

see), they unintentionally lent a certain unity of style to these impermanent articles, which then ceased to be mugs or tote bags or mere replicas and took on an identity of their own. Quite accidentally, the memorabilia copying Egyptian art have become art itself—a kind of pop art for the masses.

**A**S POP ART, THESE OBJECTS do not represent our philosophies or our intellect, our hope for the future or our appreciation of the past. Pop art merely says, this is the world we live in, these are the things that make up our daily lives. Like fashion, the naturally evolving expression of the state of mind of the moment, pop art changes with the seasons. As soon as that first designer put Tutankhamun's mask on the front of a T-shirt, it ceased to be just a shirt; it became mobile art. But eventually, some other face or slogan or symbol will replace the mask, or some other fashion will replace the shirt, to become once again, quite accidentally, a form of art.

Moreover, the Stanford show glossed over the fact that every era that experienced an Egyptian revival also produced more or less "ephemeral trash." One visitor to the Stanford Gallery remarked that, as a child in the forties, he had played with a mummy magnet identical to the one on display there. When Howard Carter first entered King Tut's tomb in 1922, and "everyone went wild," families like the Stanfords commissioned Egyptian-style tombs, but the ordinary public settled for Tut compacts and handkerchiefs instead.

As in earlier times, some of today's Egyptian merchandise will survive. A custom-made 18k gold cartouche recently advertised in the *New Yorker* magazine may find itself one day in a museum display case. Other objects, like the Tutified book bags, may not last. We can only hope that what does endure will not be held as proof, at the next Egyptian revival, of the quality of our present civilization. Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" comic strips, mocking the profiteering that accompanied the Tut show in America—just like James Gilray's eighteenth-century political cartoons—satirized a trait of mankind, not simply of a particular era.

Perhaps today's culture has degenerated, as the Stanford Gallery show argued. But the flood of Egyptian merchandise now inundating the country hardly tells the whole story of today's popular culture, much less of our whole civilization. □

# F I L M

**APOCALYPSE NOW, directed by Francis Coppola.**

## Up a creek

STEPHEN HARVEY

**A**POCALYPSE NOW HAS BEEN shrouded in a haze of event-mongering for so long that by now it's nearly impossible to look at the film itself with any clarity. Reams of print have chronicled the travails plaguing this production from its outset, while in interview after interview, Francis Coppola has cast himself as the martyred artist assailed by the jealous caprices of the gods. It's as though he expects extra Brownie points (if not a Purple Heart) for the torment he suffered in bringing this epic out of the jungle into the light—the world wired to Francis Coppola's ass in traction.

Even though the film has finally had its belated premiere, the aura of consecration surrounding *Apocalypse Now* still hasn't cleared. Since this is patently too significant a creation to be marred by anything so trivial as title credits, patrons of the 70-millimeter run receive a booklet that includes yet another mini-diary of Herculean hassles, plus a statement of artistic purpose by the creator himself. In this preface, Coppola makes it clear that what he had in mind was no mere movie, but a "film experience"—a "monument," in fact, as he phrased it elsewhere. This kind of posturing can be contagious, persuading some to find greatness against all evidence, and others to feel rather sheepish about not warming up to a film as awesome as its director says it is. Yet a campaign like this also raises the stakes to a point where they can scarcely be recouped—and I'm not talking about the inflated budget of this project either. When a director sets out to make a work of genius, weighty intentions even coupled

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with prodigious movie-making skill don't suffice. A would-be masterpiece requires an urgent personal vision, conveyed to the spectator with the force of revelation—the filmmaker's talent and intelligence transcending themselves in the attempt to extract new truths from the subject at hand. Failing that, what you're left with is no "film experience" after all, but just another movie saddled with a lot of flossy affectations.

As far as *Apocalypse Now* is concerned Coppola's freshly minted insight turns out to be that Vietnam was a hallucinatory nightmare—which is merely the most familiar cliché of the seventies particularly dear, it seems, to filmmakers who never served there. Accompanying this central inspiration are a host of other like commonplaces, such as the notion that the agony suffered by our GIs was the primary tragedy of the war with the Vietnamese once again alternately menacing and pathetic blur in the background; and that our greatest defect was that we were too tentative and compassionate to commit ourselves to a plan of utterly merciless annihilation.

