THE NEW SCENE CANON

Chopping Choppers Unforgettably

The 'Nowhere to Go but Down' Scene in *Apocalypse Now*

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Aucun hélicoptre, aucune fumée rose, aucun fleuve, aucun uniforme kaki, aucune jungle n'ont vraiment existé à l'écran depuis. Aucune film ne resemble à celui-là. Pas même sa version initiale.

No helicopter, no pink smoke, no river, no khaki uniform, no jungle has really appeared on the screen since. No film looks like this one. Not even the original version.

- Cedric Anger

After the Odessa Steps Massacre in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the helicopter attack setpiece in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is almost certainly the second-best edited sequence in the history of motion pictures. Like the third and final monument to the magic of montage—the attack on Hidetora's castle in Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985)—these episodes tend to stand out from the features of which they are constituent parts, like little islands of perfection; they are Matterhorns and Everests, not just separate peaks in ongoing mountain chains. Indeed, when considered as independent *courts métrages*, they seem aesthetically superior to the *longs métrages* from which they are abstracted, despite the absence of a proper beginning or end and so many other—usually essential—cinematic attributes.

The primary purpose of this essay is to find out how and why this should be.

One of the more intriguing things about this segment is the ease with which it sidesteps most of the controversy surrounding the production itself. The sequence was shot *before* Typhoon Olga destroyed Francis Ford Coppola's carefully constructed sets and *after* Harvey Keitel had been replaced by Martin Sheen in the lead role (the latter having also recovered from the heart attack that threatened to call for the appointment of a *third* star). Being so intensely visual and aural, it manages to avoid connection to all the literary references that sometimes threaten to strangle the core story like the tentacles of a Hugolien octopus. There is no need to weigh the relevance of James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1914), Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) or T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925). Even the inescapable texts—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the film's source novel, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), which provided *Apocalypse Now* with its ethos and moral tone (serving essentially the same function that fictional Ishmael did in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* [1852])—are kept on the back-burner for a short while.

The same applies to the cinematic references, the most obvious of which has been largely overlooked.[1] Most mercifully of all, it's a gossip-free zone, having nothing to do with Dennis Hopper's drug-addled antics, Marlon Brando's disappearing hair and apparently alarming girth, John Milus's right-wing views,[2] or Francis Ford Coppola's alleged megalomania.[3]

1. As Francis Ford Coppola told Peter Cowie, "Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God*…inspired me a lot" (Cowie 181). When one considers that the 1972 German feature mentioned above dealt with the increasingly insane quest of a professional soldier who gradually loses his mind as he travels down a jungle river in search of El Dorado, this is hardly surprising. In particular, there is a scene wherein a hallucinating Conquistador sees a Spanish galleon lodged high in an Amazonian tree. This was almost certainly the inspiration for the brief, but memorable, moment when Willard's PBR (Patrol boat) passes the giant tail section of a wrecked B-52. It might be worth mentioning here that this dream vision emphasizes the ahistoricism of a film that was originally supposed to be set in 1968. At the beginning of the movie, we get a quick peek at a newspaper headline announcing the 1969 Manson Family murders. And according to U.S. historians, it wasn't until November 22, 1972 that the "first B-52 of the war to be shot down [was hit] by a SAM missile" (Bowman 206).

2. The prolific screenwriter is widely believed to have been the first and most emblematic of the 'fat sissies with guns,' a scornful term reputedly employed by John Ford, William Wellman, John Huston and other Hollywood directors who had survived *real* baptisms of fire in the First and Second World Wars and didn't think much of 'movie brats' who were obsessed with violence without ever having seen real blood flow. To be fair, John Milius *did* try to join the U.S. Marine Corps during the early days of the Vietnam conflict, but was rejected on account of his asthma.

3. The evidence for which is, admittedly, enormous. According to Peter Biskind, "Coppola treated himself like a potentate, replicating America's intervention in the Third World in more ways than one" (Biskind 347). Even more damningly, Karl French tells

In a production famed for the things that went wrong, the helicopter attack scene was the one thing that went fabulously right.

