Apocalypse Now: Performing Imperialism and the Apocalypse

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Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "What we see is neither real, because after all we are looking at actors acting, nor unreal, as everything that happens makes us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam" (Alter viii). Storytelling based on historical events simultaneously allows for audiences to be drawn into, and separate from, those events. This is especially true for stories (fiction or non-fiction) about the Vietnam War. The war was pumped into households across the world as the first televised war. In the last decade of the war and the decades that followed, there was a rush of books, plays, and films, which tried to capture the horror and drama of the war in Vietnam. Often, when people think of the war images pop into their minds. Images of a child covered in napalm, a Buddhist monk engulfed in flames, and the visual and sound of the Huey are some of the most reproduced imagery of the time.[1] But the images from famous Vietnam War films, such as the Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the "Born to Kill" helmet from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and the "Ride of the Valkyries" Huey scene in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), also seep into the visual zeitgeist of the war. While audiences watch these stories for entertainment, they also see the realities of war represented. To view Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* through the lenses of imperialism and the apocalypse allows for a deeper investigation of the performative quality of the actors, their performance, and the final product – the film.

In theatre and performance studies the concept of "performative" emerged in Judith Butler's work on gender, but the use of "performative" is applicable here as well. Performance, in Butler's work (and in the work of Richard Schechner), is defined as twice behaved behaviors + an audience. Butler adds to this definition in her discussion of the body: "(a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is

[1] Huey is the nickname for the military helicopter Bell UH-1 Iroquois that first appeared in combat in the Vietnam War.

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not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of *historical* possibilities" (521, emphasis added). This history of imperialism and apocalypse are present in both the actors' bodies and the "body" of the film as they perform for audiences. In this way, the historical significance of *Apocalypse Now* (and what the film represents) is also performative. The Vietnam War was unlike any war before or since and "a defining feature of the war story had been its essential simplicity, its childlike unself-consciousness, its lack of explanation" (Engelhardt 275). This article goes beyond past scholarship to question what are the representations of imperialism via performance within the film, but also the performance *of* the film? And what role does ambivalence or "childlike unself-consciousness" play in both "performances"? How does the horror of apocalypse relate to imperialism in the film? Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* "makes us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam" through the performance of imperialism and the apocalypse (Alter viii).

Apocalypse Now is one film in a long list of Vietnam War films which include *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).[2] *Apocalypse Now* stands out from this list. Arguably, each film functions as a commentary on war and those comments are often a negative critique of the United States involvement in Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now* is arguably less self-censored than Vietnam War films that came before it, and perhaps after it. Gilbert Adair's posits *Apocalypse Now* as the "full frontal" Vietnam War film (9). Engelhardt notes that *Apocalypse Now* is a "quagmire film" which "offered audiences their only chance to experience from a peasant's viewpoint the annihilating terror of attacking U.S. helicopters. With its sardonic view of the war effort and its crazed length, it seemed an object lesson in why the war should not be refought by Hollywood" (277). In Adair's book, *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (1981), he shares an anecdote about a friend who confessed that he put more faith in the moon than in Vietnam, "because he could *see* the moon but he couldn't see Vietnam" (11-2, italics in original). Despite the evening news reporting images, stories, and videos from the war, many Americans still felt as though it was incomprehensible. Coppola's film attempts to show the war in Vietnam, but it also "had to be about *something else*" (Adair 146, italics in

[2] There are many films that focus on the Vietnam War, but for the purposes of this paper I will only be investigating *Apocalypse Now*. That is not to say that other films would not work with this methodology, but for the length of this paper, *Apocalypse Now* is sufficient.

original). *Apocalypse Now* is *something else*. Vietnam War stories in film, television, literature, and on stage presented audiences "with more disturbing imagery about their culture, soldiers, and institutions of authority than ever before," especially *Apocalypse Now* (Huebner 243). While the narrative of the film is fiction (like most Vietnam War films) as well as an adaption, it still allows for this investigation of the reality of imperialism and the apocalypse. The combination of these ideologies in this film serves as a site of a departure from other Vietnam War films as it highlights American imperialism through its own performance of imperialism.

