DARKNESS AT THE HEART of Apocalypse Now.

Film Review by David Maughan Brown.

All through Apocalypse Now Francis Coppola advertises his debt to Conrad's Heart of Darkness with the kind of anxiousness with which a press photographer might wave his press card around during a baton charge. The number of verbal echoes, from the assertion that Colonel Kurtz's 'methods are unsound' to his dying words, 'The horror! The horror!'; the parallel plots, with their journeys up rivers to find Kurtzes; the parallel characters, like the American photo-journalist who is a puzzling counterpart to Conrad's harlequin Russian and Captain Willard who is the equvilent of Marlow as narrator; such parallel incidents as the bow and arrow attacks on the boats and the spearing of the helmsmen, all invite the audience to make the connection with Conrad. Or rather, all stridently insist that those in the audience who have read Conrad bear Heart of Darkenss constantly in mind as they watch the film. And Coppola appears not to give a damn for those who haven't, for whom the last quarter of the film must be wholly bewildering and largely meaningless. Seldom can a producer have specified his putative audience, for whatever art form, so clearly. The question one must obviously ask is why?

Why should an American film director, working in the last quarter of the twentieth century, choose to base his account of the Vietnam war on an English novel, written by a Polish sea-captain in the British merchant navy, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Why should Coppola's indictment of the version of Western 'Civilization' which was manifested in Vietnam take as a model a novel which, while questioning the civilizedness of the civilizing mission in Africa, shows its author to be hopelessly contradictory and confused about colonialism?

Conrad's Congo experience had made it clear to him that colonialism was an evil. But because of his devotion to the British merchant navy tradition, and because of his adoption of British nationality, Conrad owed the exaggerated loyalty to Britain of a recent convert. The ideological pressures operating on Conrad were in this respect almost identical, interestingly, to those which determine the choice of the American national anthem as the song, of all songs, the Russian–Americans choose to sing at the end of The Deerhunter.

Because Britain was involved in the colonial exercise she had to be exonerated from the indictment of Heart of Darkness. This was done by attributing to Britain an underlying justifying 'idea'. But Heart of Darkness makes it clear that no 'idea' can survive in the colonial situation. The only saving grace is work, and that is a saving grace precisely because it precludes thought.

Why then does Coppola choose to base Apocalypse Now on Heart of Darkness? I would suggest that there are two reasons. Firstly, because Heart of Darkness is kosher. It is a 'great' novel, and the mystique surrounding its being a 'great' novel can be guaranteed to act as flak insurance against hostile criticism from those worth bothering about–the putative audience. As it has to some extent done. That Heart of Darkness can still be regarded as a 'great' novel in spite of its racism, as exposed by Achebe ('An image of Africa', The Massachussets Review, 1977), and in spite of its contradictoriness about colonialism, is, of course, symptomatic of the critical ideology which assigns it greatness.

But that isn't the only reason. Heart of Darkness offers a model, and again because of its 'great'ness, by implication a justification, for the crucial shift in focus from the material effects of colonialism/imperialism to the examination of individual psychology. It offers impeccable credentials to someone wishing to provide a 'definitive' account of Vietnam but anxious to avoid examining the material base of the war. The film questions American claims to 'civilization', it is an indictment of 'unsound methods', but it does not invite, indeed it directs investigation away from, an examination of the economic base of American imperialism.

This is not to say that its condemnation of the American army's conduct in the war is not pretty far-reaching, as it would be bound to be in a film as thoughtful, within the limits of its possible consciousness, as this one. Its depiction of an army consisting largely of men who spend as much time as possible as high as possible, (with very good reason), whose leaders are either nowhere to be found, or else are bizarre West Point graduates who make it a matter of principle not to duck out of the line of fire while sending their men out to surf in the middle of battle, must come as a shock to South Africans brought up on a media diet which had America manfully defending Western Civilization against the onslaught of communism. Like the boys on the border.

