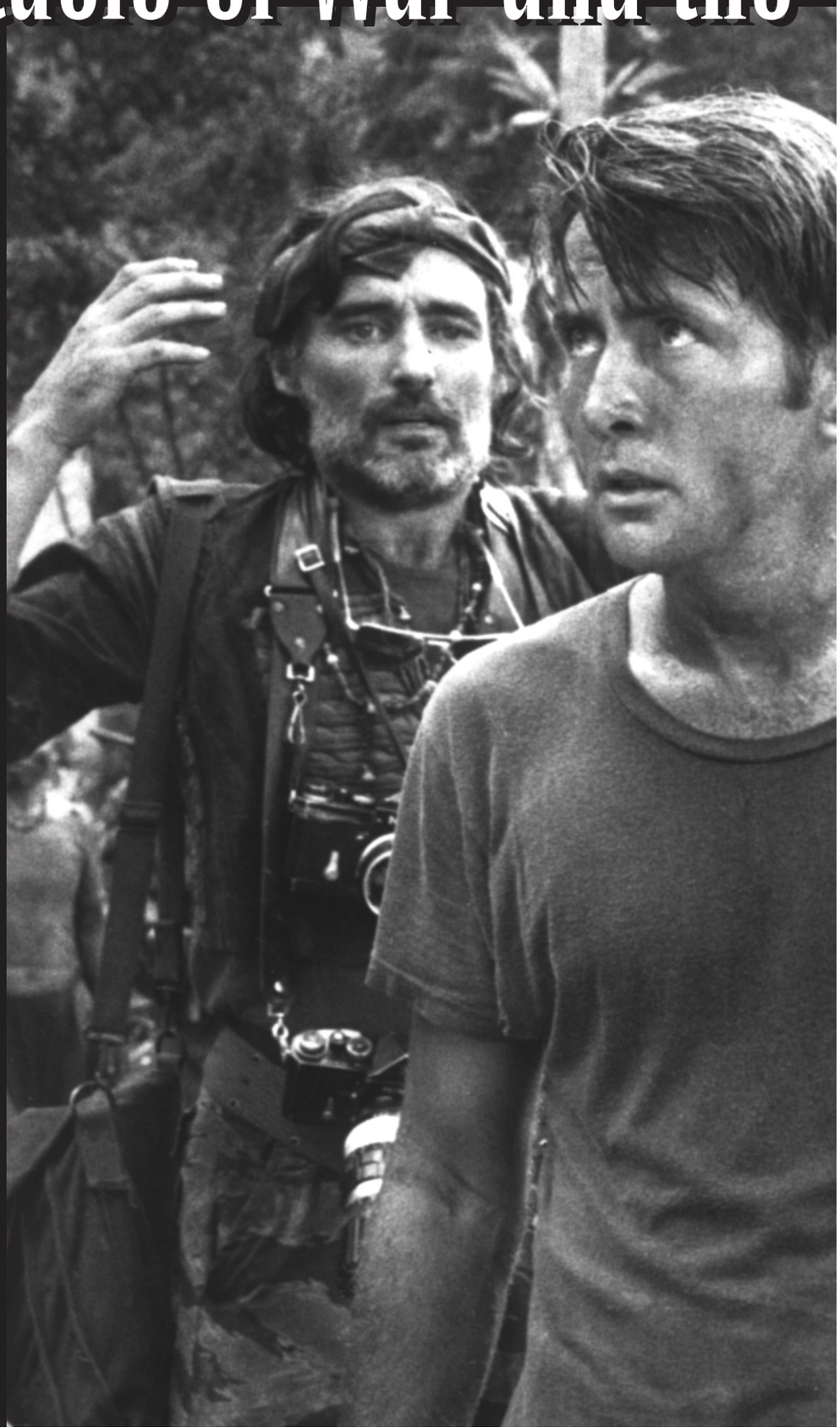
The Spectacle of War and the *Apocalypse Now* and American Imperialism



By Keith Solomon

Abstract: This article examines the 1991 Gulf War, and the film *Apocalypse Now*, arguing that reliance on advanced technologies to conduct war and to replicate it on TV/film has diminished our ability to distinguish between reality and entertainment, turning our experience of war into mere "spectacle." Media emphasis on technology and spectacle results in a positivist depiction of war, and our reception of that spectacle turns us, as viewers, into tacit supporters of the imperial project.

Keywords: *Apocalypse Now*, colonialism, CNN, Francis Ford Coppola, Gulf War, Imperialism, technology, spectacle

As the first smart bombs started falling on Baghdad in the predawn hours of January 17, 1991, Ted Turner's all-news network CNN began its twenty-four-hour-a-day coverage of the U.S. military's first major action since Vietnam.