According to Edward Said, imperialism is the "'process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire'" (9). Said writes that an empire is a relationship "in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society" (9). Imperialism encompasses cultural, political, and economic influences and control (Ritzer 69). Raymond Williams describes "American Imperialism" as a "primarily economic denomination associated with the global reach of capitalism but not having the political form of 'colonialism'" (Tomlinson, 4). Imperialism is inherent in war especially in a "war of aggression" such as the Vietnam War, which displaced and oppressed people (Association D'Amitie Franco-Vietnamienne). In this way, I use imperialism as a means to investigate the performative nature of: the characters, the actors who played them, the making of the film, and those who made it.

Similarly, I utilize "apocalypse" to explore the film and its performance. Death, destruction, oppression, and loss are all wrapped up in the idea of the apocalypse. Any discussion of the apocalypse must always be in conversation with the "original" apocalypse from the Book of Revelation in the Bible (as well as in other non-Christian religious texts).[3] The Greek word *apokalypsis* is not related to the end of the world, but instead refers to a revealing or uncovering. The definition of the word apocalypse, as I interpret it, has two elements: the reveal and the complete destruction. The reveal comes from the Biblical apocalypse; the idea of revealed knowledge and newfound awareness. It implies that something is hidden or not known and when it is revealed what follows is destruction. Apocalypse almost always references the end – the end of time or the end of the world. The end then leads to, in religious terms, the afterlife or spiritual realm. It some ways it is a

[3] The term "apocalypse" comes from the Greeks meaning "uncovering" or "revealing," the but the *original* apocalypse is considered as the one found in the Bible.

promise of hope; after this death and destruction something new will come. It is the end in order to have a new beginning.

Performing (Playing) Imperialism

Margaret Morse cites Homi Fern Haber who equates "any form of unity with terror" and thus "totalization – or any assertion of structure or identity is equated with totalitarianism and viewed as an instrument of repression" (164). Totalitarianism is often a tool of imperialism. This quote from Haber also points to an important notion: terror unifies. There are examples of this throughout history. A particularly prominent recent example was the coming together of the American people in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001. The terror of what happened and the fear of what could happen unified the country in many ways. Both revelation and destruction can be viewed as the outcome of unifying terror (imperialism). There are many reasons America got involved in Vietnam which include the French Indochina War in the 1950s, the fear of the Domino Theory (if Vietnam is lost to communism, then communism will spread), the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, as well as the performance of power, among others. French imperialism led them to Vietnam and the same could be said for American imperialism. The war that often accompanies acts of imperialism results is a form of the apocalypse. The apocalypse (war) can be, or is, the result of imperialism.

Nora M. Alter introduces the phrase "playing imperialism" to describe the performance of Vietnam War plays on stage (26). Alter utilizes the term to refer not only to the "implicit 'imperialistic' perspective from which the American plays tend to *view* the war, more or less consciously, but also to a similar perspective from which they *restage* it, more or less unconsciously – in most cases to the exclusion of other perspectives that might be *less* subjective, *less* complicitous with the dominant ideology of the United States" (26, italics in original). Alter proposed that the "America staging of the Vietnam War [specifically in theatre] was a form of 'playing imperialism'" (26). Just as Alter examines plays about the Vietnam War (*Viet Rock* in 1966, *MacBird* in 1967, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* in 1970, and others) and applies the ideas of "playing imperialism," here I apply this methodology to *Apocalypse Now*.

Apocalypse Now performs (or plays) several forms of imperialism. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, "contended that Coppola 'wanted to express the main idea of Joseph Conrad, which is the imposition of one culture on top of

another," which is present throughout the film (Norris, 211).[4] There are several examples of imperialism examined here: overall American imperialism (as it is portrayed in the film), the performance of imperialism by the characters Kurtz (Colonel Walter E. Kurtz performed by Marlon Brando) and Willard (Captain Benjamin L. Willard played by Martin Sheen), and the film's performative imperialism.

