The Power of Adaptation in Apocalypse Now

Lately Francis has been talking about his fears. His fears that he can't write an ending for his film. His fear that he can't write. That his greatest success has come from adapting someone else's writing. My guess is that when he gives up, when he concludes he is not the kind of novelist or playwright he dreamed of being as a young boy, he will know what kind of a writer he is and it will be more right for him than anything he could have imagined. —Eleanor Coppola, Notes
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979)

Francis Ford Coppola takes the same approach to adaptation that he takes to the film industry. He adopts someone else’s material or structure, absorbs and expands it by identifying it with his own experience, and thereby transforms it into his own uniquely powerful vision. This approach worked brilliantly in The Godfather, which proved that an adaptive auteur could be just as personally expressive as a Bergman, Fellini, or Buñuel. It demonstrated that Coppola’s ability to look inward with such intensity and to attend to the smallest physical details also enabled him to perform a more comprehensive analysis of the social political forces of the entire nation. This film was a landmark both in defining the nature of Coppola’s genius and in launching his ambitious scheme of adapting the industry. It brought him the money and power to build an alternative film structure, under his own control, that might rival Hollywood economically while making superior films artistically.

When anyone in America achieves this kind of power, it arouses both adoration and anger. That’s why it was so easy for Hollywood to get rid of Chaplin and Welles. Now there seems to be a growing desire to “get” Coppola, to watch his personal empire crumble. Even in reviews that acknowledge the aesthetic power of Apocalypse Now, several critics choose a tone of ridicule or revilement; some even attack him for daring to “cannibalize” Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. The intensity of the response may be, in part, a reaction to the film’s elaborate promotion, which has invited viewers to see it historically as another cultural landmark (that cost years and millions in the making and that now requires advance ticket bookings in the selling) and self-reflexively as a saga of Coppola’s personal struggles. The promotion encourages us to identify Coppola both with Willard and Kurtz; to admire his courage in risking his health, happiness, and personal fortune on this film; and to sympathize with his admitted failure in finding the right ending. Some critics may resent the fact that Coppola and company have anticipated most of their negative perceptions, so they compensate by exaggerating the note of condemnation in their tone. The irony is that many of the points stressed by the pompous promotion are actually insightful. This is particularly true of Eleanor Coppola’s strange journal, whose publication was coordinated with the opening of the film. It’s hard to tell to what degree Notes is a reliable account of the decision-making process and to what degree it is merely more promotional hype. One can easily imagine Francis standing behind the scenes, adapting his wife’s book (with or without her awareness) as a vehicle for expressing ideas that might be embarrassing for him to say himself. Yet the book is still illuminating about the film and thus is repeatedly quoted in reviews.

In Apocalypse Now Coppola uses the same approach to adaptation that succeeded in The Godfather, but this time he is only partially successful for his attempts to personalize the material interfere with the portrayal of the historical events. Where he does succeed brilliantly is in creating a dual perspective on the war as both an internal and external nightmare. Like The Deer Hunter,
APOCALYPSE NOW

Apocalypse Now illuminates the powerful impact the war had on American consciousness rather than its effects on the Vietnamese, but Coppola's vision is so much broader than Cimino's, and the sense of being immersed in warfare is so much more vivid and compelling, that it's as if we were seeing a film dealing with this subject for the first time.

Heart of Darkness provides the structure for the inward journey; the Vietnam war provides the outward focus. Although John Milius (who wrote the original screenplay) was the first to bring the two together, the fusion could have resulted in a disaster like his Big Wednesday. Coppola took over the combination and introduced many changes to make it work. In using Heart of Darkness to illuminate our experience of the war, the film demonstrates the extraordinary power of Conrad's vision while making the exploration of Vietnam primary, as it should be. This is the delicate balance that Coppola tries to maintain, a goal which is made explicit in the promotional brochure distributed in the theater:

The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of Apocalypse Now was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war. . . . I tried to illustrate as many of its different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars.

Although Coppola succeeds in creating an overpowering sensuous experience of the war's madness—perhaps better than any previous war films—he confuses the moral issues, perhaps because of his drive to personalize the material. In identifying so strongly with Kurtz, he distorts the issue of power and upsets the delicate balance between the Conrad story and the subject of Vietnam. The film succeeds in forcing us to experience the horror of the war and to acknowledge our own complicity in it, but it fails to illuminate the nature of Kurtz's horror.