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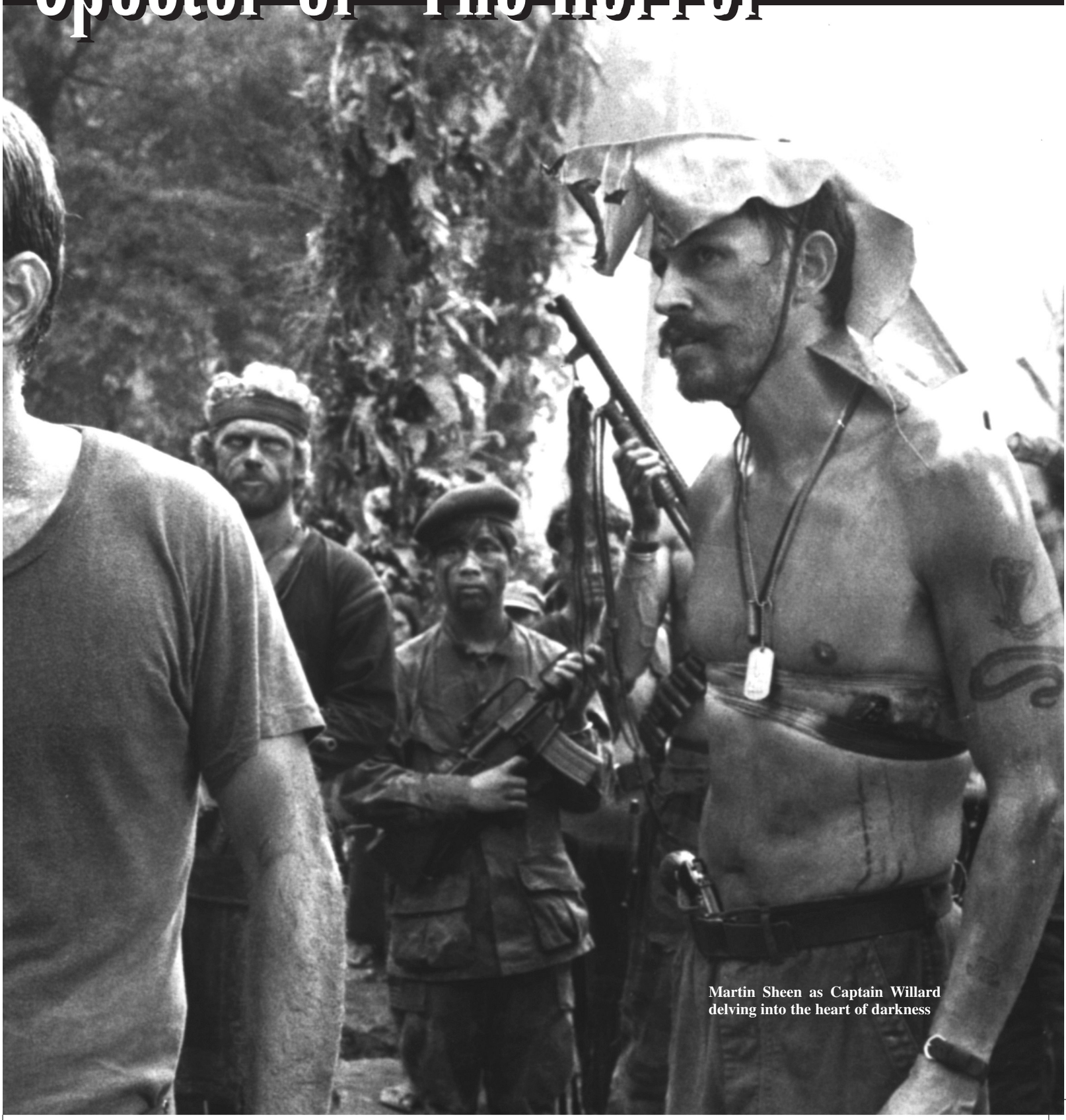
Specter of "The Horror"



Martin Sheen as Captain Willard delving into the heart of darkness

The voices of CNN senior reporter Bernard Shaw and veteran combat correspondent Peter Arnett remained calm and cool as they reported from inside a Baghdad hotel on the sights and sounds of a city under siege, while viewers, eyes transfixed on the screen, watched for the first time in history a war fought live on television.

Granted, from an aesthetic standpoint the televised images were not very compelling, bathed as they were in the murky green hue of night-vision enhancement technology. But mimicking as it did the equipment used by the invading U.S. forces, the night-vision effect also gave our view of the battlefield a kind of military authenticity it otherwise would have lacked. As tracers shot across the night sky and explosions rocked the Iraqi capital, one American fighter pilot, perhaps still in the festive spirit of the season just past, described Baghdad as being "lit up like a Christmas tree." It was a quote a friend of mine repeated with glee a few hours later over coffee, imitating the pilot's Southern drawl as we discussed the amazing scene unfolding before our eyes.

Likewise rapt were reporters who gathered to cover the Gulf War from the relative safety of the media center inside Saudi Arabia. Once the initial novelty of witnessing an attack unfold live had subsided, U.S. General Norman Schwarzkopf, the coalition forces commander, continued to hold the media in awe via his press conference tutorials on the latest military technology being employed in Operation Desert Storm. Exemplifying what Paul Virilio calls "a growing derealization of military engagement" (1), war indeed became a technological spectacle to behold as Schwarzkopf diagrammed precision bombing strikes on targets within Iraq, shown either from a satellite image or from the perspective of a black-and-white camera mounted on the delivery system itself. This footage was more difficult for the untrained eye to decipher than the night-vision footage from CNN, so Schwarzkopf necessarily served as interpreter, helping the media "see" what had occurred. I recall in particular the footage of one "surgical strike" that also chronicled the desperate attempts of an Iraqi driver to flee his burning city by car. Following a harrowing near-hit, the driver's vehicle disappeared into the monochromatic smoke of a second explosion, only to reappear and continue on its way. Many a reporter laughed as Schwarzkopf joked about the Iraqi's good fortune, as if somehow the episode was merely part of an action-movie plot, rather than one in which a human life had been at stake. As witnessed from on high, such scenes took on a kind of video-game quality that diminished the human reality of war even while they simultaneously put us (in a virtual way) at the heart

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of the action. Through the wonders of technology, war had truly become dehumanized—and with that, civilians in the crossfire lost their humanness as well, becoming merely actors on the screen. New terms such as *collateral damage* reflected this trend, as the U.S. government sought to depict war as something waged by machines, against hard targets, rather than as violence committed against people.