American Imperialism. Where and how does imperialism emerge? From nationalism? From the culture? As John Tomlinson writes in *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (1991), "Culture is entirely – even definitively – the work of human beings" (23). The first spoken line of *Apocalypse Now* comes from Captain Willard. "Saigon. Shit!" (00:04:24-00:04:25). "I'm still only in Saigon... Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle" (*Apocalypse Now*, 00:04:27-00:04:41). While Saigon is not home, it also is not the "jungle." This implies that Saigon is safer, easier, or better than the rest of Vietnam. In this way, Saigon becomes a new normal, a new sense of safety. The people sent to fight in this war, at least in this portrayal, are not convinced of their country's imperialistic practices.

A key component of the film is the performance of the us versus them mentality by highlighting the "otherness" and "foreignness" of the Vietnamese and Cambodians. The visual and aural representations of "foreign" are constructed in the film. There is a clear dichotomy of American versus non-American even though most of film is set in Vietnam and Cambodia. As Willard moves up the river on his mission to find Kurtz, the visual and aural differences become more apparent and more "foreign." This reinforces Conrad's, and also Coppola's, belief that the farther upriver the men travel the deeper they go into the heart of darkness. At the start of the river, the men are water-skiing behind the boat while laughing and listening to The Rolling Stones. There are Vietnamese fishermen and people working on the shores. As they continue upriver there are less and less encounters with the locals

[4] *Apocalypse Now* is based Joseph Conrad's short story, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The story and themes of Conrad's narrative is closely followed in the film, with the major exception of the context and, therefore, the location. Conrad's story is set on the Congo River in Africa and highlights European imperialism. Both Conrad and Coppola received criticism for their works. The 2000 edition of *Heart of Darkness* edited by Cedric Watts is just one of edited versions of the 1899 original. In this edition, Watts cites critics who claim that *Heart of Darkness* is a tale of authenticity, while others praise it for being an amazing part of modern fiction, and some claim that Conrad was racist. Regardless of criticisms, *Heart of Darkness* is widely read and provided the source material for *Apocalypse Now*.

and the music stops. The boat keeps moving up the river until they stumble across a USO supply depot where the USO show is being set up. At the depot, soldiers are able to restock on cigarettes, soda, beer, and ammunition and they are able to partake in a Playboy Playmate USO performance. Norris writes, "The exaltation of individual freedom and dignity, traditionally sacrificed in the military, is further undercut by the USO show's display of mindless male frenzy and violence" (214). The soldiers in the boat continue upriver as they get closer and closer to Cambodia.

Another layer of the performance of imperialism is the issue of race and the United States military. The Black-White binary is also seen in the film with the American soldiers just as it was throughout the Vietnam War. War is an act of imperialism, and the United States is no stranger to war. Scholars Paul B. Rich, author of "Racial Ideas and the Impact of Imperialism in Europe" and Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, author of *Empire & Emancipation: Power and Liberation on a World Scale* (1989), among others, site the relationship between race and imperialism. Both in different contexts outline the impact of historical imperialism on historical and modern racism. Pieterse argues, "Racism is the psychology of imperialism" (223). Through the history of US-involved wars, the military has relied on the performance of black and brown bodies to help protect US interests. Black men were fighting in US conflicts as early as the 1700s. Jay David and Elaine Crane argue in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* (1971):

> For two hundred years the black soldier has fought for his own personal freedom as well as for his country. It is no longer a question of proving ability; the black soldier has proved his heroism. Today the issues are acceptance as a human being and an American citizen and being granted the dignity and the privileges those identities imply. (15)

Almost 200,000 Black men fought in the Civil War, while close to 300,000 Black men fought in the Vietnam War. The United States military needed numbers (bodies) and therefore "began to court increasing numbers of potential black recruits" to fight in Vietnam (Engelhardt 248). While *Apocalypse Now* shows the camaraderie between the soldiers, which in many cases is a true representation of solider relationships, but the opposite is also true. One black solider said, "'I wasn't fighting the enemy. I was fighting the white man'" (Engelhardt 248). I would need an additional article to cover the entirety of the Black-White binary in the film, but it is important to note: none of the Black soldiers who start on the boat with Willard survive. While in fact only one white soldier, Lance, survives with Willard, *all* the