The film opens with quiet jungle sounds and a graceful line of palm trees, waving gently in a breeze. Smoke drifts upward from the foreground, and a faint sound (that could be either modern electronic music or some kind of engine) fades in from the background. As a whirling propeller arcs across the top of the screen, we know the sound is made by an army helicopter. As another chopper streaks across the sky, the smoke and noise become more intense. Suddenly the jungle bursts into a fiery hell of napalm, and the sound track assaults us with Jim Morrison singing "This is the end, beautiful friend." The camera pans right as another chopper crosses the screen in the opposite
direction, further disorienting us with these counter movements. A huge upside-down close-up of Willard's head is superimposed over the jungle on the left side of the screen. This dissolve moves us inward to the Saigon hotel room where Willard is having a mental breakdown and inward to his mind which is projecting these jungle memories and nightmares. On the right side of the screen we see an overhead fan superimposed over the image of the helicopter, dissolving the boundaries between the hotel room and the jungle. As the jungle background turns to night, the right side of the screen dissolves into a huge statue of Buddha's head, which is neither in the room nor the jungle, but is pure imaginative projection. This head not only matches the huge close-up of Willard, but also mysteriously foreshadows his obsession with Kurtz. When Willard opens his eyes, he stares at the overhead fan, as if recognizing the specific image that triggered the nightmare. But the sound of choppers continues in the room. He moves to the window and looks out at the sunny Saigon streets, where helicopters buzz overhead; then he begins the voice-over narration that dominates the film, "Saigon... shit!... I'm still only in Saigon." We soon learn that this narration is told from the perspective of the future. Then follows a strange montage of bizarre images from Willard's mind and external shots of his freakout, which are linked by dissolves.

This opening sequence, which was not in Milius's original script and has no parallel in the Conrad story, dissolves all boundaries between inner and outer experience, between past, present and future. It introduces a visual style that is strongly marked by superimpositions and cross dissolves, suggesting the multilayered nature of experience. It also introduces the recurring images of fire and smoke, which obscure vision with their terrifying beauty; helicopters, which are more omnipresent and dangerous than any jungle creature; and detached heads, which lead us inward to the focus on madness and horror. The sequence strongly suggests that all footage in this film is filtered through a subjective consciousness.

*APOCALYPSE NOW* must be seen both as a nightmare vision of the historical events and as an exploration of one man's journey through madness. This double perspective, so vivid in the opening sequence, is rooted in the narration Conrad gives to Marlow. On the one hand, Marlow insists "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes it truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence... we live, as we dream—alone." Yet he proceeds with his story anyway because "it seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts." The true story of the Vietnam war is also impossible to tell; Coppola's film is as haunting as Conrad's story because it illuminates the madness and horror of the Americans who experienced it. No matter how good or how strong, everyone who was touched by that war had a change in consciousness. Not only the fighting men, but also those who experienced the war secondhand—through accounts by veterans, through television coverage, and now through seeing *APOCALYPSE NOW*. Just as Marlow's listeners accused him of being a storyteller who was "unaware of what [his] audience would best like to hear," many viewers don't like Coppola's vision of the war. Many would prefer to hear that all the atrocities were committed only on one side or that it was possible to come back from Vietnam heroic and improved—like DeNiro in *The Deer Hunter*. But *APOCALYPSE NOW* denies this by showing that even the invulnerable heroes—Kilgore, Willard, and Kurtz—are driven mad, each in his own special way. Willard tells us explicitly that the story is essentially a confession.

Coppola rarely hesitates to change Conrad's story—setting, events, characters—whenever the revision is required by the Vietnam context. In fact, the first half of the original story is omitted almost entirely. Coppola picks up Conrad's narrative line with the natives' attack on the boat (which occurs more than 90 minutes into the film). Even here there are significant setting changes, for the primitive weapons are more ironic in the Vietnam setting and the black victim at the wheel who is killed by a spear is not a foolish tribesman but an angry black soldier who challenges Willard's authority at every turn. The man dies, not merely with a terrible frown, but with a desperate effort to take Willard with him, by drawing him down on the spear.

Despite the substantial changes, the film is
amazingly true to the story’s core of meaning—its “heart of immense darkness” and to the dream-like suggestiveness cultivated by Conrad’s narrator Charlie Marlow.

