

How does Apocalypse Now's script, music and sound portray its themes of Psychoanalytically, colonialism, and existentialism, and how does it paint a deeper picture of the destructive nature of mankind

Apocalypse Now is a 1979 film directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The script was adapted from the novella *Heart of Darkness* written by Joseph Conrad. The film follows Captain Benjamin Willard as he is sent on a mission into the Cambodian jungle through the river to assassinate an American colonel who has gone rogue and is utilizing methods of war that the US military finds deplorable.

The colonialism present in the story

One of the most notable things that was changed from the book is the setting. This was done to make the film more relatable to the modern Western audience and to reflect on the Vietnam War, but even though the setting was changed Coppola still wanted to maintain the colonialist themes of the *Heart of Darkness*. One of the points of colonialism that the film wants to display is its dehumanizing effects on not only the native population but also the American soldiers. This can be seen in the transgressions of the American government and military toward the people of Vietnam and Cambodia, civilians have their villages burned and their lives destroyed by the American war machine. The American soldiers are incentivized to hate the Vietnamese, this can be seen in how the soldiers treat them like annoyances and are also extremely distrusting of them, which is shown in the scene where Captain Benjamin (played by Martin Sheen) and his boat crew kill a group of farmers over a miscommunication. I think that the best example of American colonialism present within the film is what happens to the Cambodian tribe who are under the control of the film's main antagonist Colonel Walter Kurtz (played by Marlon Brando). Kurtz's followers see him as this divine-like being worshipping the strength that Kurtz possesses, Kurtz then uses the admiration for him for his own goal as he turns them into his own personal militia to continue the war on the Vietnamese. I feel that the film is saying that Kurtz's madness and goals have infected the minds of the native people which could be seen as symbolic of how American colonialism forces its ideals onto native populations and uses them to serve their own goals.

The most notable example of America's horrific actions against the Vietnamese is the scene in which one of the film's many songs *Ride Of The Valkyries* by Richard Wagner and Giscard Rasquin is played. The idea of the commander of the first squadron of the 9th Cavalry Regiment Lieutenant Colonel William Killgore (played by Robert Duvall) playing an opera song about Norse mythology over a helicopter strike on a Vietnamese village perfectly encapsulates the absurdity of the Vietnam War. One thing that the film conveys to the audience is the contrasting ideas between the

song and what is happening on screen. The song is about the mythical Norse beings called "Valkyries" who were female warriors that would ride into battle on winged horses and bring fallen heroes back to Valhalla, in this sense the song is seen as a celebration of heroism, but when Killgore plays it he uses it to strike fear into the hearts of the enemy and to inspire his own troops. I believe the film is saying that Killgore (and by extension the American troops) see what they are doing as heroic, but in reality, they are destroying a Vietnamese village and killing its people, this creates a disconnect between the reality of the war and how Killgore and the soldiers see it which only further pushes the narrative of the insanity of the Vietnam war and about how the war itself is devoid of any morality.

What the War machine does to people's psychology

Throughout the film, we also see what effects War has on the soldiers and we see how the American military forces them to commit acts of atrocities to not only win but survive the war. I find that the film is not trying to specifically comment on the Vietnam War's effects on people's minds, but rather using it as an example in recent times to illustrate one of the film's core messages and themes. That being that all humans have the capability to commit acts of primordial savagery and evil, and during times of great struggle such as war or being in a jungle, the urge to give in to this more primal side becomes greater, and how the film shows this happening to all the characters within the movie it in turn forces the audience member to ask themselves the question. Would this happen to me if I was placed in a situation like this and could I stop myself from being corrupted by it? I find when asking this question from an existential perspective the film not only became a lot more personal to me but became a lot more personal to every person who is viewing the film as the basic idea of having to grapple with multiple parts of ourselves is inherently personal, but the film adds a whole other layer to this by psychoanalyzing the human psyche and the darkness that humans poses. This is mainly done through Captain Willard and Colonel Kurtz, Willard's story and journey in *Apocalypse Now* is one of inner struggle and torment, his boat ride into the jungle I believe is metaphorical for his descent into madness and his embracing of the evil that lies within him as he journeys further and further away from civilization and further into the war-torn jungle he starts to gain a better understanding of himself for better or for worse, we also see his growing infatuation with colonial Kurtz as Willard believes that he is the only person who can cope within the madness of the war and I also believe that Willard's higher morality is trying to convince him that Kurtz is a moral man and a patriot who is fighting for his country, it is this belief that further sends Willard into the jungle to see that if upon meeting him he will have answers for who he is as a person and hopefully find some morality within himself.