Black soldiers die long before Willard arrives in Cambodia. The film goes beyond demonstration the death of Cambodians and Vietnamese, but also the death of Black American soldiers. War is a point of division and codification for American nationalism. And *Apocalypse Now* complicates this as Willard is fighting "them" (Cambodians and Vietnamese) and "us" (Kurtz). It becomes a civil war: Willard vs. Kurtz. This is the central relationship in the film though they do not meet until well into the story. Towards the start of the film US Captain Willard is summoned to a headquarters in Nha Trang and is given orders to find and kill US Colonel Kurtz; to "terminate Kurtz's command" (*Apocalypse Now*, 00:17:52). They do not say "kill," but the desired result is implied. This film emphasizes when nationalism (as well as patriotism and duty) turns into imperialism. The result of performing imperialism is war or perhaps, vice versa.

Character Imperialism. The performance of imperialism in *Apocalypse Now* is underscored in the fight for what Willard and Kurtz believe is right. Are there "right" answers in war? Or are there only better options depending on what side you are on? Can war, and therefore, imperialism ever end in anything other than an apocalypse, like the title of the film implies? John Milius, screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now,* explains, "I had the title to call it, *Apocalypse Now,* because all the hippies at the time had these buttons that said 'Nirvana Now,' and I loved the idea of a guy having a button with a mushroom cloud on it that said, 'Apocalypse Now,' you know, let's bring it on, full nuke'" (Norris 209-10). A "full nuke" would go beyond imperialism to full destruction, death, and the apocalypse. Willard's removal of Kurtz is the "full nuke" option for the military leadership. But is that the "right" choice or the better option? The film continually provides moments of mirror-like reflections of Willard and Kurtz, which highlights the connectedness of these two men and their missions. For example, Willard puts his face in his hands and rubs his head, an act previously done by Kurtz. This dual physical performance of despair and frustration allows the audience to question the differences and similarities between Willard and Kurtz who seek nirvana and imperialism, if not apocalypse.

Kurtz's imperialism, and therefore resulting colonialism, is performed by his takeover in Cambodia. But is it imperialism? Or is it madness? Kurtz is searching for something: understanding? Atonement? Control? Escape? The character of Kurtz is an intelligent, educated, career officer in the United States Army. He attended West Point, earned a Master's degree from Harvard, served in the Korean War (1950-1953), worked at the Pentagon, and then was sent to Vietnam. During

his time in Vietnam (as well as before and after) the war was somewhat of hot potato passed from president to president, administration to administration. And his role in Vietnam was similar to that of the thousands of real "advisors" who were sent there to report on failures of the United States military polices and involvement from 1950-1975. This again pulls on Sartre's quote about making "us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam."

Kurtz also is representative of a trope found in war stories of the "old" soldier who wants to feel useful and applies to reenlist or to join Special Forces. His request to join Special Forces is initially denied due to his age but is later accepted. Kurtz is then sent to Vietnam again to join Project GAMMA (a real Special Force), which is tasked with intelligence operations in Cambodia. In addition, he is asked to build and lead an army of Montagnard (an indigenous group in Vietnam) warriors to help defeat the enemy. The tribesmen are later referred to as "his [Kurtz's] children" and "his people" (01:47:12; 01:50:36-01:50:39). Kurtz sets up camp at an abandoned Cambodian temple. This is where the audience finds Kurtz throughout the film, in the shadows of what is now his temple. In these scenes, Kurtz is seen as worshipped and valorized. At times he is seen as an example of the strength of the United States military and at other times he is viewed a mad leader of this indigenous group, both are arguably performances depending on the audience. Kurtz methods are described as barbaric and brutal. Shuting Sun writes, "Instead of sanitized civilized violence Kurtz opts for direct violence" (70). When he allowed photos of his "world" to be taken by the Photojournalist (to be released to the public) the military decides to shut him down. Kurtz explains, "You have to have men who are moral…and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling…without passion…without judgement…without judgement! Because it's judgement that defeats us" (02:13:27-02:14:02). His tactics and the results satisfied the leadership until the images are revealed to the critical public eye. Sending the message that the performance of imperialism is fine, unless it is on camera, which is why Willard is sent in.