Seeing war as a spectacle of technology, rather than as a grim, human enterprise, is a tendency that dates back to the beginnings of cinema. As Virilio has noted, D. W. Griffith, who photographed the Western front during World War I, was "disappointed with the reality of the battlefield," but responded with fascination to new war technologies, and it was these technologies that directors like him sought to re-create on film in the years following (15). Rudolf Arnheim's claim that "after 1914, many film-actors became props while the props took the leading role" is at least partially true (qtd. in Virilio 22). This tendency of film to focus on the machinery of war took on an even greater emphasis as the technologies of cinema and of war advanced simultaneously: with the addition of sound to the motion picture and the increased mechanization of warfare (especially with the coming of the German blitzkrieg in 1939), and today, with the employment of computer-generated (CGI) special effects and battlefield robotics. With mechanization (and now, automation), war itself became more theatrical, thus leading to the advent of psychological weapons such as the siren-equipped Stuka dive bomber in Germany and, with an increased ability to monitor the battlefield, the recognized need to "fool" the enemy through duplicitous maneuvers. Such deception reached a height during World War II with the Allies' employment of whole armies of wooden "prop" tanks and planes, and actors posing as military leaders (Virilio 63–64).

On the homefront, cinema emerged as a vital weapon in the war effort both in the United States and in Germany, serving, through war bond drives and the production of jingoistic films, to manufacture consent among the masses for the continued struggle. Hollywood's role as a propaganda machine in the WWII years is well known, but I would like to argue here that since then, the American movie industry's continued fascination with technology—both the technology of warfare, and its own technical ability to replicate the battlefield experience—virtually assured that Hollywood would continue to support U.S. imperialist concerns, as positivist assumptions about, and heavy reliance on, technology put the military and the

film industry squarely in the same camp. As Schwarzkopf's briefings attest, the focus on technology puts a positive spin on war by turning it into spectacle, in the process removing all thoughts of the human element. In Operation Desert Storm, demonstrations of the military's latest magic served to elicit public support for the war, while at the same time distracting Americans from the fact that the lives of the country's young men in uniform were in peril—and those same young men were, in some cases, killing civilians.

I begin with my recollections of the Gulf War to illustrate the way in which, at that moment in history, war and cinema became the same thing, and the integration of the populace into the machinery of war was rendered complete. Spectacle—whether it is that of film, or that of war—makes the "real" and the "virtual" indistinct. Our view of the world is mediated through the images we see on the video screen; as Guy Debord argues, our sense of reality is nothing more than "an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (12). Perhaps, through film and television, it had already been so for some time. Debord was writing in 1967, and the Gulf War may simply reflect that the U.S. military had finally caught up, employing the "spectacle" of technological warfare as a way to ensure the public's consent and complicity in much the same way the motion picture industry had done in the past. If the introduction of aerial reconnaissance photography in WWI forever changed our perception of the battlefield, and the "cinemachinegun" in WWII aircraft put the viewer in the gunner's seat, the Gulf War's employment of technologies such as "spy-satellites, drones and [. . .] video-missiles" (Virilio 1) marked the culmination of a trend that served to blur the line between passive observer and active participant, in the process securing our tacit consent of imperialism and war. This "blurring" is made even more apparent with the advent of video games that actually place the trigger in the participant's hands.

Spectacle is thus a way for empire to display and enforce its power, to bring all within its fold. In the twentieth century, film and television replaced the scaffold as the site of our participation in the ritual of power recognition. Through cinema and through its positivist depiction of technology, our partaking in the spectacle of war and our receiving of that image as "entertainment" makes us complicit in the machinations of imperial power. The camera thus serves as an intermediary between empire and subject, making our point of view one and the same.

In this manner, and through Hollywood's heavy reliance on, and fascination with, technology (both of war, and of its own ability to replicate war through special effects), it becomes doubtful that any film depicting war can truly posit itself against the empire of which it is a part. Special effects may indeed increase the verisimilitude of a film's depiction of war, but at the same time, the viewer is dazzled by what he or she sees, and has a tendency to forget that what is depicted on the screen is intended to be "real." Likewise, the use of weapons-mounted motion-picture cameras on the battlefield tends to turn actual warfare into spectacle. In the end, it matters not whether what we see is fact or fiction. The war of cinema and the cinema of war are perceived as one and the same. As Virilio states, the "triumph of the electronic image" creates a "growing confusion between 'ocular reality' and its instantaneous, mediated representation" (73).

Despite claims to be against war, movies depicting America's involvement in Vietnam instead at best seem ambivalent about war and at worst seem to celebrate it.

