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Coppola, 'Apocalypse Now,' and the Ambivalent 70's

By DAVID STERRITT

Francis Ford Coppola's most popular contribution to American screenwriting is surely Marlon Brando's wry promise in the first Godfather film (1972): "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse."

There's another oft-cited line, in Coppola's 1979 Apocalypse Now, that crystallizes far more of the 70's American spirit, however, with a wit so ferocious that audiences have never quite known whether to laugh, gasp, or shudder. It comes when surfboard-toting Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore, played to the hilt by Robert Duvall, sniffs the warm Vietnamese air, flashes a contented smile, and expresses his satisfaction with the war he's so zealously fighting: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning!"

Expect that line to be quoted countless times again now that Coppola's epic is returning to theaters 22 years later as Apocalypse Now Redux, a re-edited director's cut with an additional 53 minutes of footage that had been left out of the original release.

The story hasn't changed. Martin Sheen plays Willard, a soldier sent to hunt down and "terminate with extreme prejudice" the renegade Colonel Kurtz (Brando), a brilliant officer who has gone insane and established a jungle kingdom that answers to no law but his own megalomaniacal will. Meandering as unpredictably as the river bearing Willard's boat, the film etches an episodic portrait of the Vietnam War as historical farce, geopolitical tragedy, and psychological catastrophe.

Pundits have already begun analyzing the previously unseen material, which includes a longer look at Willard and company as they begin the upriver journey; a sexual encounter between

Willard and Playboy playmates on a stranded helicopter; a scene where Kurtz dissects the lies in a Time article about the war; and a sequence on a French plantation hidden in the Vietnamese jungle, where Willard listens to a conversation about the history, morality, and futility of the war as seen by Vietnam's former colonial masters.

What threatens to get lost in critiques of the added footage is a broader perspective on Coppola as a quintessential voice of 1970's filmmaking. Like others of his generation -- including the director Michael Cimino, whose Vietnam epic The Deer Hunter opened a year earlier -- Coppola spent the ambivalent 70's hovering between the flamboyant idealism of the radical 60's and the self-absorbed cynicism of the conservative 80's. Apocalypse Now mirrors that instability, oscillating between outrage at the gut-churning horrors of war and pleasure with the spectacle that war produces for the widescreen Technovision camera.

The ambivalence of Apocalypse Now grew partly from Coppola's collaborators, who channeled 1970's sensibilities in wildly different ways. At one end of the spectrum was the screenwriter John Milius, a military buff who had celebrated guns, guts, and glory in aggressively post-60's, anti-flower-power movies like Magnum Force (1973) and The Wind and the Lion (1975). On the other was the actor Dennis Hopper, the Easy Rider (1969) hippie whose onand off-screen image had become an internationally known emblem of strung-out psychedelia. In a Salon review of the Apocalypse Now DVD edition last year, Michael Sragow accurately summed up Hopper's portrayal of a combat photographer who worships Kurtz's mad power: "He knows his brain has exploded even though he claims it has been enlarged. He catches himself up with a single word -- 'wrong' -- that sounds out like his conscious mind's foghorn. Hopper may express more about the fallout of the '60s than anything else in the movie."

The heart of the film's ambivalence lies in Coppola's own creative personality, however. He was an ambitious artist in the 70's, eager to tackle large-scale subjects and willing to court a reasonable degree of controversy. But he was also a savvy businessman, seeing mass-audience success as the key to his ongoing artistic

freedom and the survival of American Zoetrope, the cinematic fiefdom he had established in 1970 as an alternative to Hollywood.

Many critics in 1972 hailed The Godfather as a brilliant meeting of artistry and commerce. To his credit, Coppola disagreed, seeing the movie's wide appeal as a missed chance to reach the public with ideas as well as entertainment. "What an opportunity that could have been," he said at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1974. And he meant it. Riding his Godfather success as exuberantly as Kilgore on a California wave, the Coppola of the mid-1970's was still enough of a 60's loyalist to want more social impact in his work. He proved that in The Conversation and The Godfather: Part II, two 1974 releases with forthrightly sociopolitical themes: high-tech corporate snooping in the former, the hazy line between capitalism and criminality in the latter.

Coppola's business side made sure, however, that even his most high-minded projects took few commercial risks. The Conversation placed well-liked Gene Hackman in an art-thriller plot heavily influenced by Michelangelo Antonioni's breakthrough hit Blowup (1966). As for the eagerly awaited Godfather sequel, its cast bristled with favorites like Duvall and Robert De Niro; its story moved at a compelling pace despite an unconventional flashback structure; and its powerfully choreographed violence erupted frequently enough to keep crime-movie fans cheering whether or not they paid attention to the picture's deeper messages.

Apocalypse Now opened new ground for Coppola the director -- it was his first war film and, more important, his first foray into a truly contentious topic. But it continued the Godfather II pattern by anchoring its sociopolitical themes in time-tested genre conventions. True, it refought the Vietnam conflict with an anguished ambiguity that couldn't be more different from the macho posturing of The Green Berets (1968), Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985), and their appalling ilk. Still, it paid obeisance to many Hollywood traditions, from its suspense-laden narrative (it's a road movie on a river) to its combat-film action scenes. Coppola hoped intellectuals would appreciate his ideas, but his first priority was making everyday moviegoers line up at the ticket window.