In the first half of the film Coppola makes the seemingly paradoxical choice of realism as the best mode to adopt in attempting to capture something of the unreality of the war. His indictment of America's claims to civilization is at its most incisive in a brilliantly economical evocation of the order and tranquillity of Vietnamese civilization in the moments before its representative village is destroyed by helicopter gunships, because it happens to be situated on the only spot on the coast which boasts six-foot waves for the surfers.

In the second half of the film realism ceases to be the dominant mode and elements of surrealism, symbolism and allegory are introduced. The change of gear is made particularly obvious in two surrealistic episodes roughly half way through the film. The first is the garishly lit arena in the darkness of the delta–'This sure enough is a bizarre sight in the middle of this scene'–where the Playboy playmates-of-the-year arrive by helicopter to titillate the assembled G.I.s and provide a bemusing insight into American civilization for the Vietnamese watching through the fence. The second is the episode at the last bridge up the river, which the Americans build every day and the Vietcong

destroy every night (a direct equivalent of the objectless blasting, supposedly for the railway, in Heart of Darkness), where Willard enters an equally obviously parallel 'inferno' situation, in a fruitless attempt to find the American commanding officers. That the leaderless men, who are all significantly black, should assume he is the commanding officer, largely because he is white, makes its own point.

The change in mode is necessary because, while realism may be appropriate to the depiction of napalm strikes, it is not appropriate to the journey into the individual psyche, into the heart of metaphysical darkness which the journey up-river represents. Coppola, like Conrad before him, takes refuge in the 'meta' physical when he gets within range of questions in the 'physical' which his ideology prevents him from asking. Questions which have to do, in this instance, with the underlying reasons for the war's being fought at all.

The shift in focus from the material destruction caused by the war to the inner recesses of Colonel Kurtz's individual psyche, which takes place as the banks close in on the journey up the river, necessitates the use of an intellectual zoom lens. As the attention homes in on Kurtz so the geographical and social specificity of Vietman is necessarily excluded. The movement from an economically and politically explicable war to the complex mental processes of one man, a movement which invites assessment of his actions in terms of absolute good and absolute evil, is a process of mystification rather than elucidation.

Even here the film makes some far-reaching statements, and gives evidence of a complete, and in the event wholly justified, confidence on the part of Coppolla in his ability to control the response of those in the audience towards whom the film is directed. The ruined temple which is the setting of the final scenes is littered with decapitated bodies and unattached heads. There is a visual insistence on 'the horror' in Apocalypse Now which is the exact equivalent of the 'adjectival insistence' which Leavis identified in Heart of Darkness. Yet the audience remains largely unmoved. Discussion of individual responses to the film suggests that it is a common experience among the audience for people to find themselves worrying about their lack of feeling of shock or revulsion. This, I suspect, is precisely what Coppola was after. The violence in the first half of the film is almost always distanced—aerial shots from helicopters allowing the viewer to share the detachment of those firing aerial machine-guns from helicopters. By the end of the film the audience is being invited to recognize how easy it is to become inured to violence.

Again, the complex series of literary allusions in the last part of the film is more than just a self-gratifying intellectual exercise for the initiated. Those in the know will realize that Colonel Kurtz is made to read 'The Hollow Men' aloud to himself because T. S. Eliot took the subtitle for that poem from Heart of Darkness. Those in the know who notice The Golden Bough prominently displayed on Kurtz's bedside table will be prepared for Willard to be accorded the status of a god once he has killed Kurtz, and so on. But Coppolla isn't just pandering to the art-film clientele's self-image. The point is, firstly, that the civilization, or culture, represented by Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance (also on the bedside table), by Frazer and by T. S. Eliot, and, more important, the civilization embodied for those 'in the know' in being 'in the know', has not prevented the barbarism depicted in the first part of the film; any more than exposure to a supposedly humanizing literary tradition prevented certain Germans from murdering Jews. And, secondly, not only has that culture not prevented the barbarism, it has actually been made to contribute to it. This is most clearly seen in the grotesquely amplified recording of Wagner which is switched on when the helicopters are approaching their targets because it 'scares the hell out of the slopes (Vietnamese)'—as it well might—and it is seen also in the way Kurtz finds sustenance for his activities from T. S. Eliot. Coppolla is clearly including Western Civilization's much vaunted culture in his indictment, as well as issuing a warning about the ideological ends towards which art can be appropriated.