“The I’ve been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what’s the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged in every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.” (p. 144)

The dialogue in the film—especially Willard’s voice-over narration, written by Michael Herr (author of Dispatches, the noted personal account of Vietnam)—has been attacked by many critics for sounding more like a parody of Raymond Chandler than an adaptation of Conrad. But Willard’s tone and character are obviously not intended to be Marlow’s. To suit the Vietnam context, the narrator has been completely transformed into a trained assassin, whose life has been drained of all meaning—except for his obsession with combat and Kurtz. Coppola may have used this narration to cover for Martin Sheen, who suffered a heart attack while playing Willard, or to give himself greater flexibility in making revisions. But the selection of Herr also strengthens the dual perspective of the personal/historical account, for his first-person point-of-view is based on actual participation in the historical events. Marlow’s words would have been unrealistic in the Vietnam context. Even Willard’s banalities, when set against Coppola’s powerful visual images and multi-layered sound track, still have behind them the “terrific suggestiveness” of Conrad’s illuminations.

Coppola also retains Conrad’s central image of the river, which dominates the narrative in both works. The frame of Conrad’s story opens with the Thames, which lies before Marlow and his listeners and merges with the Congo, the river that lies at the heart of Kurtz’s inner story. Marlow describes the Congo as an immense snake uncoiled that “fascinated me as a snake would a bird.” The structure of the film is controlled by the image of the river “that snaked through the war like a main circuit cable” carrying Willard to Cambodia, where no American troops are supposed to be. In both versions, the river ultimately leads to Kurtz and his dying words of horror. It’s when Coppola leaves the river that his difficulties begin.

Coppola’s primary failure in combining the Conrad story and the Vietnam war is in the adaptation of Kurtz, the only character whom he retains in recognizable form. The original Kurtz is corrupted by his isolation in the wilderness, which leads to an obsession with power and reveals terrifying truths about himself.

“I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with his great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.” (p. 133)

Coppola echoes the “hollowness” by having Kurtz recite T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” but this is a symbolic solution that doesn’t really make sense in the Vietnam context. Vietnam seldom offered the feeling of power to American fighting men that the Congo offered to Kurtz. In fact, generally they were forced to see just the opposite—their own powerlessness in facing inferior-equipped guerrillas who refused to be defeated in the jungle terrain.

The turning point for Brando’s Kurtz came when he realized what it took to win in this war—the kind of total commitment that enabled the enemy to hack off the arms of small children who had been inoculated by the Americans. When Kurtz first saw the dismembered arms, he was overcome with horror and grief, but then he realized with super- clarity “as if [he’d] been shot with a diamond bullet in [his] head,” that this was an act of great moral strength and genius. These enemies were not monsters, but moral men who were able to use the primordial urge to kill without passion and judgment. If Kurtz had ten divisions of men like these, he could end the war. And that’s presumably what he tried to do—to build an army of such followers, to act on primordial urges, to make horror and moral terror his friends. But he was defeated because he could not give up judgment. Immediately after his monologue, he tells Willard “I’m worried about my son . . . that he might not understand.” He fears his son will judge him, and this fear makes horror his enemy and victory seem hollow. As critics have pointed out, this key incident of the inoculation was not based on historical fact, but certainly there were equally terrible atrocities committed on
both sides. The point is that Coppola was using this incident dramatically to shift the central issue from power to efficiency—a theme that would work both in Africa and Vietnam.4

Marlow introduces his narrative with a statement about “devotion to efficiency”—the idea which underlies the profitable ivory trade and justifies ruthless exploitation. This passage applies equally well to the Vietnam war because they are both phases of western imperialism.

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.” (p. 70)

Although Coppola doesn’t retain this speech, it is the basis for the dramatic incidents that unite Kurtz and Willard—Kurtz’s recounting of the inoculation story and Willard’s murder of the wounded Vietnamese woman on the boat. Both men are thrust into a war situation where military efficiency is totally undermined, yet they have been trained to worship it and to internalize it as the source of their own personal pride. So they impose their own idea of efficiency, even when it contradicts orders from above or other compelling values such as human compassion. After experiencing the economic exploitation and sexual taunting at the USO performance, Willard muses: “Charlie didn’t get much USO. He was dug in too deep . . . He had only two ways home—death or victory.” Willard clearly shares Kurtz’s admiration for the enemy’s efficiency as well as his contempt for the leadership on their side: “The war was being run by a bunch of four-star clowns who were going to give the whole circus away.” When Willard first hears of Kurtz and his execution of four spies—an efficient action that nevertheless leads to charges of murder—we can see that he admires Kurtz’s move and would have done the same thing in his place. Yet Willard still accepts the assassination assignment. At the end both men realize why it is essential for Willard to kill Kurtz. Willard understands why Kurtz can never go home again since he, himself, has been there and back. Both men know that if Kurtz stays in Vietnam, the horror will only escalate.