In an examination of the highly acclaimed Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), I will show how even Hollywood films lauded for their "antiwar" stance undercut those claims through an emphasis on technology and the spectacle of war. Despite claims to be against war, movies depicting America's involvement in Vietnam instead at best seem ambivalent about war and at worst seem to celebrate it. Indeed, the very nature of cinema has the tendency to turn war into spectacle, and as viewers, our own reception of that spectacle as entertainment turns us into tacit supporters of the imperial project. By accepting images of war as a form of entertainment, the viewer thus becomes both colonizer and colonized. As Jonathan Beller suggests in "The Cinematic Mode of Production," we become a *colonizer* through the camera's point of view, which is simultaneously that of empire and subject, and because we *labor* to create the scene before us by piecing together the movie's discrete frames. We are also *colonized*, however, because the film has conquered our mental landscape, turning us through participation (via the purchase of a movie ticket, and through our "labor" as viewers) into subjects both of Hollywood and of American imperialism, as our free time is surrendered to capitalism and the multibillion-dollar entertainment industry.

In a press conference at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, *Apocalypse Now* director Francis Ford Coppola claimed he had captured the very essence of the Vietnam War in his film. In fact, he felt that what he had created was not a "movie" at all, but the reality itself. "My film is not about Vietnam," he stated. "It *is* Vietnam. It's what it was really like" (*Hearts of Darkness*; emphasis in original). Rather than claiming *Apocalypse Now* as the epitome of verisimilitude,

however, Coppola explained that the Vietnam experience he had captured was in fact the psychological reality of the war. And he noted that the production itself in many ways mirrored that reality. "It was crazy," he said. "And the way we made it was very much like the Americans [who] were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little, we went insane" (*Hearts of Darkness*).

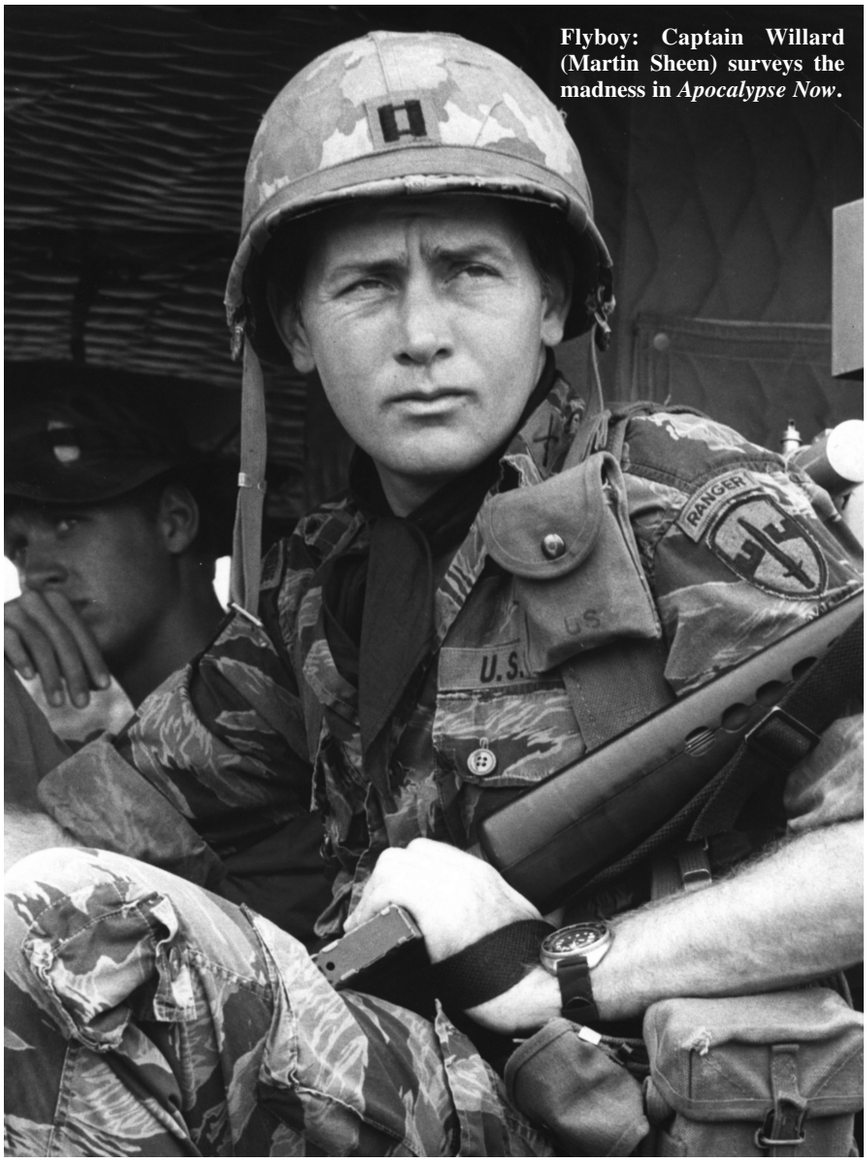
Coppola's claim to have captured the war's psychological reality lends credence to the view of *Apocalypse Now* as an antiwar film; indeed, the idea that war represents a kind of insanity now seems commonplace. Brian J. Woodman supports this stance, noting that "Coppola's movie does not seek textbook realism; rather, it strives for the 'feel' of Vietnam: the violence, confusion, and nihilism of the war" (99). However, Coppola's recognition that the film's production mirrored Vietnam in several ways is significant in its potential to undermine that same antiwar claim. Gerald Sussman cites several examples of the ways in which the cast and crew of *Apocalypse Now* constituted a veritable army that laid siege to the Philippines for more than a year. Among other colonialist behaviors, the production paid Filipino extras and crew a fraction of the wages that Americans and Europeans received, gave them substandard accommodations and meals, and deprived them of acknowledgment in the movie's credits. Conveniently, none of this information was revealed in *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, the 1991 documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now* that was narrated by Coppola's wife, Eleanor. Nor was it revealed in the documentary that a Filipino worker had died in an on-set accident (Sussman). The documentary does reveal that Coppola made a deal with Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos to secure the use of Filipino Army helicopters and pilots; however, the fact that Coppola paid for the mounting of machine guns on those same helicopters (which were then used to battle leftist guerillas) is never mentioned, and that he also relied heavily on U.S. Army logistical support is emphatically denied (Sussman). Never mind the fact that the very decision to film in the Philippines replicated U.S. imperialism in the region in a twofold manner: by restaging the Vietnam War itself and by doing so on territory conquered by the U.S. military some seventy-five years before. In these ways, then, *Apocalypse Now* undermined its own claims to antiwar status via its very production, which served rather to mimic, cooperate with, and further, American imperial interests in Southeast Asia, rather than to expose American imperialism for its evils, as what seems to have been original claim.