Captain Benjamin L. Willard was part of a special operations unit called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG). But like many, he is tired of the war. Following the release of the photos the leadership now views Kurtz as an insane, loose cannon. In *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*, Michael Shafer describes Willard as "a quester knight who must face and text the shadowy civilian/military authorities" who give him the mission (193). He joins the Navy river boat patrol,

and they head upriver. Willard's quest up the river teaches him the danger of the "other." As Willard moves upriver "the more meaningless and morally vacant a nightmare Vietnam becomes" (Shafer 193). Chef (Frederic Forrest) says, "never get out of the boat" and this line is almost immediately repeated by Willard (via voiceover) after a threatening interaction with a tiger in the jungle (00:55:25-00:56:29). The boat becomes American soil. And once they leave American soil, they are in danger due to the "other." Early in the film, Willard encounters Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) who says, "Fucking savages" (00:45:13). Kilgore, the military, and the media reinforce the stereotype that "other" is savage and Willard buys into this notion. Willard's imperialism is essentially an extension of American imperialism. Willard is doing his military duty (whether ethical or not) and becomes consumed by it, which is perhaps the same path Kurtz attempted to follow.

As Willard, Lance (Sam Bottoms), and Chef arrive upriver to their destination, it is silent as they move through war-painted Cambodian filling canoes. As the Photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) appears through the crowds on shore, Willard, Lance, and Chef are welcomed. The images of the sculptures and the rituals being performed create a scene of otherness and foreignness. These images go beyond image of war and Vietnam to an even darker and worse place. Willard meets Kurtz and when Kurtz asks why Willard has been sent to him, Willard says, "They told me that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound." Kurtz asks, "Are my methods unsound?" Willard answers, "I don't see any method at all, sir" (01:57:28-01:58:01). Willard is successful in killing Kurtz. The Montagnards then kneel to Willard. He appears to push against American imperialism, but then creates his own version of it.

Film's Imperialism. Coppola makes a cameo early in the film when Willard arrives at an Army base. Kilgore walks Willard through the base and they pass a scene of chaos: helicopters flying overhead, soldiers dancing to The Rolling Stones, a pastor holding a service next to a church (that is being built or torn down, it is unclear), and television news crew with Coppola's character shouting, "Don't look at the camera! Just pretend you're fighting!" (00:27:36-00:27:48). This begs the question of authenticity of the war narrative, but also with the news narrative. Were (are) US citizens being show the "truth" about the war? Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, the trope of the "camera gun" in context

with the "aggressive use of the camera by the agents of the colonial powers" (107).[5] In this way, the camera is its own form of imperialism by choosing what images to "shoot" and what images not to "shoot," which is the job of a filmmaker like Coppola and the photojournalist character. The media has a significant impact on the perception of war back home. This performance doubles back on itself as audiences then question the truth of Coppola's film via his cameo. Linda Dittmar examines the appearance of television crews in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* writing that these moments articulate "the filmmakers' awareness of the ubiquitous role reportage plays in the process of imaging the Vietnam War" (3). What it meant for the news media or the soldiers who fought is different than what it meant for Coppola or for the Photojournalist character.

In the telling of the story of the Vietnam War, is imperialism inherent? In 2007, Keith Solomon wrote the article, "The Spectacle of War and the Specter of 'The Horror': *Apocalypse Now* and American Imperialism" for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Solomon highlights the reliance on technology to conduct war and to replicate it in film and television, which in turn creates a "spectacle of war." This transforms the audience into "supporters of the imperial project" (Solomon, 25). The film challenges the audience to answer the question: war, what is it good for? Solomon goes on to write, "By accepting images of the war as a form of entertainment, the viewer thus becomes both colonizer and colonized" (25). Perhaps an alternative reading of the film could reveal that the viewer becomes more educated about (and therefore more able to respond to) American imperialism which occurred during the war. Or the opposite could also be true – continued ambivalence? If Solomon is correct and the viewer acts as a colonizer then what agency is ascribed to the filmmakers? Are those involved in the production the colonizers?