This is as true for Willard (and for all US troops) as it is for Kurtz. Yet Willard has to survive so that he can serve as “the caretaker of Kurtz’s memory.” Both men have to make a personal sacrifice—to die, or to survive and remember. Both are subjected to judgment. There is no way out either for victim or killer.

If the devotion to efficiency were carried to its logical extreme in an insane situation like Vietnam, then it would lead to the ultimate madness—total annihilation of the enemy. In both the story and the film, Kurtz reaches this mad conclusion, which he scrawls in his memoirs—“Exterminate all the brutes,” or “Drop the bombs. Exterminate them all.” It’s the same conclusion that was reached by Ahab, Hitler, and Charlie Manson (who is so pointedly mentioned in the film). It’s a conclusion that ultimately demands the moral and physical destruction of both sides.

Unfortunately, Coppola confuses this “devotion to efficiency” with the issue of power. Conrad’s Kurtz pursues efficiency only until he understands that it is merely a means of gaining greater power; once immersed in his obsession, he totally embraces madness, and gives up efficiency. It’s not that he has “unsound methods,” but “no methods at all.” While Coppola retains these lines about “methods,” his Kurtz clings to the ideal of efficiency right to the end because it’s the only part of his behavior that makes sense in Vietnam.

His relationship with the tribal followers—supposedly Montagnard soldiers—is particularly problematic. Coppola retains the relationship from the Congo, where the white trader exerts his power as a god over a primitive people. We are told that Kurtz’s followers take his every word as their command, but supposedly that’s because he at first managed to get practical results. Since we never see these actions dramatized, it is hard to believe that his role as God actually achieves greater military efficiency. What this relationship between Kurtz and his followers does imply is a complete passivity and demoralization of the Montagnards, who historically are known to have been quite independent and strong. This is one aspect of the story that seems to be carried over from Conrad for purely symbolic reasons.

Why should Coppola have clung to a conception of Kurtz corrupted by power when it so clearly
distorts the facts of the war? Certainly the answer can’t be simply that he was trying to be faithful to Conrad, for, as we have seen, elsewhere he makes radical changes in the story. Moreover, Coppola must have been aware that this Kurtz could not work realistically in the Vietnam context, for he purposely shifts to a symbolic treatment. Eleanor Coppola blames this decision on Brando.

Brando was going to do something he had never tried before. He was going to play a bigger-than-life character, a mythical figure, a theatrical personage. He is the master of the natural realistic performance and he was going to go for a different style of acting for the first time in his career. (p. 127)

She also blames it on his physical condition.

Marlon was supposed to be lean and hard in order to play a Green Beret officer, but when he arrived hopelessly over-weight, he had to give up his preconceptions about the character and come up with a solution which pushed the film much more in the direction of a myth. (p. 155)

Elsewhere she acknowledges that both men were responsible for this interpretation of Kurtz.

Francis had asked Marlon to reread Heart of Darkness. Now Marlon was saying how his character should be more like Kurtz was in the book. Francis said, “Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.” (p. 128)

She also quotes Coppola as saying: “I don’t make the person play the part, I make the part play the person.” (p. 157) I suspect that for the part of Kurtz, Coppola was referring not only to Brando as the “person” but also to himself. The most plausible explanation for Coppola’s retention of Kurtz’s obsession with power is his own “irresistible fascination” with this dimension of the story, which applied to his own experience of making the film.