The sound design also adds to the oppressive and maddening atmosphere of the Vietnam War through the use of impressionistic sounds. A good example of how sound is used is the tiger attack scene. In this scene when Willard senses that there is something watching them the scene goes quiet except for the artillery strikes in the

background. This was done to give the audience an unconscious feeling that danger is close by and what Willard hears could be a Viet Cong soldier. What's more intriguing about how the sound design plays with the mind is that the sound designer and editor(Walter Murch) wanted to use the "thunk" sound of the artillery fire to mimic a heartbeat to make the scene feel more intense and immersive, also in the scene, we hear the natural sounds of the jungle which further adds to the immersion of the war-torn Vietnam jungle.

The Psychoanalytical perspective and potential symbolism present within the film

One of the potential ways to read into Willard's journey throughout the film is him trying to find his moral compass. At the start of the film, we see Willard's breakdown in his hotel room, as he monologues about how he misses being a part of the war in Vietnam and how while he is in Vietnam he can only think about going back to the jungle, and what is also inferred from this scene is that Willard believes that while he is back in American civilization he thinks he is getting weaker while others in Vietnam become stronger. I think that in the first part of Willard's monologue, it can be seen as him seeing the war in Vietnam as a place that makes sense to him a place where he believes he belongs, but what makes this statement more interesting is that it states that while he is in Vietnam he wants to return to the war. I believe that Willard has grown disillusioned with the conventional civilized life when he says the walls are closing in inside his hotel room which could be trying to convey to the viewer that he feels trapped by his life outside the war. I also believe that Willard is self-aware of this dark fact about himself but he is also aware that finding purpose and fulfillment in such a horrible place and environment is enough to make him resent himself. We see that these conflicting feelings toward the war causes Willard to break down into an alcohol-infused mess as he comes to realize what position he is in his life. I think this scene perfectly encapsulates the main Psychoanalytical theme of war that is present within the film. It shows us how this kind of horror will break people and leave them completely confused about who they are, but what is more frightening is that throughout the rest of the movie, we see how people come to find that sense of purpose and twisted satisfaction from war.

This idea of what war does to the people who have to go and fight in it is something that has been looked at before particularly by Sigmund Freud(the philosopher who coined the psychoanalytical theory). Freud like Coppola and the writers of Apocalypse Now also felt the impacts of war upon his home during World War One and World War Two. World War One was the conflict that Freud had more time to ponder and write about. During this war, Freud's outlook on the war had changed from enthusiastic patriotism to disillusionment, which he expressed in his book Thoughts for The Times On War And Death. In this set of twin essays, Freud laments

his feelings on the war, human nature and the supreme institution of the state. What I find that is more important than this essay is how the war influenced Freud going forward in this work as he would later come to write that he felt that humans are inherently cruel and selfish and that human behavior is fueled by unconscious desires. This view on humanity is shown in *Apocalypse Now* as we see Willard throughout his journey into the jungle give in to his darker unconscious desires, but the character who I think embodies Freud's ideas on human nature is Colonel Kurtz. One of the scenes that shows off Kurtz's mindset and morality is the scene colloquially referred to as "Horror Has a Face". In this scene we see Kurtz describe the exact moment where his moral stance on methods of war had shifted. He describes his time with the special forces, they were tasked with giving vaccines to Vietnamese children in a civilian camp, but when they returned to the camp Viet Cong soldiers had come and hacked off the arms of the children where the vaccines were injected and placed them in a pile as a message to the Americans and South Vietnam supporters. Kurtz states that at this moment he "recognized the genius" and "the will" of what the Viet Cong soldiers did, he then says how they are stronger than the American soldiers and if men like the Viet Cong were under his command the war would be over because they are willing to put aside any human attachments and emotions and use their primal instincts to fight their enemy without any feeling or passion and without any judgment of their actions. In the film, this brutality that Kurtz witnessed is what caused him to go rogue on the American military and begin utilizing methods that the USA deems excessive and inexcusable. I believe When Kurtz witnessed the massacre at the camp it broke him and it was the moment when he fully gave in to his dark savage side and also decided he would do whatever it took to win the war. I think that what the film is conveying about both Kurtz and Willard is that they both seem to find(or are hoping to find) peace and purpose in giving in to their primal desires and letting these desires govern their life. This conclusion that both characters have come I believe has been brought about by two outside forces, that being the hypocrisy and poor handling of the Vietnam War by America and also the horrors that both characters have seen and participated in during the war, but the frightening reality of the film and real life is that this state of being that both characters have ultimately ends badly. Tying Kurtz back to Willard, I believe the film is trying to convey to the viewer that Kurtz (and by extension his mindset) is the endpoint for Willard who has not fully embraced the primal mindset seen in Kurtz yet. At the end of the film, both Willard and Kurtz's stories are concluded with Willard killing Kurtz. Before this Willard mentioned that he is only alive because Kurtz wants him alive, Willard then concludes that Kurtz wants him to kill him. The reason why Kurtz wants to die is because he has become so corrupted by his primordial desires that he has lost any semblance of a higher morality and because of the weight of what he has done in the war.