I agree with Solomon in that the film, and story, reek of imperialism at all levels from production to narrative. Coppola and his crew spent 238 days on location in Manila, Philippines.[6] Ezra and Rowden write, "a term like 'on location' actually highlights the dislocation of most films from any representational relationship to or acknowledgement of the economic 'home' that is making it possible" (8). Philippines and United States have a long history, which includes the Philippine-American War (1898-1910) in which Filipino's fought for independence from the

[5] They site this concept from Étienne-Jules Marey "fusil cinematographique."

[6] Filming was scheduled to last six weeks.

United States. The first battle of the war was the Battle of Manila, where Coppola chose to film *Apocalypse Now*. After the war, the Philippine-US relationship improved so much so that the two became allies, which is part of the reason Coppola was allowed to film there. The 238 days of filming is just one example of how the film became, in terms of clichés, "bigger than itself." Being "on location" for that amount of time inevitably impacts the economy, if not the culture.[7]

The time spent in the Philippines became one level of imperialism and not only because of the excessive filming timeframe.[8] In the documentary, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, one of the producers describes building the scenery for Kurtz's temple. The film hired 600+ local workers in the Philippines for $1 a day. One producer flippantly questioned whether they were taking advantage of the local people. In addition, several hundred people of Ifugao from Luzon were brought in to play the Montagnard warriors.[9] Ifugaos not only act as the Montagnard warriors, but also performed as decapitated heads (*Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*). The "heads" had to stand in boxes in the ground with their heads sticking above the ground for eight to twelve hours a day while filming the scenes which took place outside Kurtz's temple. The use of the locals as "foreign" warriors and severed heads not only represents the performance of imperialism within the world of the film, but also the performance of the film.

Media, in all forms, plays a significant role in the discussion of imperialism. In Jeremy Tunstall books, *The Media Are American* from 1977 and *The Media Were American* from 2008, he examines the American takeover of media and the downfall of American media. In the introduction to the second book, Tunstall points out that the US "remains unique in that most Americans are exposed almost entirely to their own nation's history, culture, and mythology" (xiv). Most American's knowledge of the Vietnam War comes from an American perspective. Even how the US refers to the war, as the "Vietnam War" is a representative act of imperialism. In Vietnam, the war is often referred to as the American War and some (in the US and in Vietnam, among other places) call it the Second Indochina War. In the US,

[7] One of the legacies left behind in the Philippines was a growing culture of surfing. In April 2013, the BBC did story on *Apocalypse Now* and its influence to the surfing culture in the Philippines. The surfers viewed the films influence as positive.

[8] On average, most films take 3-5 months to film.

[9] Luzon is a province in the Philippines. The Ifugaos perform as the "Mountain people"/Montagnard warrios in the Cambodia scenes of the film.

people often shorten the title by referring to the war as just "Vietnam." The culture within in the US has taken agency away from the country by utilizing the term "Vietnam" synonymously with the war which occurred there. Tomlinson also argues the importance of media as a form of cultural imperialism and "cultural imperialism is dependent on an analysis of the *relationship between the text and audience*" (44, italics in original). *Apocalypse Now* addresses the relationship between text and audience by holding a mirror up to the American public (and government, military, etc.), yet audiences are still able to deny or even ignore the imperialism presented directly in front of them.

Civilian access to war exists only via the media and perhaps personal recounts or personal research. As Andrew Huebner writes, "The popular press, novels, newsreels, magazines, museum exhibits, photographs, radio shows, television broadcasts, government films, and Hollywood movies carried portraits of war to the American home front during and after three major overseas conflicts: World War II (1941-45), the Korean War (1950-53), and the Vietnam War (1964-73)" (1). The media creates representations of war which cannot be erased. Audiences may conflate the reality of the Vietnam War with films like *Apocalypse Now*. The film performs in such a way that it "turned the real-life specificity of U.S. imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil, light and dark" and in the process, "American society was treated to a film that represented not so much Vietnam-era America as America's idealized view of itself post-Vietnam, that is, from the enlightened perspective of a historical hindsight that could sublate contradictions" (Dittmar, 147). This historical hindsight also applies to how the film is viewed today – with the nostalgia of the images and sounds that have become iconic.