Coppola consistently makes directorial choices that emphasize Kurtz’s symbolic nature. In the story, Marlow describes him as a man who “presented himself as a voice” (p. 119). Like the Platonic conception of creation, Kurtz is experienced as a chain of divine or demonic echoes, which is emphasized by Conrad’s complex narrative structure. Since the story is told by one of Marlow’s listeners, we are several persons removed from Kurtz’s actual words, yet we still experience their impact. Although Coppola simplifies the point of view to Willard’s first-person narration and the film medium allows us to experience Kurtz directly, Coppola amplifies his image through media presentation. We first hear his voice through a tape of a radio broadcast, we first see his face in photographs, and are introduced to his character through an official dossier. The character is also media-amplified through the casting of Marlon Brando, who increasingly plays cultural icons (e.g., The Godfather, the father of Superman, and George Lincoln Rockwell in Roots II).

Despite this amplification, the character never achieves the moral stature of Conrad’s shadowy Kurtz, who set out to civilize the natives and who sincerely believed in his moral aspirations. Coppola’s Kurtz is merely an excellent soldier (perhaps like a Patton), who, though disobedient and obstreperous, was able to fight better than anyone else within the normal rules of war. When Kurtz discovers that those rules don’t apply, he makes up his own in order to get results. And somehow (we never really see exactly how), this shift drives him mad. But clearly this interpretation of Kurtz was too vague and banal, so Coppola and Brando try to compensate with symbolic visual enrichment. Kurtz is no longer tall and thin—“an animated image of death carved out of old ivory,” but a paunchy Buddha. His baldness is retained, but its meaning transformed.

Conrad used it to link him with the ivory he pursued:

“The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish imitation.” (P. 121)

The film uses Kurtz’s baldness to strengthen his identification with Buddha. The first time we see Kurtz (more than two hours into the film), his face is in shadow and only the dome of his bald head is illuminated, as if he were a moon god presiding over darkness. This shot is linked to the chain of head images that run through the film. The decapitated heads are part of the original story, but they are intensified visually through direct presentation and dramatically by making one of the victims a companion of Willard’s. The huge inverted close-up of Willard and the matched head of Buddha in the opening sequence introduce this motif and foreshadow Willard’s identification with the godlike Kurtz.

Coppola strengthens the symbolic identification
of Kurtz as Willard’s Shadow, a move that was undoubtedly facilitated by his own identification with both characters. This Jungian relationship is developed visually in the last photograph and first live footage of Kurtz, both of which present him primarily in shadow. Repeatedly, we see silhouettes of Kurtz artfully framed by a doorway, sometimes with a beast posed in the foreground. By making the purpose of Willard’s quest the assassination of Kurtz, Coppola also suggests a totemic identification between hunter and prey—a connection that is developed dramatically by intercutting his murder with the ritualistic slaughter of the water buffalo. This connection is underlined rather pretentiously when the camera passes across Kurtz’s copies of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. Perhaps this totemic relationship serves as a substitute for the identification between Kurtz and his ivory in the original story. But Coppola uses it to give an ironic twist to Willard’s romantic quest, where the slain dragon turns out to be another version of the self. At the beginning of the film Willard, the war hero, is locked in a Saigon hotel room, cut off from home, drunk and self-destructive. As an emblem of his personal deterioration, he shatters a mirror and cuts himself. It is precisely at this point that his Mission arrives to put the pieces back together again. He becomes obsessed with studying Kurtz, whose dossier substitutes for letters from home. In hunting him, he moves deeper into himself for in Kurtz he sees a reflection of his own madness at a more advanced stage. Eventually he decides to reject the armed forces and pursue his own will like Kurtz. But in the end, Willard discovers that he is the instrument of Kurtz’s will—the means of his suicide and the embodiment of his reincarnation. He survives as a reflection—refusing to replace Kurtz as a false god, but echoing his dying words of horror.

By identifying Kurtz so strongly with Willard—and by implication with the other American fighting men who were driven mad by the war—Coppola undermines the character’s dramatic power. In Conrad’s story, Kurtz is set much more apart. Although he embodies all of Europe, he is a “universal genius” who demonstrates what lies in store for those who dare to look into the abyss. Like an Ahab or a Hitler, he demonstrates how an extreme obsession with idealism can lead to the total embracing of evil. Marlow admires Kurtz’s romantic extremity and his courage in choosing his own nightmare. He interprets his dying words, “the horror, the horror,” as a judgment combining desire and hate. In stepping over the edge into madness, Kurtz achieves a “moral victory” by which Marlow realizes his own limitations and defeat. When Marlow is later faced with death, he has nothing to say. He merely survives. “The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of extinguishable regrets.” This is what Marlow offers his listeners, what Conrad offers his readers, and what Coppola offers us as survivors of Vietnam. But the primary dramatic problem of the film is that we gain this kind of knowledge from our confrontation with the war, rather than with Kurtz—who nevertheless retains the climactic position in the narrative structure.

