclusion of substance. Those who come armed with the best of intentions are often ravaged by the time they get near the top, their principles reduced to nostalgic reminiscences. Their films often reflect that the dross is the only thing left after the mill. Fresh from UCLA in the early sixties, Coppola had garnered, by the mid-seventies, enough gold to turn the best of principles and intentions to mush. But, despite at times becoming inebriated by his own power, he walked the fine line over which many before him have tripped. He stayed in San Francisco where his American Zoetrope Company has its headquarters; he produced films for then-unknown directors; he made films that challenged rather than pandered to his audiences; and he sent his company off in what he terms "odd directions" to investigate and develop bold new technology for the medium he understands so well.

His earlier claim that the future cinema will be an electronic and digital space-traveller is one that can be backed by advances in the field, some of which are taking place under Coppola's patronage. His electronic editing table, marrying video flexibility with film, has been credited for much of **Apocalypse Now's** surrealist texture. A far more sophisticated table, being developed by Laurie Post in L.A., will interface a computer's memory bank and retrieval system with laser-coded video-disks for film. Digital transmission through binary coding is in the works, a distribution system that will eliminate the static and interference seemingly inherent in video transmission, and make possible the use of large, flat wall-mounted viewing screens. Out in space, a Canadian-built

CTS satellite, being tested for broadcast purposes, will clear the way for consumer-owned mini-dish receivers. These and other developments represent a quantum leap towards a faithful and more forceful representation of a director's vision, and towards a more direct link between filmmaker and audience. With freer means of expression at the director's disposal and a more powerful experience of that expression by the audience cinema will become, in Coppola's words, "more so the collective consciousness that will link us in the future."

After San Francisco and four years in the jungle, Coppola is back in L.A. on his own terms. He has recently bought the old Hollywood General Studios and plans to turn part of it into comfortable workshops for new writers and directors, a far cry from the bad old days when scriptwriters were crammed six at a time into sparsely-furnished footlockers to bang out scripts by the light of short candles. From this Hollywood base, Coppola intends to continue and enlarge his role as producer for new or neglected filmmakers. He has said recently that those with money can't make good films while those who can make good films usually don't have the money, and that producers-directors like himself have a responsibility to produce films for those who don't have the money. With this idea in mind, he is producing Monte Hellman's (**The Shooting, Two-Lane Blacktop, China 9 Liberty 37**) next film entitled **King of White Lady**. Coppola has also said that, as far as he's concerned, the only national cinema around at present is German. Putting his money where his mouth is, he's producing Wim Wenders' first American film, **Hammett**, based on an incident in *roman noir* novelist Dashiell Hammett's life. And he's recently picked up the American distribution rights for Hans-Hurgen Syberberg's seven-hour monologue marathon **Our Hitler**. It's hard to think of a tougher film to distribute in America, but it's harder still to think of a film more worthy of American distribution.

It is a bold move on Coppola's part to take the initiative in Hollywood, a place known more for its pack filmmaking than its innovation. Without denigrating needlessly the many, though sometimes thin, virtues of the American film process, the opportunities to learn and work intelligently are few and far between in Hollywood; those that supply those opportunities, however self-serving they might seem to some, are to be treasured. Another thing to consider is that Coppola has followed through on his stated commitment to a film renaissance, from the technological developments fostered through his company to producing bold films that would otherwise not be made. And now, he has made **Apocalypse Now**, an ambitious, unconventional and ultimately successful master work that incorporates much of the coming technology and much of Coppola's peculiar psyche. More ambitious, expensive and theatrical films have been made but none have proved so challenging or so clear-headed and none have offered such hallucinations, such beauty and such a journey as that on which **Apocalypse Now** takes its audience.

"I wanted to make a stylized movie. For me that means that it can be theatrical, it can be kabuki and opera. I felt that to make a realistic film about Vietnam would be too small, so I made a theatrical film to try to get more of the sensation of what it was like. I felt that my audiences were familiar with war films so I wanted to win their confidence at first and say, 'Come with me, we start in a movie you understand, that you've seen

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before. We go a little further, we get a little stranger until, after a while, you are in a place where you've never been before.' I was given the biggest compliment by a guy who was in Vietnam, a serious man who told me, 'Now when people ask me what Vietnam was like, I can tell them to go see that film.' That's what I'm most proud of about the Vietnam aspect: it is the truth, it was an acid trip, it was crazy."

