NOTES ON APOCALYPSE NOW

This movie was released in 1979, when the public was weary of war news and ready to elect Ronald Reagan to be president. No one at the time was terribly interested in the resemblance between the Viet Nam war and the European colonialism that Conrad exposes in Heart of Darkness. The movie’s pretentious and misleading title further hurt box office.

Viet Nam until 1954 was part of French Indochina and particularly valued as a source of cheap latex rubber for France’s tire industry (Michelin being the well known firm). At the time of the French withdrawal in 1954, the U.S. decided to block elections on the basis that communists would win. A regime with little popular support was installed and sustained by U.S. financial and military assistance. U.S. efforts were continually baffled by the difficulty of distinguishing between a civil war (communist versus non-communist forces) and a war of aggression (communist Red China invading the south with a view to eventual domination of the world—the “domino theory”). In 1965, continued communist-nationalist successes brought about President Johnson’s decision to send ground troops, which escalated in number. Americans were in harm’s way for eight years in Viet Nam. The long-range effect on the country appears to have been only to create distrust of the U.S.

“For my sins, I was given a mission.” The movie shows Captain Willard’s (Marlow’s) paralysis before the assignment, his wife having just left him. Marlow goes on a drinking spree and breaks his image in a mirror.

Staff meeting where Marlow receives his assignment, to “terminate Kurtz’s command with extreme prejudice.” This scene effectively sets the moral and thematic basis of the movie. In some men, the “dark side” overcomes the good. Note presence of youthful Harrison Ford. Movie must supply dialogue to reduce the amount of “voice over” in the narration.

Kurtz had trained and led a band of Montagnard “rebels.” Special Forces (Green Berets) in Viet Nam actually were given this mission to train native units to fight against the Viet Cong (communist guerillas) but were eventually removed to regular army. Kurtz’s methods have become “unsound,” but we are not to question the U.S. purpose in conducting the war.

The unexamined and superficial justification for the mission is parallel to the missionary zeal of the women who recommend Marlow for his job in the Belgian Congo.

Marlow in the movie has murdered a tax official (a native) so is a darker version of the character in the novel. Martin Sheen plays him as competent but only slowly aware of the absurdity of his situation.

Helicopter commander Major Kilgore, superbly played by Robert Duval, represents macho, nearly psycho lover of war. Utterly incapable of seeing the moral issues, he gleefully bombs and strafes a peaceful village, including school children, calling them “savages” for fighting back. He is a surfer.

“I love the smell of napalm in the morning.” Wagner played during raid underscores the Germanic blend if aggression and racism that led to World Wars I and II.

Inspection of peasant sampam reveals collision of cultures rendered deadly by war. Puppy represents loss of innocence--one responds to a puppy but not the murder of an entire family.

“Don’t get off the boat” may mean “never leave your own world, your culture, the guidelines given you in youth.” If so, the result would be a moral naiveté like that of the helicopter commander. However, the phrase may also mean “fear the unknown and stick to the job you know.” Marlow found satisfaction and a kind of civilization in repairing his boat.
The soucier, or chef, also has this civilized devotion to his craft, is outraged by the army cook’s boiling prime-grade beef.

The Central Station is a place of chaos in the movie. Under the influence of cross-cultures and drugs, civilization turns on itself, becoming a nightmare carnival of destruction.
*“Who’s in charge here?”*
*“Ain’t you?”*

Photographer (played by Dennis Hopper) is equivalent to the Russian in the novel, a “disciple” who has lost moral direction and has surrendered to a powerful personality. He stands for the members of cults and other fanatics. “This man has enlarged my mind.” The disciple mistakes the message for the man and becomes something like an idolator.

Kurtz (played by an overweight Marlon Brando) in the movie explains that one should “make a friend of the horror; otherwise it most surely will be your enemy.” The movie is true to the book’s depiction of Kurtz as a talented man whose insight has led him astray, who lacks restraint. Kurtz evinces a kind of hubris in believing that moral principles, if found difficult or irrelevant in some situations, do not apply to his own actions.

Marlow beheads Kurtz as a heifer is being similarly abused--both sacrifices to civilization? The movie denies Kurtz the final, victorious recognition of his own darkness. This recognition is instead given to Marlow only. What is the effect of this change?

The movie leaves out any return of Marlow to his own world. There is no Intended, no lie to preserve the illusions of women and other pretty thoughts. Consequently, the movie leaves the horror without a moral framework. We are unsure of what difference the knowledge will make in Marlow’s life.

*“Meet me in the back of the blue bus”* by Jim Morrison and The Doors.