At the beginning of the film, the song *The End* by the Doors is playing over the scene of Willard's breakdown and it also plays during the final scene where Willard kills Kurtz. The song's usage in the film ties in with the narrative of how someone could become so corrupt by their circumstances that they lose any higher moral purpose and become empty husks left with only their carnal urges. The song *The End* relates

to the film through themes of life and death, specifically in the song's first verse is about how the lead singer Jim Morrison sees death as a beautiful thing and as a release from the pain of life but another popular interpretation is that this verse could be about breaking human taboos and perception, "the end" of these two concepts. I believe that both of these two interpretations of the verse are present in the film and are portrayed through Willard and Kurtz. Kurtz wishes for Willard to kill him, and the song is playing over this scene. The song correlates with Willard's quote "he was up there waiting for me to take the pain" in reference to Kurtz. The main villain of *Apocalypse Now* shares similar thoughts on death as Jim Morrison does in *The End*, which is why this song is so appropriate for this scene. In regards to Willard, *The End* could relate to the end of Willard as a man of civilization as he has seemingly turned his back on his country at the end of the film. Another part of the song that ties in with Willard's narrative of embracing his darker primal side is the bridge between verses 5 and 6. The passage in the song (according to John Densmore the drummer of the band) is about Jim Morrison's spiritual belief that one should commit the act of killing the father and f-king the mother. Morrison believed that killing the father meant killing everything that has been instilled in you by outside forces and that f-king the mother meant returning to more natural and personal concepts, returning to reality in a sense. This passage first plays over Willard's breakdown scene, a scene in which Willard is thinking about how much he misses the war and the jungle and we also see how disillusioned he is becoming with American society. When Willard appears to be having a flashback to the war the verse plays. Through this song passage, the film I believe is conveying that Willard wishes to return to a more natural and simple place that makes sense to him.

Ultimately the film ends with Kurtz dying a broken man not being able to cope with what he has become, and with Willard fully embracing the darkness that has been eating at him throughout the film and in a sense becoming Kurtz.

Bibliography

asyraf, mohad (2018) *Apocalypse now: Imperialism or moral sacrifice?* / Mohamad ASYRAF Mohamad Zaidi, *Digital Patmos Vol 2 No 2*. Available at: <https://digitalpatmos.com/vol2issue2/home/apocalypse-now-imperialism-or-moral-sacrifice/> (Accessed: 12 October 2023).

Bochenski, M. (2019) *Apocalypse Now review – a guilt-edged, accept-no-substitutes masterpiece*, *Little White Lies*. Available at: <https://lwlies.com/reviews/apocalypse-now-1979/> (Accessed: 05 November 2023).

(Densmore, J. (1991) in *Riders on the Storm: My life with Jim Morrison and the*

Doors. New York: Dell, p.88.)

Freud, S. *et al.* (2001) 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915)', in *The standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Vintage, p. 275–299.

Isaza, M. and Says, A. (2009) Home, Designing Sound. Available at: <https://designingsound.org/2009/10/09/walter-murch-special-apocalypse-now/> (Accessed: 05 November 2023).

Jarreau, P. (2013) Mardi Gras and human nature, FromTheLabBench. Available at: <https://www.fromthelabbench.com/from-the-lab-bench-science-blog/mardi-gras-and-human-nature#:~:text=Sigmund%20Freud%20took%20the%20view,of%20overcoming%20more%20base%20desires>. (Accessed: 19 October 2023).

Kerr, R. (2017) *Intertextuality and transgression in apocalypse now*, *Explaining Film*. Available at: <https://explainingfilm.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/intertextuality-and-transgression-in-apocalypse-now/> (Accessed: 12 October 2023).

Polcaro, B. (2021) *The meaning of the doors 'the end' according to Jim Morrison, Rock And Roll Garage*. Available at: <https://rockandrollgarage.com/the-meaning-of-the-doors-the-end-according-to-jim-morrison/> (Accessed: 04 November 2023).

Schrader, J. (2022) *Freud and the World Wars*, *Psychology Today*. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/psychiatry-history/202202/freud-and-the-world-wars> (Accessed: 18 October 2023).

Sherlock, B. (2020) *Apocalypse now: Why Willard is a perfect protagonist (& kurtz is a perfect villain)*, *ScreenRant*. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/apocalypse-now->

[captain-willard-best-hero-colonel-kurtz-perfect-antagonist/](#) (Accessed: 05 November 2023).

Shrout, W. (2019) *Invisible scars: 'The horror, horror!' of Kurtz' bipolar nihilism in apocalypse now*, Tuscan Shed Media Network. Available at: <https://tuscanshed.com/blog/2018/3/11/invisible-scars-the-horror-horror-of-kurtz-bipolar-nihilism-in-apocalypse-now> (Accessed: 05 November 2023).

Toth, N. (2021) *An exceptional man? Kurtz and fascination with colonialism, from co..., Miranda*. *Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone / Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world*. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/42610> (Accessed: 13 October 2023).