Francis Coppola

"He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'"

Joseph Conrad, **Heart of Darkness**

"...one last chopper revved it up, lifted off and flew out of my chest... no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there."

Michael Herr, **Dispatches**

The curtains are still drawn yet the sound of the jungle already fills the hall: crickets, macaques and beetles weave their chants into the sparse opening bars of The Doors' apocalyptic song "The End." The curtains part and give way to a shimmering row of palm trees bordering the Southeast Asian jungle. A Loach chopper, black and spider-like, floats by silently, followed by another until several crisscross the frame in a quiet, technological ballet. The face of a sleeping man appears, superimposed, then the egg-beater rhythms, of an overhead fan mixes with the Loach props as the fly-by goes on in the jungle. The music builds to a first spacey crescendo, suddenly, the green erupts in a torrent of napalm fire, the smell of victory, the answer to every grunt's prayers. The nightmare journey of **Apocalypse Now** has begun.

The plot, adapted from Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**, is laid out quickly. Woken from a cognac-and-vomit sleep, Capt. Willard (Martin Sheen) is dispatched to the headwaters of the Mekong to kill Col. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a Green Beret SF officer who has succumbed, in the isolation of his posting, to the temptation of playing God. Up the river Willard goes on a boat skippered by Albert Hall and manned by a Harlem street punk (Larry Fishborne), an acid-dropping Californian (Sam Bottoms) and a thirtyish ex-cook (Fred Forrest). On the trip, he runs into Lt. Col. Killer Kilgore (Robert Duvall), a hotshot helicopter commander who delights in leaving death cards on the bodies of dead V.C., into Bill Graham who's hosting a Playboy R&R show on a floating helicopter pad and into Coppola himself as a combat television reporter.

As the implements of civilized amorality are stripped away, the journey turns into a progress towards the core of the human soul where bare-faced terror hashes it out with unadulterated beauty, a confrontation with the human dialectic which has plagued us since primitive times. Coppola has removed the politics from his film to distill the basic horror of the war, exposing the underlying hypocrisy and fear that motivated the killing and scarring of millions, the devastation of two countries, and, least important of all, the expenditure of billions of dollars. But, at the same time, Coppola has captured the seductive beauty of war, of its machines and of its no-holds-barred savagery sacrilegious as that beauty might be. In the end one comes out feeling on the one hand, blameless but, on the other, ultimately responsible.

Coppola has said that the film was not about Vietnam but that it was Vietnam. Though he was in part referring to the production itself ("We were in too long, overbudget and we were in a state of chaos."), he was also indicating that the film does not pretend to involve its audience in a drama but in an experience, in a boisterous quasi-Japanese meditation on the human condition reminiscent of Kurosawa's 50's films (**Seven Samurai, Throne of Blood**). The goal is met by first setting the audience off balance with surrealist images and unique sounds and then by keeping them in a state of heightened tension, giving one the impression of not being in control, much like going through an earth tremor that lasts for three hours.

With haunting and sumptuous photography that frames operatic special effects and strange incidents drawn from a vet's notebook, Coppola and cinematographer Vittorio Storaro (**Last Tango in Paris**) fill the film with images rich in beauty yet full of horror, from a harrowing chopper strike accompanied by Wagner's **Ride of the Valkyries** (connotations courtesy of Riefenstahl and Lang) to a free-fire zone on the edge of the chasm where, night after bloody night, grunts and V.C. face off to the tunes of Jimi Hendrix, to the smoke-shrouded ruins of a Cambodian temple where Kurtz reigns over his war-painted Green Berets and ash-covered Montagnard tribesmen. As the journey progresses and the moral frames of reference dissipate, the images and incidents become more and more primitive - but Coppola prevents his film from being staccato and episodic through the use of generous dissolves and superimpositions and by respecting the day/night continuum, all of which reinforce the film's - and the audience's journey.

