

**Apocalypse Now Redux-2001:** As somebody said: 'We've seen the enemy, and they is us!'

I saw *Apocalypse Now* (AN) soon after it was first released. Years later, I forget when, I saw Coppola's documentary about the making of AN. That helped to clear up, for me, some of the very odd jump shifts and cuts that were obvious in the first release of this epic story about ...well, I'll get to that below.

First, however, I'll say a word (or few) about the original novella – *Heart of Darkness* – from Joseph Conrad. Written in the style of Conrad's times – a series of nested first and third person narratives – it's not mainstream for sure. In fact, most of today's reading audience would not read it, I think. Moreover, the whole narrative is a bit of a chore to follow (it's many years since I read it). Conrad, however, wasn't interested in entertaining per se; he was more interested in asking fundamental questions about the human condition and this story went to the heart of the matter: what drives people to do terrible things?

That, in a nutshell, is what AN is all about; and, in this film, you see many people do terrible things. The fact that Coppola dressed up Conrad's central question within a fictional episode of the Vietnam War served two purposes: it brought Conrad's thesis into the mainstream and also allowed Coppola to make his own philosophical statement about the Vietnam War. Well, by all accounts, he certainly succeeded in both objectives. The phrase 'heart of darkness' is bandied about now so often, I'm sure most would know where they first saw it; and that wouldn't have been while reading Conrad, I reckon. Moreover, in all probability, the narrative Coppola constructed around Conrad's question will stand as the definitive criticism about war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular.

And I say that in full recognition of the other fine directors (Milestone, Fuller, Malick, Kubrick, Eastwood etc) who have given us great war movies that also stand as classics.

With the possible exception of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964) – that savage, comedic satire about the Cold War – AN is, first and foremost, a full-blown satire about war. But, it's not a comedy, although one might be forgiven for laughing at Colonel Kilgore's (Robert Duvall) antics when attacking the Vietcong village, attempting surfboarding during battle, BBQing on the beach, or loving the smell of napalm or "victory", to use the Colonel's word. And not to be missed is Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen, in his best work) coming ashore to meet by none other than Coppola portraying a gung-ho documentary producer/director who keeps shouting, "Don't look at the camera, keep going, keep going, don't look at us, look like you're fighting, keep going...." And, all the while, the mortar rounds crump in the distance, the Hueys thump-thump-thump on by, and the people screaming for help go unheard.

The satire continues as Capt. Willard is carried up river aboard a Navy patrol boat towards Cambodia where he must assassinate Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), the officer whose methods, according to top brass, are "unsound" – a euphemism for 'crazy'. Along

the way, the crew of the boat and Willard first encounter some jungle jollies for the grunts – a Bunny show, staged at a supply depot on the river that, of course, gets completely out of hand as sex-starved soldiers attempt to get their lusts satisfied. The mute Vietnamese people – outsiders in their own land – watch through chain-link fencing with big eyes and must wonder at the crazed antics of the Americans. Grinning ruefully and shaking his head, Willard gets the boat going again, up river....

Further up, they encounter an all but destroyed Medic unit, mired in mud from incessant rain, and mired in lust from incessant sex with live-in Bunnies, there as ‘treatment’ for broken bodies and minds. Well, thinks Willard, no doubt: what else is there to do in this crazy and God-forsaken place? Trading some fuel for sex for the crew seemed like a good idea at the time. After which they again carry on up river....

And are stopped by some bizarre French colonialists who are mired in past glories of French colonial conquests and defeats. In a bizarre dinner, Willard is subjected to vitriolic abuse, from some at the table, about the stupidity of the American efforts in Asia and Vietnam in particular. However: there they are – the stupid French – still arguing about the merits of Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat – or victory, depending on your point of view. And, after bedding one of the women, Roxanne (Aurore Clement), Willard continues with his quest.

Which, as he gets closer, he realizes is not what it seems to be. However, it is when he meets Kurtz that his odyssey ends - or so he thinks. Because along that tortuous river, Willard has explored, via voice-over narration, the tortuous machinations of the rationale for and against the bloody conflict in which he had been mired for years and finally comes to realize that, in the final analysis, he and Kurtz are kindred spirits. Weeks before, the brass had said to Willard: “Cut the head off the snake, and the body dies.” And so, Willard completes his mission – physically and, most importantly, symbolically as he cuts power off the radio to air strike operations, thus keeping his location hidden.

Thankfully, the Redux version includes footage that fleshes out the interplay between Willard and Kurtz, so that when the denouement arrives, the reasons for Willard’s final decisions are completely rational within the irrational world of war.

For me, the ending of the cinema version never made sense, psychologically or militarily; but, that’s studio bosses getting their way, I suppose. The Redux version says it all. It’s long (220+ minutes), but I didn’t get up even once to get a drink of water.

Highest recommendation for all mature adults.

8th January, 2008

Rating: 9

Copyright © Roger J Burke, 2008. All rights reserved.