Despite the flaws in its handling of Kurtz, *Apocalypse Now* is still a masterful work that equals the power of Conrad’s vision. In place of Kurtz, an orchestrated madness dominates the film—from the opening intense hotel scenes with Willard, through the chaotic battle sequences with Colonel Kilgore, the tragically absurd slaughter of the boat people, the hysterical USO performance, the nightmarish carnival of the trench warfare, the savagery at Kurtz’s compound, and the closing shots of Willard, as mad as he was at the beginning. In practically every sequence, a sensuous beauty is combined with deadly terror, obscuring the boundaries between good and evil. This combination is particularly vivid in the scene where a tiger unexpectedly springs out of the lush green jungle, reminding us of Blake’s “fearful symmetry.” The madness dominates the editing rhythms, Vittorio Storaro’s brilliant cinematography, Dean Tavoularis’s apocalyptic sets, and the driving music and explosive sounds of war on the audio track. The cacophonous range of the madness is developed very powerfully in the characters, all brilliantly acted, who seem purposely directed in clashing tones and styles: Willard’s intense, inward morbidity and clipped posturing cynicism; the absurd invulnerability of the highly stylized Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who can respect a dying Viet Cong’s courage and then callously
turn his back on the soldier's agony when distracted by the prospect of surfing; the realistic, tight-reigned explosiveness of the angry black leader Chief (Albert Hall); the zany comic exuberance of his young black buddy, Clean (Larry Fishburne)—"a rock 'n roller with one foot in the grave"; the frantic outbursts of Chef (Frederic Forest), who is wound too tight for war; the dehumanized bumping and grinding of the caricatured playmates (Cynthia Wood, Colleen Camp, and Linda Carpenter), who callously taunt the soldiers into an animal frenzy; the surreal reckless moves of the black soldiers in the trench, their eyes glazed over with junk or despair; and the bewildering manic speediness of the photojournalist (Dennis Hopper), who continues the media-amplification of Kurtz by converting the original lines of Conrad's harlequin into promotional hype ("He's up there!" "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man," "This man has enlarged my mind," "His soul is mad!") and by playing Pip to Kurtz's Ahab and the Fool to Kurtz's Lear. The madness builds—partly through the slow transformation of Lance (Sam Bottoms), from a clean-cut, gun-shy surfer into an eccentric war-painted acid-head who moves through the war and the Montagnard rituals as if in a trance, accepting all horrors as part of the bummer. It is his acid vision that dominates the visuals in the powerful trench sequence; in this last outpost before Kurtz's compound, there is no command and no boundaries between dazzling beauty and blind destruction. Except for Willard, Lance (also known as L. B. Johnson) is the only one who survives the trip, implying that his zombie-like acceptance of madness is a viable defense.

In fact, the film shows no American in Vietnam who is untouched by madness. Not even the suave officers with their good manners and euphemistic language who give Willard his mission "to terminate Kurtz's command." In one shot we see a plate of bloody roast beef on the left side of the screen and a photograph of Kurtz on the right, foreshadowing his murder and revealing the butchering impulses of these officials. Later, Kurtz will strip away the lies.

KURTZ: Are you an assassin?
WILLARD: No, I'm a soldier.

KURTZ: You're neither. You're an errand boy for grocery clerks come to collect the price.

The pervasiveness of the madness is also developed in extraordinary battle scenes where the moral boundaries are totally confused. Kilgore's attack begins with a montage of the helicopters, exterior long shots of the ominous machines and close-ups of men in the interiors. Kilgore turns on Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" to orchestrate the attack and terrify the enemy. Although the music is stirring, it can't help but remind us of our German enemies in previous wars and prevent us from identifying totally with the American aggressors. When the film cuts to the target, we see school children lining up and hear dogs barking; as the music invades the scene, the children flee and the film cuts back and forth between both sides. In the midst of battle, the total panic is captured in the loud explosions and spatial disorientation. Movement comes from every angle and goes in every direction. Music and battle sounds collide in dissonance. When the perspective shifts to the helicopters' point of view, we get caught up in the realistic excitement and dangers of the attack. Significantly it's from this perspective that we see the first wounded American, a black man screaming in agony, and the destruction of the rescue helicopter by a grenade thrown by a young Vietnamese woman, with whom we were just sympathizing. By now our sympathies are split, and we are forced to see that for an American in Vietnam there was no way of escaping the moral quicksand. Throughout this battle neither Kilgore nor Willard is frightened by the prospect of death—for they are both absorbed in their personal