Apocalypse Now combines numerous forms of media within the film, including film, television, news, and music. Timothy Corrigan (*Cinema Without Walls*) writes, "cinematic engagements with that historical watershed event of Vietnam often aspire to the condition of nostalgic songs (from the sixties) and operatic spectacles as the very structuring principle of their representations," including *Apocalypse Now* (39-40). Perhaps one of the most memorable moments of the film is when Kilgore leads his cavalry, in this case helicopters, in a seemingly unnecessary attack on a Vietnamese village.[10] The scene progresses with a soundtrack of a Wagnerian opera, "Ride of the Valkyries" from *The Valkyrie* (1870), which replaces the sixties

[10] "Seemingly" because at the end of that scene a woman throws a grenade into one of the helicopters.

tunes that had previously served as a backdrop. Corrigan writes, "these soldiers as spectators absolutely need to transcend that historical moment to live in it" citing Lyotard's postmodernism "'it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history…not as the need to remember or to project…but on the contrary as a need to forget'" (39). This is where not only the filmmakers come in, but also photojournalist in war and their representation in *Apocalypse Now*.

Apocalypse

In an interview, Coppola described *Apocalypse Now* as "'a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War'" (Adair 145). The title of the film, *Apocalypse Now*, embodies the qualities Coppola describes with the horror of the current war (what feels like the end of the world), happening now. Imperialism, in many ways, emerges from a place of horror and fear: fear of the other, fear of the unknown, and fear of loss of power. Therefore, the two lenses – imperialism and apocalypse – go hand in hand. When Coppola set out to direct *Apocalypse Now*, he wanted to "address as many aspects of war and human nature as possible" (Schumacher 203). Fear, terror, and horror reside in both war and human nature. The comparison of war to the apocalypse seems to provide fruitful insights on the reality of war.

An argument can be made that war and ideas the of apocalypse are inextricable. The view from civilians and the military, in war, is the same – death and destruction all around. While some may argue that the goal of war is not an apocalypse, it can seem to be a biproduct. There are countless books about the Civil War, First World War, Second World War, among others that frame wars as apocalyptic. There is a six-part documentary series from 2009 entitled *Apocalypse: The Second World War*, which shows wartime images and film of the destruction of the war. The word apocalypse is also connected to nuclear war; often referred to as "nuclear holocaust" or "nuclear apocalypse." Therefore, there is no doubt that by the time of the Vietnam War potential apocalypse is part of the zeitgeist.

The apocalypse in *Apocalypse Now* can be read in several ways including the war itself as an apocalypse, but also in the minds of men like Kurtz and then author, Willard. Frank P. Tomasulo who writes, "If *Apocalypse Now* does indeed tell a universal story about a never-ending conflict between Eastern primitivism and Western civilization, then it may unconsciously be fueling American fears of a

barbarism and a future war more horrific than anything known in Vietnam" (Dittmar, 155). Again, fear is a motivating factor. The fear easily turns into terror and horror. This is foreshadowed during an early scene where Willard is drunk in the hotel. Gilbert Adair notes in *Vietnam on Film*, "In this sequence, Vietnam is *literally* what it will become figuratively in the rest of the movie: less a precise geographical (or geopolitical) area than a phantasmagoric landscape etched on the inner eye" (148, italics in original). The end of the film leaves the audience to question whether or not Willard will call in the air strike as planned, which Kurtz calls for in his journal, "Drop the bomb. Exterminate them all!" (02:22:10-02:22:16). As one writer notes about the imagery of napalm (also dropped from above) in *Apocalypse Now*, "The exploding napalm also represents a contemporary correlative for one of the film's mythic substrata, the original Apocalypse, the New Testament's Book of Revelation" (Dittmar 156). There is a continual image of apocalypse coming from above with napalm, bombs, and the Huey's in war and specifically in this film. This references imagery of the horrific biblical apocalypse raining down from above (from heaven? From God?).