While the making of *Apocalypse Now* can be seen as a physical extension of the American imperial or colonial enterprise, the film's content—far from expressing an antiwar stance—likewise promotes imperialism and war through technical effects, cinematography, narration, and dramatic structure. Heavy reliance on special effects to produce the authentic "look" of war serves, in essence, to promote war as a technological marvel, undercutting the affective or ironic potential of some scenes. Furthermore, Coppola's employment of longtime Federico Fellini cinematographer Vittorio Storaro to give the film a "dreamlike" appearance adds to the aestheticization of the movie's depiction of war and to its overall sense of fantasy (*Hearts of Darkness*). The film's narrative and dramatic structure mimics this dreamlike quality, with the sense of unreality making the entire movie seem like a hallucination. In this way, I feel *Apocalypse Now* functions in part not unlike the later "amnesiac" war films that appeared in the 1980s, which sought to reinvigorate America through a reinscription of masculinity in the form of muscular, resilient male heroes (Jeffords 142). Through its surreal, nightmarelike depiction of the war, and the metaphorical trip back in time represented by the journey upriver, the movie transports us back to a point where, conceivably, America's involvement in Vietnam is erased altogether.

In his discussion of the aesthetics of travel photography, David Spurr argues that photographs often "effect the distancing of the reader from social reality through sheer force of technique, which establishes its own precedence over the ostensible subject matter, so that the encounter with a foreign reality becomes pretext for the display of the photographer's art" (Spurr 52). He cites specifically a June 1981 *National Geographic* account of drought in Somalia (June 1981), in which the sheer beauty of the images—"the sharpness of focus, the richness of color, the impeccable compositional arrangement—ends by overpowering the reality of the drought and its consequences for the people of Somalia" (52). An identical effect can be had with cinematography; that in the course of turning the landscape into a movie set, the view into a "scene," an aesthetic distancing occurs. I am reminded particularly of the scene in *Apocalypse Now* where Captain Willard accompanies Chef into the jungle to gather mangoes and, as the two make their way inland from the boat, they arrive under a massive tree that utterly dwarfs them by its stature. Indeed, it is all they can do to climb over its roots. The moment is one of exquisite beauty, which seems to suggest the grandeur and supremacy of nature, and man's own insignificance in the face of that. But from a late-twentieth-century perspective, that sense is an illusion. As Susan Sontag suggests, to interpret a photograph (or in our case, a movie scene) out of context and to imbue it with a universal significance, is to deny its real significance, which derives from the political, historical, and geographical particulars of its creation (83, 86). To accept Willard and Chef's moment in the Vietnamese forest as a statement about the insignificance, or impermanence, of man, is to ignore that these men in the forest are not representative of humanity, but are American soldiers, and conquest of that landscape is their mission. The tiger that bursts forth from the jungle a moment later is no match for an automatic rifle, just as earlier in the film we witness how the landscape around "Charlie's Point" is no match for the napalm strike ordered

by Colonel Kilgore. The beauty of the scene (created in part through framing by the camera, focal length, and no doubt, the use of a filter to accentuate the blue-green of the jungle) misleads us by calling attention to the image as "art."

