



Playhouse Cinema. Tuesday 2 October at 7:15pm.

First of four in InFiFa's season of Difficult Shoots.

APOCALYPSE NOW. (153 minutes. USA 1979)

Produced and directed by Francis Ford Coppola; written by Coppola and John Milius, narration by Michael Herr; cinematography by Vittorio Storaro; production design by Dean Tavoularis; edited by Richard Marks.

Starring: Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, Robert Duvall, Frederic Forrest, Laurence Fishburne, Dennis Hopper, Harrison Ford, Scott Glenn, Sam Bottoms.

In Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, a character named Kurtz escapes domesticity and civilisation (his wife and merry old England) to go wild in the Congo. In *Apocalypse Now*, an adaptation of the book, a character named Kurtz escapes domesticity and an even more doubtful version of civilisation (his wife and the US Army) to go wild in Cambodia. After travelling upriver, each man finds his own realm in the jungle. Environed by a horde of vassals, each becomes a god, beholden to no rules of a cultured community. Such absolute freedom cannot go unpunished, however, and so each man is pursued by an agent from the society he has left behind.

When Coppola started shooting *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines in March 1976, the budget was \$12 million, and the film's release was planned for April the following year. However, first a typhoon halted the shooting schedule for seven weeks. Then Marlon Brando arrived: his character in the script was a lean, physically very fit Green Beret, but Brando was weighing almost 300 pounds and looked like an out-of-shape Sumo wrestler on his way to another eating contest. Next, Martin Sheen had a heart attack and could not work for more than seven weeks. Throughout the writing, shooting, crash-dieting and recovery phases the production costs went up because Coppola wanted all the details right. He claimed that he was not just making a film about the Vietnam war, but that it was Vietnam itself. Without the locals. The only Vietnamese speaking part belongs to a South Vietnamese army translator, who gets to yammer: "This man is dirty VC! He wants water! He can drink paddy water!" Is it to remind us of Kurtz's scrawled imperative at the end of his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs in the novel, to "exterminate all the brutes"? For those invading a foreign country it seems that it can only be made habitable if all locals, particularly if they are non-white, are... removed.

Self-indulgent and expansive as his star actor, his costs became so excessive that Coppola had to sink his own money into the project: \$18 million came from his personal assets and loans for which he was accountable. He and his co-writer John Milius wrote ten drafts, amounting to more than a thousand pages, and the director had difficulty in choosing an ending for the film. The image of severed heads impaled on poles and bodies hanging from trees comes straight out of Brueghel's *Dulle Griet* painting, and effectively leads us to the island where Brando's berserk Colonel holds court, but the leaden delivery of Brando's tedious monologues mumbled in the shadows of a cave (this way the actor's still ample girth was masqueraded), deep in the jungle, are perhaps not the tremendous finale many expected. When Kurtz (Brando) tells Willard (Sheen) that moral terror is necessary for the preservation of civilization, for instance, he sounds more like a drunk tucked away in the corner of some brown pub who, slurring his words, is largely ignored by all other patrons. Many critics said this obscurity emphasizes the pointlessness, futility, insanity and inhumanity of war, but it inadvertently also draws attention to the fact that dementia and wisdom are two sides of the same coin. Perhaps this is also "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose," as Conrad has it in the novel. Milius and Coppola however, are peddlers of machismo: their screenplay lacks the humanity to create characters to whom most people can relate. The complexity and subtlety of the novel are largely absent. As viewers we are bullied into submission at first, then distracted and fatigued by a truculent actor whose every whim the director indulged in.

The finished movie, released two years later than originally intended, is actually more about a bunch of mainly white American males, Coppola most of all, wading into their own hearts of darkness. The (Oscar winning) cinematography by the great Vittorio Storaro is magnificent, in the way it reproduces the essence of the Vietnam-Cambodian jungle. The suffocating foliage, the unseen yet multiple dangers, are faultlessly recreated in the Philippines; the film's expensive production and (also Oscar winning) sound design, a visual and aural excess, are awesome. The raid against a Vietcong stronghold, when helicopters fly in blasting Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, has become part of our cinematic common consciousness, together with its "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" line. Another magnificently orchestrated scene, with thousands of extras cast as marines, shows the perversion of war: the sight of a few Playboy Playmates grinding raunchily to loud music on a hastily constructed stage almost turns into a massive gang rape when aroused soldiers storm that stage. Technically this is bravura filmmaking; the director's interpretation still shocks many viewers, even after repeated viewings. But, as impressive as it looks and sounds, it is sensationalistic, frenzied art. In that aspect *Apocalypse Now* succeeds as a depiction of war as hell.

But the stories surrounding the film are so much more perceptive, fascinating and full of humanity, love, irony and... fear. The director's wife, Eleanor, accompanied him the whole time, co-directed a documentary on the making of, and kept a diary of the events: *Notes on the Making of Apocalypse Now*. Published later as a book it penetrates the human psyche and its obsessions more profoundly than anything Milius and her husband came up with in those +thousand pages of script. It is also a record of a marriage at breaking point (Eleanor and Francis have been married now for 55 years). Seeing your beloved husband tottering on the edge of a precipice, is a sight no sensible woman can endure for very long.

Apocalypse Now certainly is a polarizing film; to some this is an emperor in full regalia, to others the emperor wears no clothes at all (or maybe just a jockstrap and a pair of khaki socks). It's also the first of three films InFiFa will be showing this month where the circumstances created a film that might not always live up to the legend attached to it. Is it still current that ***if the legend becomes fact, print the legend?***

Tony Janssens (InFiFa)