Of course, this film means to address more than just our sorry past in South east Asia, and theoretically a novel approach could make even the most threadbare ideas seem profound. Her Vietnam is the allegorical launching pad for the universal journey in quest of the dark reaches of the human spirit, or so Coppola tells us. The fatal mistake was to try to construct a movie metaphor from the confining symbolic and structural blueprint of High Literature specifically, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The challenge of rendering Conrad's elusive, portentous imagery on screen would defeat almost anyone; Orson Welles tried and was thwarted, and instead made his film debut with *Citizen Kane*.

**H**ERE COPPOLA'S STRUGGLE does a disservice to both Conrad and himself. Concrete images limit the horizons of Conrad's grim vision, and the condensed spoken dialogue trivializes it. Meanwhile, the film is stunted by having been pruned to suit a form imposed by an alien medium. As a result, *Apocalypse Now* is too

stilted and schematic to succeed on even the most fundamental level Coppola intended—namely to sustain an atmosphere of escalating horror. After all, how can you surrender to the illusion that you're witnessing a waking cinematic nightmare when the director is so conspicuously present, prompting you to smell disaster looming at every bend of the river?

*Apocalypse Now* and its hero both start on such an ominous note of frenzy that there's little left to build up to over the next long 140 minutes. We first see Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) photographed in close-up, upside down—an apt bit of spatial disorientation, because it soon turns out that the captain is distinctly nervous in the service; we see him shadowboxing kung fu style, shattering a mirror with his fist and then writhing while smearing blood all over himself. “I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one,” he intones huskily; his task is to find and infiltrate the jungle domain of one Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a renegade who has defied the accepted rules of warfare and hence must be “terminated.” This is where the disparity begins to set in between the impact on the audience of what is seen and heard, and the devastating effect of it all on the film's characters. To impress upon Willard the lunatic charisma of his quarry, his superiors play him a tape of Kurtz's voice; the colonel relates a nightmare he had of a snail gliding across a razor's edge and surviving. Eccentric and mildly creepy, you think; heavy, think the assembled brass.

According to his instructions, Willard commandeers a boat that will snake upriver into Cambodia towards Kurtz's lair. (Logic indicates that there might be more efficacious modes of transport available to him, but never mind that—the symbolic necessity of this trek upstream toward self-awareness overrides everything.) The hapless crew of said vessel, ignorant of the purpose and destination of the journey, are described colorfully by Willard as “rock-and-rollers with one foot in the grave.” They are a racially balanced quartet: two blacks, a rigid and scornful pilot Chief (Albert Hall) and a boogieing teen-aged Mr. Clean (Larry Fishburne); and two whites, a jangle-nerved *saucier* from New Orleans (Frederic Forrest, who gives the movie's most compelling performance) and a blissed-out surfer from California (Sam Bottoms).

As the squad penetrates deeper into the war zone Willard bestirs himself occasionally to bark orders at his queru-

lous crew, but he is essentially passive, in an “I Am A Camera” literary pose, sweating copiously as he stares out at the accumulating horror on both sides of the river. When not thus engaged he pores over the dossier on Kurtz, which redundantly reiterates what he (and we) were already informed of before the journey began: that the colonel is a man of unusual brains and virility who went off the deep end when prevented from fighting the war his way, principally by slaughtering hordes of supposedly seditious Vietnamese.

**W**ILLARD'S RUMINATIONS on the madness of this war and the growing bond he feels for the enigmatic Kurtz are expressed via voice-over narration written for the film by Michael Herr. Not having read Herr's war chronicle, *Dispatches*, I can only assume from the acclaim it received that the book included nothing like Willard's butch-laconic pronunciamentos in *Apocalypse Now*. When Willard tersely reveals that the war is founded on lies, or that Kurtz “could have gone for general—but he went for himself instead,” this isn't the voice of truth we're hearing—it's more like a malaria-infected parody of Mickey Spillane.

Fortunately these reveries are punctuated by sudden and often breathtakingly executed sequences of warfare, set

pieces that have rather the effect of musical comedy production numbers that distract you momentarily from the dreary plot in which they're mired. The best and, anticlimactically, the first of these is the encounter of Willard and Co. with Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), complete with Confederate cavalry hat; in a grudging bow to technology he has exchanged his noble steed for a helicopter. A strutting, poker-faced warlover who “loves the smell of napalm in the morning” but thrills even more to the clarion cry, “Surf's up,” Kilgore is an authentically terrifying figure of black comedy.