A simultaneous "lingering" over both the beauty of the landscape and the military technology working toward its destruction (and arguably rendering the scenery even more beautiful) begins at the very outset of *Apocalypse Now*, with the slow-motion repetition of helicopters flying across the screen through a haze of smoke and fire, the lush jungle scenery backlit by the orange glow of war's destructive beauty. In this manner the movie emphasizes the technological aspects of American imperialism, and the U.S. Army's conquest of Vietnam echoes the American conquest of the wilderness back home a century before. As Spurr notes, the "gaze" is of vital importance to the colonizer, as it establishes his sense of superiority over both the land and people that are the object of his conquest. In *Apocalypse Now*, technology establishes a privileged vantage point for the colonizer—and via the camera eye—for the viewer as well. As Willard heads out to meet the patrol boat that will take him upriver, we gaze on the rugged Vietnamese landscape from the perspective of a helicopter flying high above the jungle canopy. This "commanding view" of the colonial landscape is one that offers to the colonizer a "sense of mastery over the unknown" (Spurr 15). At the same time, the vastness of the land gives us a sense of its emptiness, suggesting that it is a land that needs the civilizing, ordering hand of the conqueror. The destruction that the U.S. military wreaks is thus representative of the American tradition of conquering the wilderness and remaking it in (the white) man's image. The camera itself replicates this conquest of the landscape through its own circumscribing gaze; by "ordering" reality through the lens, the director exerts his own mastery over the scene.



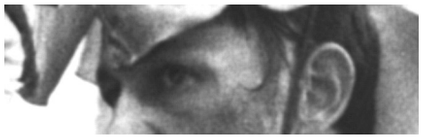
Flyboy: Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) surveys the madness in *Apocalypse Now*.

The Vietnamese people are likewise gazed on, circumscribed, and "conquered" by technology in the film—and by the technology of film. When Willard's men spot the air cavalry in action, clearing a Vietnamese village, Willard sets out to find the commanding officer, Colonel Kilgore. As he leaps from boat to shore, we see in the background a landing craft, with the head of a shark, emerge from the water and proceed to "swallow" a Vietnamese hut, smashing it to the ground in its wake. Likewise, another landing craft "swallows" the surviving villagers, who are rounded up by U.S. soldiers on the ground and forced into the craft's bowels to be evacuated. As a tank spews fire on other bamboo buildings, helicopters keep a watchful eye from above, in this way surrounding and circumscribing the village, overseeing its destruction and allowing for no escape. It appears the only building left standing is a church, itself a sign of Vietnam's previous colonization by the French. It is appropriate, then, that the village's "conversion" to the new colonial order is completed with the scene of a priest conducting mass in English while the machineries of war remove the last vestiges of the conquered (including even a water buffalo, which is airlifted away). Once the cavalry has thus cleared the land, Kilgore's men claim the physical space for themselves and "settle" it by camping out on the beach. Later, following the assault on "Charlie's Point," the Americans assert their "ownership" of the freshly taken beachhead through the act of surfing.

Indeed, even its renaming is an act of colonialization; as Kilgore expresses, "Damn Gook names all sound the same to me."

Such devastation of the land and its people in the initial air-cavalry operation might give one pause to consider the human consequences of the American intervention in Vietnam, and certainly the appearance of the cavalry here is intended to remind us of their role in "pacifying" the American West. But our camera-eye perspective remains at all times an American one, making it difficult to dissociate ourselves from the colonizer. This perspective is reinforced in the assault on "Charlie's Point." Here the camera puts us in the helicopter with the attacking forces, in effect making the viewer complicit in the attack. Only rarely do we get to view the scene from ground level, and never are we allowed to hear the words of the Vietnamese defenders. Instead, we hear only the American soldiers' banter (both in the helicopters and over their radios), again establishing our position as squarely on the colonizer's side. Scenes of death likewise stress the viewer's imperial position. The Americans are generally shown as impervious, but when injuries do occur, they are made to look horrible, as with the black soldier whose leg has been terribly mangled: the injury elicits a sympathetic response. Vietnamese casualties, in contrast, are shown as entertainment, as with the soldier who flies through the air following an explosion that topples his gun emplacement. Quick jump cuts, from one helicopter to another, from one explosion to another, as the Americans make their assault, serve to heighten the drama and emphasize the spectacle of the scene, making Lance's mistaken response ("Wow, it's really exciting") to Kilgore's question about the surf ("What do you think?") stand in for the audience's response to the entire attack.

The assault on our senses in *Apocalypse Now* is not unlike the Americans' method of war itself, with the film using a coordinated attack of sight and sound. As Kilgore explains while flying in to "Charlie's Point," "We'll come in low out of the rising sun, and then we'll put on the music [. . .] I like to use Wagner. It scares the hell out of the slopes." This tactic to produce "shock and awe" (a term now used by the American military to describe their quick-strike strategies) is one that also works well on moviegoers, as the impressive sight of helicopters in attack formation and the explosions that follow leave us breathless in our seats. In this spectacle of sight and sound, however, the viewer tends to become caught up in the moment; rather than regarding the scene as "war," we are dazzled by the effects and awed by the spectacle of war as seen through a camera lens. Hence,



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bodies hurtling through the air at the impact of a missile are no longer seen as "bodies," but are dehumanized, seen merely as "stunts" or "effects." In all the excitement, any idea that war is "hell" tends to get lost.

At the heart of *Apocalypse Now*, one presumes, is "the horror" of which Kurtz speaks, the phrase constituting his dying words both in Conrad's original work and in Coppola's film. But save for the severed heads and dangling bodies at Kurtz's compound (themselves more spectacle than horror), where, exactly, does this horror lie? In the story of *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is depicted as a dying man, one whose excesses have finally caught up with his soul. But in *Apocalypse Now*, he is corpulent and robust rather than wasted, healthy in body and totally clear in his mind—even if, as the photojournalist tells Willard, "his soul is mad." Although signs of excess may abound, Kurtz is not possessed of any personal demons; as an experienced soldier, his behavior must seem perfectly logical. Indeed, the severed heads and lifeless bodies indicate his use of spectacle as a means of social control, as well as suggesting the Montagnards' complicity in maintaining Kurtz's power over them.