The commercial aspects of Apocalypse Now underscore a side of Coppola that would become increasingly visible in the less-adventurous 1980's, when his projects ranged from the tame (Gardens of Stone, 1987) to the trifling (The Outsiders, 1983) to the woefully misbegotten (The Godfather: Part III, released in 1990). Those and other ventures seemed more interested in exploiting marketable material -- how else to explain the half-baked mishmash of Godfather III? -- than exploring ideas that genuinely engaged Coppola's intellect and imagination.

A more subtle quality of Apocalypse Now casts additional light on Coppola's essentially conservative desire to treat momentous themes without unduly disturbing his audience. Despite the political ramifications of its story, Apocalypse Now has less to do with the history and morality of the Vietnam tragedy than with the possibilities for motion-picture mythmaking that Coppola saw there. It's not about the Southeast Asian war in particular but about war in general, seen as a fundamental force of nature -- no less inevitable than floods or famines, no less morbidly fascinating than the existential Heart of Darkness conjured up by Joseph Conrad in the 1902 novel that inspired Milius's screenplay. While the film can be read as a cry against the evils inflicted on Vietnam, it's more accurately seen as a humanitarian statement on the tragedy of war itself, as timeless and unspecific as the Homeric epic that some of its admirers likened it to.

It's interesting to consider that Coppola had reached the Hollywood big leagues in 1970 by co-writing the Academy Award-winning script for Patton, which President Richard Nixon viewed repeatedly during the Vietnam conflict. It's hard to think of a subject more freighted with political import, especially in the Nixon era when warmongers and war protesters were at each other's throats.

Yet the critic Peter Cowie notes in his authoritative The Apocalypse Now Book that Coppola was "never ... a political animal," and Coppola's own comments don't contradict this. Nor do the books and films that directly influenced Apocalypse: Hard-hitting documentaries like Peter Davis's Hearts and Minds (1974) and Emile de Antonio's In the Year of the Pig (1969) were in

the mix, but Werner Herzog's hallucinatory melodrama Aguirre: the Wrath of God (1972) provided at least as many ideas and inspirations. No wonder Eleanor Coppola told Cowie that her husband's goal was less to analyze the Vietnam conflict than to weave "a kind of myth, an opera" around his larger-than-life subject.

Coppola's mythmaking ambition was in sync with Hollywood's ambivalence about how -- and whether -- to put Vietnam on screen. American forces had left the region about a year before he started shooting in his Philippines locations. Studios had been dithering over the subject through-out the 70's, however, showing remarkable timidity even by Hollywood standards. When a screenwriter proposed a Vietnam project in 1971, Cowie reports, one executive declared it five years too early and another proclaimed it five years too late. Coppola decided the time was right for Apocalypse after a Paramount executive told him the public wasn't ready for it. While his decision came partly from contrarian boldness -- by the time the picture was finished, the public would be ready for it -- there was another motivation too.

After the intensity of Godfather II, he wanted to make an action picture that would be as much fun for him to direct as it would be exciting for audiences to watch. Little did he know how hard it would prove to be, plagued by everything from a Sheen heart attack to his own marital problems and a full-blown Philippines monsoon. Although various qualities tie the film to the self-indulgent 80's era -- its preference for myth over polemic, its avoidance of hot-button commentary -- the 60's links of Apocalypse Now speak loudly too, through its anti-authoritarian spirit and its willingness (however mixed Coppola's motives may have been) to tackle Vietnam when conventional studio wisdom balked at the prospect.

Both sides of this chronological coin are captured by the newly restored scene showing Willard's visit to the French plantation. Coppola never explains how these French folks have managed to live undiscovered for years in the heart of their country's lost colony. But their long conversation in Willard's presence says more about the specifics of Southeast Asian history than the rest of

the movie's scenes together. "We fight to keep what is ours," says the French patriarch played by Christian Marquand, summing up his argument that France has proprietary rights because it brought Vietnam into the modern economic world. "You Americans fight for the biggest nothing in history."

Here we have Coppola in full 60's mode, diving into Vietnam's tormented past with depth and candor. Remember, however, that he excised this episode from the original cut, to shorten the picture and prevent too much talk from taxing Saturday-night moviegoers. This brings us back to Coppola the studio exec, ready to scrap his film's most analytical sequence rather than risk offending audiences more interested in action and psychedelics than dialogue and historiography.

Caught though it is in 1970's ambivalence, Apocalypse Now Redux looks fresher and healthier to my eyes than any war movie made since then, perhaps excepting Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line (1998), which also bears the scars of a troubled production history. The competition is admittedly thin, with Steven Spielberg's strident Saving Private Ryan (1998) the reigning "classic" and Michael Bay's insufferable Pearl Harbor (2001) the latest debacle. Both deal in aggressive nostalgia, self-justifying spectacle, and a faux verisimilitude built on Hollywood clichés and the high-tech voyeurism embodied by TV coverage of the Persian Gulf conflict. All this makes a sorry contrast with the willingness of Coppola and company to enrich their audience-pleasing product with discursive elements ranging from literary allusion (citing Conrad and T. S. Eliot) to mass-culture critique (excoriating Time magazine) to apocalyptic mysticism (evoking the demonism of drug-dazed combat, the blood ritual of assassination, the ineffable horror whose invocation by Kurtz provides the film's indelible climax).

Coppola has his shortcomings as a filmmaker and a thinker, but there's no denying the energy and resourcefulness that surge through Apocalypse Now at its most powerful moments, alternately helped and hindered by its 1970's sensibility. While he found no magic key to unlock Vietnam's heart of darkness, Coppola's intuitive grasp of what may now seem an old-fashioned

brand of cinema -- there's not a computer-generated frame in sight -- carries a unique blend of insights into one of the past century's most troubled historical moments.

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