With serene images of massed helicopters intercut with swooping target views of the village below waiting to be strafed, the airborne cavalry charge, bugle call and all, is perversely exhilarating stuff. Here Coppola, working in strictly cinematic terms, comes close to conveying the adrenalin-charged appeal that combat holds for many men; then he mars it with the cheap aural overkill of flooding the soundtrack with snippets from “The Ride of the Valkyries.”

As they proceed up the river, Willard passes so many signposts of a disintegrating civilization that by the time he and the audience finally get within poison-arrow range of Kurtz's realm, Coppola's tom-tom has been beating crescendo for two solid hours. The direc-



tor's only apparent recourse at this stage is to pile on the phantasmagoria recklessly, yet the more vehement he gets, the sillier the whole premise becomes.

On arrival, Willard is collared by a stranded photographer turned wild-eyed court jester (Dennis Hopper). Glancing around at a bevy of hanging corpses twisting in the breeze, he babbles that "Sometimes he [Kurtz] goes too far, but he's the first to admit it." As Willard stumbles over paths littered with severed heads, he unburdens himself of the insight that "Everything I saw told me that Kurtz had gone insane"—a remark that deserves the Croix de Guerre for both redundancy and understatement. An imitation Angkor Wat with the film's title scrawled on the walls for no discernible reason, this domain is populated by paint-smeared natives performing pagan sacrifices out of fealty to their willful white god—forget Conrad, this is *Cobra Woman* played straight and big, just as Maria Montez would have done it if *She* had been blessed with Coppola's budget.

**T**HE LAST TWENTY MINUTES of *Apocalypse Now* are so deliriously cosmic that only blind faith (of the sort that Kurtz exacts from his subjects) could convince you that there's any exalted truth to be gleaned from Coppola's bloated abstractions. How does Kurtz realize even before meeting him that Willard is both his kindred spirit and the implacable bearer of his destruction? Is there any reason, apart from *Weltschmerz* and the film's need for a symmetrically primed climax, why Kurtz doesn't dispose of Willard the moment he enters this martial Jonestown? Evidently, all that is too mundane to merit an explanation. Instead, Kurtz, Willard, and the photographer exchange leaden epigrams while awaiting catharsis. "You're an errand boy sent to collect the bill," sneers Kurtz to Willard. "The man is clear in his mind but his soul is mad," hisses the cameraman to the captain. "He broke away from them [Kurtz's family], then he broke away from himself. I never saw a man so broken apart," says Willard to himself.

The accompanying images are likewise grave and momentous; Coppola's visual shorthand to convey Kurtz's mystical derangement lies in the transparent device of never letting you get a good look at him. A hand plunges into a bucket of water, then bathes a shaved pate glowing under a spotlight; when the face actually looms during Brando's big monologue, globs of shadow scud across

the screen in metronomic measure. On a painfully literal show-and-tell level, to illustrate the stranded photographer's claim that this is a "poet-warrior in the classic sense," Coppola has Brando, encircled in a saffron glow, reading T. S. Eliot in the darkness at us. Considering that Brando's performance (what you can make out of it, anyway) is strictly self-lampoon—all garbled syllables, thought-fraught pauses, and pained eyes tilted upward—perhaps the director's camera coyness was all for the best anyway.

Throughout the making of this film, Coppola professed his intense identification with the character of Captain Willard, inexorably drifting toward his rendezvous with that distorted alter ego hidden somewhere in the Asian jungle. The final sequence gives you a chilling glimpse of what Coppola may have had in mind: As a triumphant Willard stands above Kurtz's cowed zombies,

they genuflect, then silently lay down their arms as he passes among them. Campy though the staging of this moment is, there's no denying the emotional charge it carries—the sense of absolute power as a heady narcotic that perverts the judgment unless you walk away when it's thrust upon you. The symbolic connection between these images and Coppola's role as instigator, hero, and victim of this whole filmic enterprise is too obvious to be passed over. With *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola has been intoxicated by the exercise of a kind of power accorded few American directors, particularly on a scale as huge as this—total control over a film universe of his own devising. As with Kurtz, the self-contained fiefdom he constructed is a bamboo cage in disguise—the poet-warrior may think he's spouting words of genius, but the gibberish we hear is just the product of delusions of grandeur with a vengeance. □

