# Apocalypse Now: Crash Course Film Criticism #8

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=bVMGyXnnoRM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/bVMGyXnnoRM

There are war movies, and then there is *Apocalypse Now*. In the late 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola hauled a film crew into the jungles of the Philippines and barely emerged with his sanity intact.

And he emerged with a film that after two years of work in the editing room is as much about one soldier's journey into his own mind as it is about the American war in Vietnam. It's an ambitious film that on its face shouldn't work. And yet it does, on so many levels.

[Opening music]

Director Francis Ford Coppola was riding a wave of success when he went off into the jungle to make *Apocalypse Now*. Over the previous seven years he made three bonafide classics: *The Godfather*, *The Conversation*, and *The Godfather Part II*. He'd proven he can tell intensely personal stories with the scope and scale of myths. His fascination with rituals, his daring camerawork, and his ability to put viewers into the heads of his characters had made him very successful. Critically, commercially, and artistically.

As the 1970s drew to a close, the major Hollywood studios were being gobbled up by multinational corporations. So executives were becoming more hesitant to gamble on the personal ambitious visions of filmmakers like William Friedkin, Martin Scorsese, and especially Francis Ford Coppola. Nevertheless Coppola leveraged all the clout he had, threw in a bunch of his own money, and headed off to the Philippines to make his dream film. He planned to use the Joseph Conrad novella *Heart of Darkness* as the basis for a story about the American war in Vietnam.

Conrad's book follows its narrator, Charles Marlow, up the Congo river in search of an enigmatic ivory trader named Kurtz. It's the tale of Marlow's growing obsession with Kurtz, as well as a broader critic of colonialism, and especially British Imperialism. In *Apocalypse Now*, an American army captain named Willard is dispatched by a shadowy group of senior military officers, including Harrison Ford, to find Colonel Kurtz and kill him. Kurtz, we're told, has gone insane.

He's surrounded himself with an army of Montagnard troops and fled up river into Cambodia. When we first meet Willard, played by Martin Sheen, he's suffering some kind of Post Traumatic Stress dream in a Saigon hotel. It's a stunning opening dissolving from a lush jungle ravaged by napalm, to thumping military helicopters to Willard's violent outbursts in the hotel, all scored to the end by The Doors.

*[sung by The Doors: 'This is the end, beautiful friend']*

This reveals Willard's damaged psyche, but also what caused it: the horrors of war. Then Willard begins his journey up river, traveling on a Navy patrol boat manned by a motley crew. There's the earnest captain known as Chief, played by Albert Hall. Sam Bottoms plays the California surf dude Lance. Chef, played by Fredrick Forest, is a saucier from New Orleans who gets wound tighter as the film continues. And a baby faced Laurence Fishburne plays Clean, the youngest member of the crew.

Together these guys ferry Willard deeper into Vietnam, encountering everything from a USO show staring Playboy Playmates to a surf-loving, Wagner-playing Air Cavalry officer played with gusto by Robert Duvall.

[*Film clip: "If I say it's safe to surf this beach captain, it's safe to surf this beach!"]*

The sights and sounds voyage grow increasingly absurd. And the ship's crew becomes more unbalanced, as they all look for ways to cope with the madness of war. When they finally reach Kurtz's compound, they discover macabre temples decorated with hanging corpses, heads on spikes, and thousands of silent Montagnard warriors in white paint.

With them is a manic American photo journalist played by Dennis Hopper who warns Willard that Kurtz has plans for him.

*[Film clip: He's got something in mind for you. Aren't you curious about that?]*

Kurtz himself, played by Marlon Brando, remains an enigma right to the end. Part warrior, part philosopher, and part tormented soul, he's mostly kept in shadows, looming over Willard.

*[Film clip:*
*Kurtz: Are my methods unsound?*
*Willard: I don't see... any method... at all, sir.]*

Kurtz beheads Chef before he can call in an airstrike, but keeps Willard alive, reading him poetry and attempting to justify his actions in whispered monologues.

Eventually, Willard decides to take action. And as the Montagnards slaughter a water buffalo in an elaborate ceremony, Willard uses the same kind of machete to kill Kurtz.

Willard then emerges from the temple to face the warriors, who kneel before him as he takes Lance by the arm and pulls him back to the boat. THE END!

Now, the production of *Apocalypse Now* was in serious trouble from the start. Coppola was behind schedule and over budget almost immediately. He fired his lead actor within the first months of filming. And the replacement, Martin Sheen, was in the midst of his own alcoholic breakdown at the time.

Not to mention, he suffered a heart attack in the middle of the shoot. The crew, who was scrambling to keep up with Coppola rewriting the movie as it was being shot, returned to the hotel each night for drug-fueled parties.

Much of the military hardware used in the film, including the helicopters of the Air Cavalry Unit, were on loan from the Filipino military. More than once, the real army needed them back to fight their own war. And partway through production, a typhoon struck and wiped out nearly all of the sets and equipment.

The stress of it all became so intense that Coppola threatened to commit suicide more than once and even suffered an epileptic seizure. You know, just your average film shoot…except not. It wasn't. Like, at all.

In the end, Coppola shot an unprecedented one-and-a-half million feet of film, which comes out to about 240 hours of footage. It took a team of four editors more than two years of work to cut the film together, tear
it apart, and reconstruct it.

War journalist Michael Herr was brought in to co-write Willard's terse voice over after test audiences couldn't understand the story. But, after all that, the film finally debuted at the Cannes Film Festival – a year late
– and took home the top prize, the Palme d'Or.