Far from passing judgment on Kurtz, or on American imperialism for that matter, Willard's narration is consistent with his own position as a soldier, and it further serves to challenge any notion of *Apocalypse Now* as antiwar. Willard may indeed be disillusioned, but it is not due to any insight about the true nature of man, or about the horrors of war. His disillusionment is in the way the war is being conducted and in the lack of professionalism or seriousness shown by U.S. troops. As he watches the USO show featuring the Playboy bunnies, he reflects on the absurdity of the scene, noting: "Charlie didn't get much USO. He was dug in too deep or moving too fast. His idea of great R&R was cold rice and a little rat meat. He had only two ways home: death, or victory." Willard shows admiration for men like Kurtz and Kilgore for fighting war on their own terms—even if he sees Kilgore as somewhat frivolous and fails to see a "method" in Kurtz's madness. Of Kilgore, he notes: "I guess he wasn't a bad officer. He loved his men, and they felt safe with him. He was one of those people who have a kind of weird light around them. You just knew he was going to come out of this without a scratch." The scene in which the men on the boat first encounter the cavalry reinforces Willard's militaristic point of view. He notes with a hint of satisfaction and humor in his voice that the "Air Cav" were supposed to be some 30 kilometers upriver for their rendezvous, but

"well—those boys just couldn't wait." Likewise, he stresses the effectiveness of the cavalry in its operations, noting that in the process of "tear-assing around Nam, looking for the shit," they had "given Charlie a few surprises in their time here." Further, he remarks on their efficiency, stating, "What they were mopping up now hadn't even happened yet an hour ago." He does, however, recognize a fundamental contradiction in the behavior of Kilgore and his men, between their military efficiency and their quest for recreation. In their claiming of the beach at "Charlie's Point," Willard notes the Air Cav "choppered in the beer and the T-bones, and turned the LZ into a beach party. But the more they tried to make it like home, the more they missed it." In Americanizing and domesticating the landscape, the Air Cav is in danger of turning its men "soft." Willard's seeming identification with "Charlie" at the USO show is in recognition that "Charlie" faces no such danger. His options—death, or victory—keep him hard, seasoned, and focused.

Willard's review of Kurtz's military record belies his admiration for efficient soldiering. Throughout the journey upriver, he provides us with several instances of Kurtz's initiative in fighting the Viet Cong. One example is Operation Archangel, which Kurtz organized and carried out without any authorization, but which proved a spectacular success. "He just thought it up and did it," notes Willard. "What balls. The army was going to court-martial him for that one, but when the press got ahold of it, they promoted him to full colonel instead." Kurtz's ordered execution of four civilians, including two high-ranking South Vietnamese officials, is ultimately the reason for Willard's own mission to "terminate the colonel's command," but the executions themselves only draw Willard's admiration. He notes, "After that, VC activity in his old sector dropped off to nothing. Guess he got the right four people." Admiration of and vindication for Kurtz's actions hardly seem consistent with any idea of "horror"—nor do they seem consistent with any claim to the film's antiwar status.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's trip upriver to rendezvous with Kurtz is a mythic journey into the darkness of the human soul. In *Apocalypse Now*, this journey is also one that takes Willard back in time, perhaps in recognition of the need to strip away the technology and other vestiges of modern society to still pierce that heart. Coppola in fact acknowledged that this backward movement in time is intended to "imply that the issues and the themes were timeless" (Woodman 102). But this trip into the past has another, more startling, possibility. Rather than leading us toward any universal truth, the journey might well serve as a way of assuaging those "true" soldiers, like Willard and Kurtz, who, the revisionist argument goes, could have won the war if they had only been given a fair chance to do so. As William V. Spanos suggests, a national effort to "rehabilitate the shattered image of the American military mission" in Vietnam emerged during the latter stages of the conflict, and the first phase of this "recuperative" effort placed the blame for the inevitable loss of the war squarely on an "alleged complicity" between the liberal media and the protest movement back home (133). In line with this reasoning, I feel *Apocalypse Now* functions not unlike the later "amnesiac" films that appeared in the 1980s, as described by Spanos and Jeffords. Appearing as they did during the Reagan years, those films, such as the *Rambo* series, sought to reverse the perceived "feminization" of the nation (in the wake of America's embarrassing loss in Vietnam and in the face of what was seen as a meek response by President Carter to the 1979–80 Iran hostage crisis) through a reinscription of masculinity in the form of muscular, resilient American male heroes (Jeffords 142). Some of these films, such as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), went so far as to revise the history of the war by giving these heroes an opportunity to exact a measure of retribution by rescuing American prisoners of war purportedly still held by the communists. In a sense, *Apocalypse Now* seeks a similar restoration of American dignity by having Willard "liberate" Colonel Kurtz from his own madness. America's involvement in Vietnam is conceivably erased altogether, as the movie possesses a surreal, nightmarelike quality, and employs a metaphorical trip back in time (represented by the journey upriver). Colonel Lucas sets this erasure in motion when he tells Willard at his briefing: "You understand, Captain, that this mission does not exist, nor will it ever exist." In this manner, the whole fiasco that was the Vietnam War becomes nothing but a bad dream.