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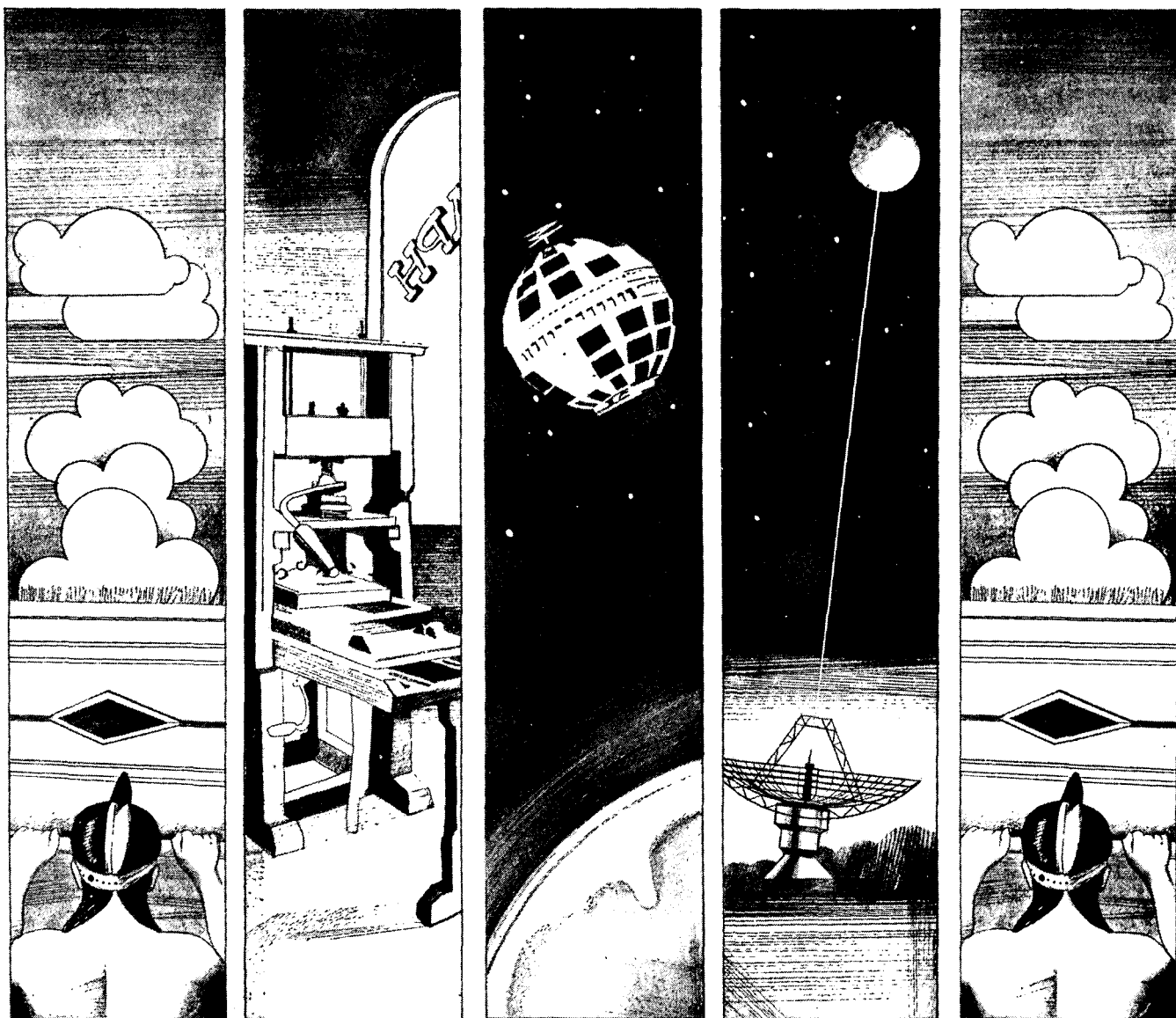
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