

# In The Dark

by George McCartney

## A Voice in the Darkness

I was finishing the original draft of this column early on the morning of September 11 when I received the news. My wife called me from the grammar school where she teaches near our home on Long Island. "Something awful," she said quietly and then told me of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers. I rushed to the television and watched the video footage in cold dismay. Then reports of the assault on the Pentagon came in, followed by the collapse of the towers. I slumped on my sofa. Although my deadline was at hand, I found it impossible to return to my keyboard. Reviewing movies seemed obscenely frivolous at the moment. I spent the rest of the day mesmerized by the television screen as events unfolded.

Most of the early images seemed to be shot at a distance of a quarter-mile or more with minimal or no audio recording. This made the event seem unreal—or, rather, surreal. It looked like something out of a bad disaster movie, something that could not be happening to the lobby in lower Manhattan I had walked through five days earlier, in a building where my nephew's fiancée was training for a new job, on a street less than half a mile from where my son's fiancée works. Later in the day, I learned that my secretary's husband had been scheduled to visit a client's offices in the north tower and that my friend Mike Ushko, a New York City firefighter, had been sent to a staging area at Shea Stadium, waiting to be called in for rescue work. Then I remembered that my cousin Anne Marie worked across the street. I went to the phone, and, after a few hours, I considered myself lucky. None of my family and friends had been reported hurt. The next day, however, my brother, formerly with the New York City Fire Department, called to tell me of the unlucky. Over 20 of his friends from Firehouse 23 had been among the first rescue teams to arrive at the scene; they all perished in the collapse of the south tower. The next call brought the tragedy even closer. My cousin's husband, Edmund McNally, had been at his office on the 97th floor of the south tower. When the first plane hit,

### *Apocalypse Now Redux*

*Produced by Producer Zoetrope Studios  
Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
Screenplay by John Milius  
and Francis Ford Coppola  
Re-released by Miramax Films  
and United Artists*

he went to a staircase, helping his colleagues attempt to reach ground level. As he did so, he made three calls to his wife on his cell phone, telling her the first two times that he thought their chances were good. On the third, however, he said the smoke had become blindingly thick. He and his companions could hardly breathe, and he was no longer confident of escaping. Then, despite the desperation he must have been feeling, he took time to tell her that he loved her and their three girls. "Wish Erin happy birthday" were his last words. As I write, his daughters are still calling his cell phone, longing to hear his voice once more. There's been no answer yet, but they haven't given up hope. Neither have I. Of course, it may be that Ed will not be heard from again. One thing is certain, however: His voice will never be silenced. He spoke out bravely and lovingly against the darkness. We must do no less.

Like so many others, I didn't know how to react at first. As the hours passed on Tuesday and Wednesday, I continued to sit on my sofa, watching, waiting, but not understanding. At times, my wife tells me, I even nodded off. I didn't realize it then, but I was in shock. I had gone emotionally numb. My wife had the same experience. We had entered that psychological state that defends us from registering enormities that might otherwise unbalance us.

Then, late on September 12, emotion returned. First sorrow, profound and helpless, as I began feebly to grasp what the dying must have experienced in their last moments and dimly felt the pain that would be the lot of the loved ones left behind. Then, the anger came: anger against the perpetrators, of course, but also with myself and all Americans who had refused to see what so clearly had been inevitable. At first, I had called the attack unimaginable. Now, I realize I could not

have been more mistaken. This strike against America was all too imaginable for anyone who had stayed sufficiently aware, as the writers elsewhere in this issue have made unmistakably clear. Like so many others, until September 11, I had found it inconvenient to imagine such an event. For this, I feel especially culpable. After all, it is my business to discuss works of the imagination. It seems that, like many Americans, I had preferred to domesticate the imagination of disaster, restricting it to a harmless play of light and shadow on a screen. I had been complicit with our national will to ignorance.

I was also irritated by those of our leaders who insisted on calling the attack an act of cowards. The charge of cowardice may seem politically prudent, but the Islamic terrorists' actions were anything but. That ridiculous word hopelessly blurs the reality of what we now face. As I write, there is only speculation about who is responsible. But whoever it is, one thing is certain: This attack was undertaken by disciplined idealists. Call them ruthless fanatics, merciless zealots, or suicidal true believers; don't call them cowards. These were men who put their cause above their own lives. However misguided, they were martyrs to their faith. If we don't grasp this, we will fatally misunderstand what must be done. I assume that, beyond the rhetoric, the Bush administration understands this. By the time this article appears, we'll no doubt know.

Returning to the review I had been writing, I find that one of the films I had been considering has a ghastly relevance: Francis Ford Coppola's re-release of *Apocalypse Now* as *Apocalypse Now Redux*. The addition of the Latin tag is meant to indicate that he's rethought his 1979 work, adding an additional 49 minutes of footage cut from the original edit. He's tried to give his overheated meditation on America's involvement in Vietnam more context and continuity.