The logistics, of course, did not come cheap. "Around 200,000 feet of film had been shot above and on the beach for the sequence—as much as some directors shoot for an entire feature" (Cowie 102). As for the military hardware required, "There were only twenty-four operational Hueys in the country, and Coppola demanded fifteen of them for Kilgore's dawn attack at Baler" (Cowie 50). Because Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos was himself fighting insurgents at the time (some say Communists in the North, some say Muslims in the South, some say both), the military insignia had to be changed at least twice a day, and some choppers were withdrawn because they were about to be in *real* combat. As for the flight of jets that eventually drops the napalm that ignites the forest,[4] they were of necessity Northrop F-5 Freedom fighters, and not the F-4 Phantoms that Coppola originally wanted. The Freedom fighters were cheap jets flown by budget conscious air forces (such as Canada's own), and never figured in the USAF's inventory. Because the Defence Department disliked the script of *Apocalypse Now*, they declined to provide its maker with any of their 'toys,' even though U.S. military resources in the Philippines were extensive. Hence, the ahistorical F-5s, a *faute de mieux* response if ever there was one.

Now we come to the central character in this story-within-a-story. As interpreted by Coppola regular Robert Duvall, Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Kilgore is lord of all he surveys (indeed, this is probably one of the greatest screen performances of all time). Ironically, the actor's indisputable excellence has sometimes been seen as something of a drawback: "The Kilgore sequence has been criticized for being almost too good, the character too charismatic, so as to unbalance the film" (French 65).

Like so many of the protagonists in this drama, on paper Kilgore bore a different moniker. Just as Colonel Kurz was originally known as Colonel Tyler, so was this leader of men originally dubbed Colonel Kharnage (the sort of nomenclature you'd expect to find in Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, *Catch-22*!). As the son of a rear-admiral and an amateur actress, Duvall had the ideal background for such a part, whatever the name of the character he portrayed. He was also known as a stickler for detail, a Method actor who sometimes made even the most fastidious members of his profession seem lazy by comparison.

In terms of historical pedigree, Kilgore has many models, but the most important are probably General George Armstrong Custer, Air Cavalry legend Colonel John B. Stockton, and homicidal General James F. Hollingsworth. Meanwhile, the man's rhetoric veers between that of General George S. Patton—Coppola, it should not be forgotten, won his first Oscar for scripting a biopic of this man—and Air Force General-turned-politician Curtis LeMay (who famously favoured 'nuking' Vietnam back to the Stone Age).

In one essential respect, of course, Kilgore is nothing like the long-haired dandy who led the Seventh Cavalry to annihilation in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. If promoted, he would doubtless be counted among 'the lucky generals' that Napoleon so admired. This is because, as Willard observes shortly before the attack sequence begins, Kilgore "was one of those guys who have this weird light around them. You just knew that he wasn't going to get so much as a scratch here."[5]

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us that "[John] Milius often refers to Coppola as his Führer or even Hitler, and it is meant as a compliment" (163). Conversely, the director's own journals are replete with self-doubt, with the fear that he was steering headlong into one of the biggest motion picture disasters of all time. In retrospect, virtually all of his onset excesses can be read as desperate attempts to avoid the creative paralysis engendered by self-hate. One should probably not forget that George Lucas was originally slated to helm *Apocalypse Now*, and it has frequently been said that *Star Wars* (1977) was his science fictional version of same, with the Evil Empire standing in for the United States and the photogenic rebels for the Viet Cong. Even Dusan Makavejev was offered the script at one point, but he turned it down. Clearly, this was one cup that could not pass from the Master of Zoetrope.

4. As Charles Tesson rhetorically asked in the pages of *Cahiers du cinema,* "*Etait-ce moral de massacrer des paysages des Philippines, des passer des forêts entières au napalm pour les besoins d'un film"* (Tesson 44). Could this sort of criticism comprise yet another bond between Coppola and Werner Herzog, the man who, in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), pushed behind-the-camera madness to what is still widely seen as its most extreme point? Of course in 1979, it seems most unlikely that anyone would have been too upset about 'massacring Philippine landscapes' or 'subjecting entire forests to napalm for the benefit of a film.' Thanks to the writings of Alexander Solzenitsyn and others, the colour 'red' had already been discredited on the left, but it had not yet been replaced by the colour 'green.'