The soundtrack represents another innovation: through the



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use of quintaphonic sound, bullets and jets criss-cross the hall, with muffled conversations placed in the aural middle-ground, dialogue in front, screams in the back and choppers overhead (the whomph-whomph of Hueys is one sound that, once you've heard it, you never forget), all backed by Carmine Coppola's eerie synthetic music. Through this sound, the audience is involved on all levels of confusion and tension with the war that's unfolding in front of them. Again, more points are scored in favor of the film's thematic.

Coppola captures the beauty of savagery down to its smallest details; whether it's a Loach spitting down death in bright streamers, the fire-flare of a chopper-mounted Minigun or the awesome presence of a Phantom jet wasted in the Mekong, the camera picks out their undisputed beauty. Not merely pretty pictures but a gut-level seductiveness. In one of the most telling scenes, two grunts are set upon and given the scare of their lives by a tiger, and it is with this tiger that Coppola's motif can best be illustrated. Aside from having the grunts scared out of their flak jackets not by a V.C. attack — which we expect — but by one of nature's own, the tiger underlines the duality examined by the film; for all its beauty and grace, the animal lives only to kill and procreate in the most efficient manner possible. It is that dialectic that Coppola forces us to confront and, in the last part of the film when Willard comes up against Kurtz — the very human face of moral terror, the myths of horror vs. beauty/good vs. evil come to a head in a haunted dialogue that leaves its eventual resolution up to the audience.

In the final analysis, no film has exhibited as much tactility and presence as this one, and none have, in the big league that Coppola operates in, gambled, in its unique and unconven-

tional way, so much. From its strong thematic base, to its visual and aural accomplishments, to its exhilarating performances and technological innovations, the sum of **Apocalypse Now** comes closest to a film- rendition of what Aldous Huxley has called "visionary experience" — outrageous and improbable as that may sound.

"I wanted to kill Kurtz for America. I wanted America to look at the face of horror and to accept it, to say, 'Yes, it is my face' and be exorcised. And only then could they go beyond to some new ways, to a new age. There has to be a new age; this is 1980 we're getting ready for, we have to put this stuff behind us and we have to go on to a new era. If we could give up fear and learn that we can live with each other, that we can enjoy each other, that our art, our ingenuity and our technology can make an incredible world, then I think that the future is going to be wonderful. For me, the guidelines of the future are intelligence, creativity and friendliness."

Francis Coppola

"After the first tour, I'd have the goddamndest nightmares. You know, the works. Bloody stuff, bad fights, guys dying, me dying... I thought they were the worst," he said. "But I sort of miss them now."

Michael Herr, **Dispatches**

"Although I've made a film that is very frightening in some places, or is unpleasant, I left the decision unclear — whether Willard turns into a Kurtz or whether he goes back — because I would like my own life to demonstrate what that decision was."

Francis Coppola

Coppola, and those of like mind, are implementing the inevitable changes that must come if film is to live up to its potential. Though some filmmakers may hate to admit it, film is more than late-night fodder for television and more than an entertaining little peep show off the midway. It holds the greatest potential of all media — since it incorporates all media — to put at the disposal of human consciousness a level of experience unparalleled by other art forms. **Apocalypse Now** only serves to demonstrate that film, in the near future more than ever, can communicate faithfully, creatively and forcefully man's wildest imaginings and his bravest thoughts.

Complacency breeds mediocrity and despite all the epithets to which he has been subjected Coppola has never been described as complacent. Though he is not alone in this, Coppola, because of his high profile, stands as one of the brightest examples of what filmmakers can accomplish, be the resources small or plentiful. You might not want to go as far as Coppola in saying that "art is the answer to all the world's problems and it is the highest potential endeavor that we can give ourselves to," but the challenge is nevertheless there to be met.

Suffice to end now with the realization that filmmakers, and those who go to films, are now entering a new sphere of communications. What has come before has served filmmakers well but the future promises much, much more and with it comes a responsibility that the film community, for the most part, has previously felt itself immune to. □



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