*Apocalypse Now* is a movie that emerged out of a really complicated production process. And it's not a film that's going to be satisfied with a single interpretation.

One way to look at films is through the lens of genre. And the most obvious way to think about *Apocalypse Now* is as a war movie. But what if we look a little deeper?

American scholar B. Ruby Rich makes a compelling case that Coppola's film actually moves through several different genres as it unfolds. She sees the first part of the film as a western. Willard is our silent, stoic white man, venturing into the wilderness because so-called civilized superiors don't want to get their hands dirty.

Rich writes, "There remaining no frontier for today's cowboys in the USA, men like Kilgore must turn instead to Vietnam... The eastern bankers and railroad tycoons of yore become here military brass, those shrimp-eating
creatures far from [the] action."

In place of Native American warriors fighting to protect their homeland, the American soldiers in Coppola's film do battle with a largely faceless North Vietnamese army. The military fights with machine guns and napalm, rather than rifles and small pox, but the game plan is the same: slaughter the dehumanized enemy and take their land. This first part of the film even culminates in an actual cavalry charge, led by Robert Duvall's Kilgore character in his ten-gallon hat. It's even complete with a real life bugle call.

Rich identifies the second section as a traditional war film. And it's during this section that Willard fires his only gunshot of the whole movie. The patrol crew pulls over a passing Vietnamese sampan, a flat-bottomed wooden boat. In a tense stand off, Chief orders Chef to board the boat to inspect its cargo.

*[Film clip:*
*Chef: There's nothing on it, man!*
*Chief: Get on it!*
*Chef: Alright!!!]*

Chef finds no contraband, but the stress of the encounter starts to break him. The confrontation escalates until a Vietnamese woman rushes toward Chef. Before it's clear she's only worried about a puppy hidden in a basket, Clean opens fire. The high-strung Americans spray the boat with bullets, killing most of the Vietnamese crew, and leaving the woman barely alive.

Chief orders her to be brought aboard and sets a course for the nearest field hospital, when Willard fires a single shot with his pistol, killing her.
He shows no emotion other than annoyance. His mission is Kurtz, and everything else is a distraction.

Rich identifies this as a central turning point for Willard's character: "Fed up with a code of honor that could massacre a boat and then feed on its remorse, Willard remarks [in voice over] that ... in this moment … he has begun to feel close to the mysterious Kurtz whose fate lies in his hands."

In this scene, Coppola also abandons the special effects, the darkly funny absurdist touches, and the rock-and-roll songs that play under much of the action. Instead, he presents war in direct, unsentimental terms. As senseless, barbaric, and arbitrary. These soldiers aren't portrayed as heroic, like in some war movies. Instead, they're weary – losing hope, mental stability, and, in many cases, their lives.

But that's just one way to view the film. Seen through a psychoanalytic lens, *Apocalypse Now* is the story of one man's journey into the depths of his own troubled mind, a mind ravaged by war.

In this reading, the opening of the film dissolves the boundaries between time and space, as seen from Willard's damaged point of view. As writer Maruerite Valentine puts it, "Willard's mind…has lost all capacity to differentiate between the inside of his head, and the external – the room, the hotel, Saigon. Fantasy and reality have become one."

The other characters Willard encounters on his trip up the river, then, can be read as reflections of himself. The boat crew might represent other coping strategies he's tried while in the military, while Kilgore could be a projection of his war-loving feelings. Even the commanding officers who send him on the mission display the same calculated dispassion that Willard shows through the film.

Which means Kurtz could be a reflection of Willard's psyche too. Kurtz is depicted in mostly darkness, as if seeing him fully would be too much for Willard to handle. And he speaks in whispered, fragmented monologues with unclear meanings. In a way, he's what Willard could – and maybe does – become: pure ruthlessness, entirely untroubled by morality. This way of looking at a film is fairly common, especially in the slasher genre.

The prolific horror director Wes Craven once posited, "...I even think the characters that are around the hero are elements of an uber personality.
And in this sense it's like a Folk Tale that says, 'Okay, the part of you that's going to have sex when something really dangerous is around? That part is gonna be killed off…'"

*Apocalypse Now*'s ending has always divided critics, some of whom believe the movie loses its way in the last half hour. But if we take this psychoanalytic reading to its logical conclusion, the climax makes sense. When Willard gets to the end of his mission, he recognizes himself in Kurtz, and he isn't sure he can go through with the kill. That hesitance doesn't make much sense in a western, a war movie, or even a myth.

But if the story is of a man trying to root out his worst impulses, to slay the dark, powerful dragon in his own mind, the final moments of the movie fit.
Because how do you destroy a piece of yourself, however terrifying it might be? As he's dying, Kurtz utters his famous last words.

*[Film clip: Kurtz: The horror… the horror…]*

But maybe he's not talking about the horrors of Vietnam, or even his own death. Instead, maybe he's speaking as part of a deeply troubled mind at war with itself, fractured by his particular experience of post traumatic stress.

Whether you choose to read *Apocalypse Now* as an exercise in multi-genre filmmaking, a journey into a damaged mind, or through some other lens, one thing is clear: This is a film that invites multiple interpretations.

It's a bold, messy masterpiece that nearly broke its crew, star, and director. And it remains as relevant today as it did the day it was released...sadly.

Next time, we'll trade the jungle of Vietnam for the Spanish countryside as a little girl unlocks a fantasy world that just might help her escape the brutal aftermath of the Spanish Civil War in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth.*

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This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C.

Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these nice people and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.