5. Michael Herr's contribution to *Apocalypse Now* is universally admitted to be essential, but some of it is indirect. Sent to Saigon by *Esquire* magazine to cover the war in 1967, this gutsy journalists stayed 'in-country' for two years, making friends with 'grunts' and war correspondents alike, surviving as they did on a mixture of drugs, adrenaline and fear. Some of his essays appeared in *Holiday*, *New American Review* and *Rolling Stone* as well as *Esquire*, so his 1977 book *Dispatches* was anything but a bolt from the blue. John Milius, for instance, freely admits to having been inspired by Herr's article "The Battle of Khe Sanh," later to reappear in *Dispatches* under a slightly shorter title. Herr wasn't hired to write the voice-over narration of *Apocalypse Now* until 1978, but he saw

At the beginning of the sequence, Colonel Kilgore can be seen striding across the helicopter landing field with an assured step. His Cavalry Stetson, pearl-handled revolvers and yellow scarf connect him to both the Old West and the paintings of Frederic Remington, just as the Old West and Frederic Remington point directly at the works of John Ford. Interestingly enough, it is not *The Searchers* (1956), the fetish film for the entire movie brat generation that Coppola alludes to, but *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), Ford's first Technicolor pony soldier picture, and *The Battle of Midway* (1942), a short Academy Award-winning documentary that is every bit as 'mythological' as the director's genre work.[6] The presence of a stetsoned, bandannaed bugler completes the illusion encompassed by Hollywood's most optimistic westerns, just as the following exchange between Kilgore and an unnamed gunner partially undermines it.

KILGORE: How you feelin' today, soldier?

SOLDIER: Like a mean motherfucker, *sir*.[7]

This is an attitude of which Kilgore obviously approves.

To speed Willard and his three man crew on their journey up the river to deal with the now demented Colonel Kurz, they take part in the pre-dawn assault (a bit of a McGuffin, I know, but we'll let that pass). Only two make much of an impact. Chef (Frederic Forrest), after first scoffing at the idea, learns to sit on his helmet in order to keep his "balls from getting blown off." As for Lance, his surfing skills will ultimately earn him a most unusual combat role.

Mortar shells are falling all around them, but Kilgore is sublimely indifferent to shrapnel. This man is so invulnerable, he isn't even aware of it as something unique. His survival is a given, like gravity.

At this point, the film's dreamy, synthesized music is replaced by an extraordinarily shrill version of Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries."[8]

The camera now cuts to the Vietnamese village about to be assaulted.[9] What we see are freshly washed flagstones; what we hear are the voices of happy children. Echoes of airborne danger arrive. Female NVA soldiers move the children to safety. One child is too young to grasp the gravity of the situation, and must be saved by a slightly older child. Like well-disciplined troops, the villagers race to their positions. The machineguns with which they must defend their village appear to be of pre-World War Two vintage. Nev-

many chunks of his work already lodged in the Milius/Coppola script and outtakes (a claim which is hard to dispute, although Milius sometimes tries to do just that). Being the only 'veteran' of the bunch, Herr was the last word on the 'bad craziness' of that time and place, an expertise that would earn him an Academy Award nomination a decade later when he co-wrote Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Basically, he is to the Vietnam dugout what Ernie Pyle was to the Second World War foxhole.

6. The truly transgressive moment in Ford's masterpiece, of course, occurs when Look's inoffensive body is found in the smoking ruins of the Native American village that the Seventh Cavalry has just ravaged. Clearly, Coppola didn't want to make the First Nations/Viet Cong connection *too* obvious, so he approached Ford's insight from an oblique angle.

7. Could he be the gunner from Kilgore, Texas who boasted to Michael Herr, "Got me one hunnert 'n' fifty se'en gooks kilt. 'N' fifty caribou" (qtd in French 125)?

8. Coppola was really attached to the 1966 Georg Solti version of this, the most 'Nazi'-sounding of Wagnerian riffs. His struggle for it was long and hard, but eventually he won out. Still, it was a near-run thing that could have ended up in the same virtual trash can as the F-4 Phantoms. One shudders to think what would have happened if he'd failed. The mixture of ambient sound, synthesized music and Germanic opera showed for the first time what Dolby stereo could really do. The cumulative effect still hasn't been equalled, never mind surpassed. For once, the phrase 'tapestry of sound' is more than just a cliché.