Conceptually, terror and horror of the apocalypse are represented throughout the film – the "madness" in the soldier (like Kurtz and Willard) and in the violent acts they perform. These concepts become literal when Willard arrives in Cambodia and meets Kurtz. Kurtz says to Willard, "Horror and moral terror are your friends, if they are not, they are enemies to be feared" (02:10:31-02:10:40). In John Nelson's article, "Four Forms for Terrorism: Horror, Dystopia, Thriller, and Noir" (from Ezra and Rowden's *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*) he describes horror and terror in this way, "Horror appalls and revolts; yet horror can also revolutionize, provoking fresh perspectives and effective inventions. For good or ill, horror provokes extreme responses that range from willful oblivion to apocalyptic reckoning. Terror disrupts and stops action by the victims; horror interrupts and radicalizes it" (185). Nelson goes on to write, "Horror is the overwhelming dread-and-disgust that initially puts someone or something else at the center of assault" (Ezra and Rowden, 185). Kurtz's dying words to Willard (after Willard attacks him with a machete) are, "The horror…the horror." Following this, Willard discovers the journal calling for him to "drop the bomb" (02:22:10-02:22:16).

At this point in the film the village in Cambodia is changed. It is altered by Kurtz's presence and imperialism and therefore the apocalypse of war. Willard's presence and the killing of Kurtz distort it again. Willard grabs Lance and climbs

aboard the board the boat with no acknowledgement of what just occurred. A voice from the radio comes through, "PBR Street Gang this is Almighty, over…," Willard turns the radio off and starts down river (02:16:13-02:16:21). Again, the audience is left wondering what Willard's actions will be and if the air strike will be called in.

Conclusion

An event as apocalyptic as the Vietnam War cannot help but to reveal something about human nature and war itself. After discovering what is revealed, **"**no one can, in good faith, elude the conclusion that the Government of the United States is guilty of the crime of aggression against the Vietnamese people" (Association D'Amitie Franco-Vietnamienne). The film and its performance challenge audiences to recognize the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Suid cites an interview with Coppola, in which Coppola said, "My film is not an attempt to mock, criticize or condemn those who participated in the war. My film is merely an attempt to use the theatrical, dramatic form to examine the issues of war, which certainly must be among the important events in our history" (338). While I believe Coppola was successful in these attempts, it is clear he failed to recognize his own acts of imperialism through the making of *Apocalypse Now*.

Film performs a unique role in popular culture as it often demonstrates ideas, beliefs, and practices of a cultural moment. It is a tool to reflect on the past, current, and potential future moments. It is a tool to educate, express, and entertain. Film is of a time and place and *Apocalypse Now*, an iconic piece of popular culture, attempts to perform these roles. It is an adaptation of another piece of storytelling, it educates audiences on the horrors of the Vietnam War (though the story is fictional), and it works with, and in opposition to, other 1970s/1980s Vietnam War films. Additionally, *Apocalypse Now* holds within it not only an investigation of the Vietnam War, but also points to other sites of popular culture such as classic literature, rock and roll music, surfing, and even *Playboy Magazine.* Due to its popularity and controversy, analysis of this film in scholarship from 1979 to today provides a methodology of how to look at objects of popular culture. *Apocalypse Now*, along with the many other Vietnam War films (including recent films such as *Da 5 Bloods* (2020)) it contributes to the continual study and analysis of not only film and film making practices, but also the war itself.

The legacy of the performative nature of *Apocalypse Now* is present in its continued popularity as well as being a touchstone for younger generations as a means of grasping for understanding of the war in Vietnam. The Vietnam War attempted to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and government, but it was also a fight for the American soul. What does it mean for the US to be involved in this type of war? And in reference *Apocalypse Now*, should this struggle be "refought," or more narrowly reperformed in film? The film altered the way audiences viewed Conrad's original narrative, the war in Vietnam, cinematic storytelling, and the culture and industry in the Philippines. While the filmmakers and actors perform imperialism, the film does remind (if not restore) the responsibility of the US for violence in Vietnam, and did so, with the help of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

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