Dennis Hopper as the journalist: Apocalypse Now
obsessions with surfing and with Kurtz. After the battle, Kilgore, in cavalry hat and yellow ascot, walks through the explosions proud and erect, as if he were made out of steel. Despite his eagerness to surf, he is distracted by the B-52's and the napalm, which bring the smell of victory. After observing him in battle, Willard says, “If that’s how Kilgore fought the war, I wondered what they had against Kurtz.”

Some critics argue that the battle scenes with Kilgore are the dramatic high point of the film. In his essay in the New York Review of Books, Michael Wood goes so far as to say that Kilgore is Kurtz, or should have been. While Kilgore is a very strong character, particularly as played by Duvall, he lacks the moral stature even of Brando’s Kurtz. He undoubtedly is Milius’s best creation, but his murderous madness belongs more to the absurd vision of Heller’s Catch 22 than to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Without the presence of the other forms and tones of insanity that permeate Apocalypse Now, Kilgore would trivialize the conception of the war. But as one strain of the orchestrated madness, he makes a brilliant contribution.

Although the sequence with the boat people has moral dynamics similar to those of the helicopter attack, its tone is more tragic. Since it is stripped of all flashy pyrotechnics we are able to observe the issues at closer range. At first we sympathize with Willard, who relentlessly wants to pursue his mission, rather than with Chief, who insists on searching the boat. Once the Americans begin the search, we share their tension and edginess—especially since we’ve all been trained by the same war movies (and earlier sequences in this one) to expect the unexpected. When the young black soldier panics and begins shooting, we aren’t sure of anything—except that the boat people are dead. Then we discover the cause—a cute little puppy, whom the Vietnamese woman was trying to save and whom Lance now mercifully or sentimentally clutches to his breast. When Chief discovers that the young woman is still alive, he wants to save her. But she raises the same issue as the dog. Would taking her to a field hospital be an act of mercy, or the indulgence of a sentimental fantasy? We never know, for Willard shoots her dead. We share the boat crew’s hatred of Willard, until he justifies himself in the narration: “We cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a band-aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of it, the more I hated lies.” Yet we’re still unsure whether Willard’s act was an efficient mercy-killing or callous cruelty to serve his own ends. We don’t really know who is most to blame for this horrible incident—just as we were unable to tell in the My Lai massacre. In this scene the only thing we do know is that several innocent Vietnamese have been murdered by American soldiers. Scenes like these refute those critics who claim that Apocalypse Now is as racist as The Deer Hunter.

Despite its colossal scope and its great variety of tones, Apocalypse Now is claustrophobic—for it restricts us to Vietnam, to the war, to the madness, to the nightmare vision, and to the obsessive consciousness of its anti-hero. It is precisely because this claustrophobic pressure is so intense and the building of the momentum so powerful that some of the slower, more symbolic scenes at Kurtz’s compound don’t work—they temporarily slacken the pace and relieve the pressure on the audience. Despite these flaws, Coppola is masterful in using all the resources of his medium to create an intense experience of unrelieved madness and horror, and courageous in trying to tell the story of the Vietnam war. The film creates a no-exit trap not only for its audience, but also for its protagonist and its creator, who are all left echoing Kurtz’s dying words of judgment and searching for a meaningful ending that will put the war behind us all.

NOTES
1. “We talked about how the film was a parallel for the very things that Francis was living out this year. How he had been Willard setting off on his mission to make a film and how he had turned into Kurtz for a while.” Notes. p. 211.
2. For an informative discussion of the differences between the original Milius script and the Coppola film, see Brooks Riley’s “Heart Transplant,” Film Comment, (Sept. Oct. 1979), 26-27.
3. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 95. All further references to this work will be noted in the text.
4. Many of the ideas in the following paragraph grew out of conversations with Beverle Houston and Leah Appet, to whom I am indebted for several valuable insights on this issue.
5. In Conrad’s story, it is Marlow who is explicitly identified with Buddha. “Lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower.” (p. 69) “Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha.” (p. 157)