Unfortunately, this restoration hasn't helped much. The film remains largely incoherent and pretentious. Nevertheless, unlike any other filmmaker dealing with Vietnam (and, for that matter, precious few dealing with any other war), he and his tougher-minded scriptwriter,

John Milius, have forced us to confront some uncomfortable issues concerning our resolve in combat. Watching this film in the aftermath of the attack on New York and Washington should make Americans squirm. Whatever else it fails to do, it refuses to let us off an exceedingly painful moral hook.

As his biblical title indicates, Coppola wanted nothing less than to become a prophet to an America still tormented by its recent defeat in Vietnam. At moments, he succeeds—nowhere more so than in the hideous challenge hurled at us by the film's monstrously clear-eyed Green Beret colonel, Walter Kurtz, played by an appropriately monstrous Marlon Brando. How, Kurtz wants to know, do we conduct a war against true-believing zealots who are willing not only to die for their cause but to commit any atrocity they deem necessary to its success?

Using the narrative structure and literary conceit of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the plot sets military intelligence agent Capt. Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) on a mission to find and murder Kurtz for using "unsound methods" in his personal prosecution of the war. As did Kurtz in Conrad's novella,

Coppola's Kurtz has stepped off the map of what is deemed acceptable restraint. He has moved into Cambodia and set up his own fortress compound, inhabited by Montagnard tribesmen who worship him as though he were a god. They even offer human sacrifice to him in the form of slain enemies. To the officers in Saigon, he's a destabilizing voice in the wilderness. Having rejected their sound methods—dropping bombs on North Vietnam in 10,000-ton payloads—he must be silenced.

Kurtz has been driven over the edge by America's hypocritical war of half-measures. He is disgusted by his country's inability to face the truth about its enemy. In his eyes, the Viet Cong are brave, determined, and merciless adversaries who cannot be defeated by Americans who lack ideological commitment and heroic honor. When Willard arrives at his compound, Kurtz illustrates his point with a grisly anecdote. Years earlier, he had tried to help some Vietnamese villagers by administering immunizations to their children. Later, he discovered that the Viet Cong had come and systematically hacked the vaccinated arms from each child. Horrified at first, his feelings gave way to admiration. "The genius of that,"

he muses, almost dreamily. He's convinced the men who did this were moral and loving in peacetime. What fascinates him is their ability to "utilize their primordial instincts" in conflict. "If I had ten divisions like that, our troubles would be soon over," he assures Willard. "Horror has a face," he explains. "You must make a friend of horror. Horror is a moral force." It would be easy to assume such comments are designed to reveal Kurtz's insanity, but I don't think it's that simple. Like Conrad's Kurtz, this man has stepped beyond the comforting hypocrisies we use to convince ourselves that we are decently civilized. Another character who believes Kurtz to be a great (although flawed) man explains (using a paraphrase of Conrad's words) that "His intelligence [is] perfectly clear but his soul [is] mad." With Kurtz, Coppola and Milius have tried to make us face the moral consequences of going to war against an implacable enemy operating outside all moral boundaries.

Whatever the warrior code of honor was supposed to be in past centuries, in our time of guerrilla engagements, mechanized weaponry, and total war, it seems hopelessly nostalgic. If we're going up against a technologically equipped enemy ready and willing to commit any atrocity, including suicide bombings, how do we respond? Can our methods be any less ruthless? More to the point, have they been in the past? Remember the rhetoric about the "smart bombs" we were supposed to have used in the Gulf War? We've since discovered they weren't as smart as advertised. How many innocents did we maim and kill in that campaign? And then we left before the job was done, using compassion as our excuse. As Willard says about our treatment of the Vietnamese: "We would cut them in half with machine guns and then hand them a bandaid. It was a way we had of living with ourselves over there."

I have no idea what will be happening when this issue hits the newsstands, but I do know this: We had best open our eyes and face Kurtz's challenge honestly. We are going to have to find ways to fight a horribly amoral enemy, meeting him with supreme and unflinching determination. Let's pray we can find the will and means to do so with clear minds and sound souls. Even as we descend into the darkness, let's keep listening for Ed's voice, calling us toward the light.

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## Disappointments

by Bradley R. Strahan

So why have we been waiting  
all this time for "The Mysterious  
Stranger," for "The Shadow," for  
"the god in the machine"?

Now that our sight fails  
we finally can see? Now that we  
fail to hear the sentence, the words  
we spoke finally reach our ears?

So let us burn our old love letters,  
tear up those "promising" poems,  
take our tight jeans to Goodwill  
and smile blankly at the horizon

where nothing will come over  
but a few more suns and stars,  
while we wait for the mist  
encrusted moon to bring us rain.