9. In her contribution to *Past Imperfect*, famed war correspondent Frances FitzGerald thought that "Coppola's recreation of a Vietcong village is fairly accurate, but there couldn't have been any flag-flying Vietcong villages intact on the coast after 1965 because the Americans had complete control of the air and such a village would have been too easy a target" (Carnes 291).

ertheless, that's all they have, and they'll do what they can with them.

The Hueys swoop in and proceed to take the village apart. The Americans seem to be entirely unaware of the disparity in strength that exists between them and the 'enemy.' Their hardware is state-of-the-art. Except for AK-47s, the Viet Cong must fight with museum antiques. Nevertheless, they do manage to shoot down several choppers before the Aircav swoops toward land.[10]

Throughout it all, Colonel Kilgore radiates self-confidence. Good shooting is rewarded with cases of beer. Wounded infantrymen are evacuated with all possible alacrity. Clearly, Kilgore is the kind of officer that all soldiers adore… except maybe for the terrified young man who keeps shouting, "I'm not going! I'm not going!"

When a "sapper bitch" throws a satchel charge into a Huey crowded with American casualties, Kilgore makes sure that she's shot in the back within seconds (as well as the entirely innocent woman fleeing next to her). It's only then that he notices that the beach beyond the village under attack offers excellent opportunities for surfing.

After landing his chopper in the sand, he convinces Lance and another soldier to ride waves with boards, one of which happens to be his. Mortar shells are falling all around them, but Kilgore is sublimely indifferent to shrapnel. This man is so invulnerable, he isn't even aware of it as something unique. His survival is a given, like gravity.[11]

As Lance and an anonymous 'grunt' grudgingly decide that it makes more sense to surf than to sit on ground like sitting ducks, Colonel Kilgore 'extemporizes' his big speech, a burst of braggadocio that includes the memorable lines "I love the smell of napalm in the morning… It smells like victory."

Of course, we can't actually *smell* the napalm—Smell-o-Rama not being included in Francis Ford Coppola's bag of technological tricks—but we can certainly see it. An entire ridge line goes up in flames, as does everything seeking shelter among the trees (including, no doubt, many animals, if not any luckless extras). Then the line of prisoners approaches the beach, and Kilgore—after referring to the Vietnamese as "gooks," "dinks," "slopes," and "fucking savage[s]"—becomes intensely concerned with the welfare of a single wounded child.[12]

What happens next depends of which version of *Apocalypse Now* you prefer, the 1979 original or the 2001 *Redux*, so I'm going to draw the curtain down here. As the defenders of both visions are more or less equally divided, it's probably wisest to bracket the action between the dawn bugle call and the line "Some day this war is going to end." There's 'war' on both sides of this sequence, but in the centre—the *storm*'s centre—there is a curious sort of peace, narrative content notwithstanding, the strangely satisfying peace that always comes when an aesthetic ambition is perfectly achieved.

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10. Although, not everyone loved the Air Cavalry. In *Dispatches,* Michael Herr wrote, "The Marines did not like the Cav, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), they liked them even less than they liked the rest of the Army, and at the same time members of the Cav were beginning to feel as though their sole mission in Vietnam was to bail out Marines in trouble" (148).

11. It's interesting to note that Herr's ability to characterize men at war in Indochina extends far beyond his official credits for *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*. Consider the following description of a Fourth Division soldier serving his third tour of duty in Vietnam. Previously, he was the sole survivor of two U.S. patrols that were not only wiped out, but subsequently 'polished off' with cold steel by the NVA. Now he just lives to kill, and his gaze has become so 'crazy' absolutely no one can now meet it. Here's his physical description: "He wore a gold earring and a headband torn from a piece of camouflage parachute material, and since nobody was about to tell him to get his hair cut it fell below his shoulders, covering a thick purple scar." (Herr 4). Rambo, anybody? Or how about this: "I kept thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good" (Herr 224). *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989), perhaps?

12. A scene which, in retrospect, is eerily reminiscent of the news event surrounding the Iraqi boy who lost both arms to U.S. bombs during the early days of the Second Gulf War before being flown to America for the best possible medical treatment. If you didn't pay close attention, it would be easy to assume that the boy's arms had simply *fallen* off rather than severed by an armament.