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The dreamlike quality of many scenes in *Apocalypse Now* reinforces this sense, as does the ample use of smoke machines to shroud the boat in fog as it makes its way upriver. Lance's "painting" of the boat in the "purple haze" of a smoke grenade creates a surreal effect just prior to the improbable assault on the boat by an invisible enemy wielding arrows and spears, and his use of psychedelic drugs adds to our feeling that what we are witnessing is unreal. The carnivalesque atmosphere of the Do Lung Bridge, replete with calliope-

like music, and the fact that beyond it is a land (Cambodia) where, officially, American military activity did not take place, further adds to our doubts about the reality of it all. This sense of unreality is further emphasized in the *Redux* version of the movie, issued in 2001 with some deleted scenes restored. In particular, the encounter with the French "soldats perdus" serves to reinforce the sense that we have regressed to an earlier, colonial age, prior to America's intervention in Vietnam. Coppola cleverly cuts into and out of the scene with an identical shot of Willard in the prow of the boat, scanning the fog-shrouded river. The dreamlike sequence in which he lies on a bed, smoking opium with the widow of a French soldier, and the way in which the mosquito netting and her face fade away to reveal the fog of the river and Willard again at the prow, suggest that all of what we have witnessed is illusion.

The French plantation scene does make one thing clear: Willard is a man who is dead inside. Perhaps, then, we might locate the "horror" of *Apocalypse Now* in the soul of Kurtz's executioner and erstwhile double. At the beginning of his mission, Willard learns that Chief ferried another man up the Nung River on a secret mission about six months previous. This knowledge prepares us as viewers for the psychological dangers Willard will face as he goes upriver, into the heart of that impenetrable darkness. But these dangers never really materialize. Although no longer the moral center of the story, as was Marlow in Conrad's original tale, Willard is also never really at risk of losing his soul. Indeed, it is already lost. He, like Kurtz, is spiritually empty, and the darkness is where he dwells. This is precisely why he has no compulsion about killing the last survivor of the sampan after a routine stop, and a moment of panic by Mr. Clean results in the massacre of a Vietnamese family. The pain we infer in Willard during the hotel-room scene in Saigon at the film's outset is not pain caused by the psychological trauma of war; it is in fact homesickness for the jungle and a return to the soldier's life. As with the Air Cav's beach party and the USO show, Saigon, with all its trappings of "civilization," only serves to make him lose his edge. "Waiting for a mission," he notes. "Getting softer. [. . .] Every day I sit in here, I get weaker, and every day Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger." Hardly a symbol of suicide contemplation, the handgun next to Willard in bed is instead his constant companion, replacing the wife he divorced back in the United States. He may not know what he will do when he finally confronts Kurtz, but we as viewers know. He is a soldier, and he knows nothing

The pain we infer in Willard during the hotel-room scene in Saigon at the film's outset is not pain caused by the psychological trauma of war; it is in fact homesickness for the jungle and a return to the soldier's life.

else. Indeed, the true "horror" that he faces might be in recognizing that he can no longer function outside his role as a soldier, and the life he once knew back in "the world" is something to which he can never return.

The real failure of *Apocalypse Now* may be its failure to recognize that the horrors of imperialism are particular to time and place. And as such, these horrors cannot be universalized in the way Kurtz's final utterance might lead us to believe. As with the camera's tendency to turn war and suffering into art, obscuring the particulars of the scene in questing for the universal, the tendency of combat films to universalize and mythologize the war experience makes any distinction between pro-war and antiwar essentially moot. They are all a part of the same Hollywood myth-making machine, and it is the machine that controls the agenda. And we, as viewers, are complicit in its production.

Among combat films made since the Vietnam War, only Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* succeeds in recognizing the true "horror" of our late-twentieth-century condition—even if it, too, seeks a universal theme in recognizing war's dehumanizing effects. In that film, man himself becomes a machine, indoctrinated into the culture of war via marine boot camp and finally, through the act of killing. Although Pvt. Joker alludes to "the duality of man" through his simultaneous wearing of the peace symbol pin on his vest and the words "Born to Kill" on his helmet, he resists, in fact, mythologizing war in any way, and he asserts a measure of independence through his self-conscious humor. Yet his killing of the female sniper indicates that ultimately he, too, has become part of the machine. His words at the end of that film, in which he announces simply that he has faced death and he is not afraid, indicate that there can be no catharsis, no redemption, no real insight into the human soul. The statement he makes about the slain villagers at Hue belies that fact. "The dead know only one thing," he says. "It is better to be alive."

Perhaps this is something that Captain Willard ultimately recognizes as well, as at the end of *Apocalypse Now*, he resists making himself in Kurtz's image, as the Montagnards would have him do. Instead, he throws down the sword he has used to kill Kurtz; gathers his last surviving comrade, Lance; and quietly slips away into the night. In truth, however, there can be no escape, for the real "horror" is that we are all a part of the imperial process. We are all soldiers of the empire, consumers complicit in its commerce of war as entertainment. And in the end, we are as hollow as the machines that create us.

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