The killing of Colonel Kurtz at the end of the film, (an interesting departure from the Conradian model), is directed in such a way as to make it look as if the film is continuing to subject American 'civilization' to a scrutiny just as searching as that provided by the filming of the battle scenes in the first half. The killing is carefully juxtaposed with shots of the ritual slaughter of a sacrificial ox by Kurtz's followers in the ruined temple outside. Kurtz is the romantic individual who has followed the logic of individualism to its conclusion: 'Kurtz got out of the boat—he split from the whole programme. . . . He could have gone for general, but he went for himself instead.' In the process he has transcended the artificial boundary which the ideology has imposed as the acceptable limit of individualism—the point at which class interests become threatened. Just how artificial the boundary is in this case is made clear by another of Willard's reflections: 'Charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out tickets at the Indy 500'. Kurtz must be turned into a ritual sacrifice to the interests, ideological and material, of those responsible for the war.

Here the Heart of Darkness antecedents so insistently stressed become an unresolved embarrassment. Why, if the film is questioning American claims to civilization, and Colonel Kurtz's base is at the 'heart of darkness', does Coppolla choose to use a ruined Eastern temple as that base? Why is a (parody of an?) Eastern religious ritual used as the epitome of barbarism? The choice of the setting was probably motivated by its theatrical possibilities—but it must carry with it the implication that anything non-Western can be equated with barbarism. A particularly unfortunate implication in a film designed to equate the West's actions in Vietnam with barbarism.

But, while the end of the film appears to be providing as damning an indictment of American 'civilization' as the focus on American military destructiveness in the first half, not only is it not questioning the individualist ideology of capitalism which underlies American involvement in Vietnam, but the prominence it gives to Colonel Kurtz's individualism is actually an endorsement of that ideology. It suggests that the key to historical events lies in the individual psyche.

It is known that Coppolla filmed two different endings to Apocalypse Now. We don't know what the other filmed ending was, and if we were to be given access to it the choice of this ending would probably be the decisive pointer to the ideological determinants acting on Coppolla in the making of the film. But even without that the ideological statement of the ending we are given is very clear. Having killed Kurtz, Willard stands at the top of the temple stairs while Kurtz's assembled followers offer him obeisance. The end of the film shows Willard being offered the choice of whether to become the new god or not. (This, of course, is a singularly circumscribed choice in that if Willard were to opt to take Kurtz's place someone else would inevitably be sent to kill him in his return.) In the event Willard chooses not to become the new god but rather to call in yet another napalm strike to destroy the temple and all Kurtz's followers. To protect Willard from the imputation that his invocation of napalm

is just as barbaric as was Colonel Kilgore's, the ex-West Point surfing enthusiast ('I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells of victory'), Coppolla has Willard say: 'They were going to make me a Major for this—and I wasn't even in their army any more.' Willard has chosen to follow Kurtz's example and opt for individuality, 'himself', rather than conformity. The film's account of the war would suggest that this wasn't a choice open to Kurtz, but Willard's survival as the narrator shows that it must somehow, have been opened to him.

That is not, however, the main issue. The point is that the film focuses finally on an individual consciousness being confronted by a choice. Coppolla wants the issue to be seen ultimately in terms of individual salvation or damnation. He wants to convey the impression that history hinges on individual choice and thus ultimately on the goodness or badness of the individual. He wants the social, political and economic context to be seen as 'background', which is, finally, only important in so far as it can't be entirely ignored in the examination of the individual consciousness which is presented, in the second half of the film, as foreground.

So what we have at the end of Apocalypse Now is a critique of a cultural tradition which has not only not prevented, but actually been used as a weapon, in a war which is shown to be an act of peculiar collective insanity. Yet at the same time Coppolla is producing a film which belongs in that tradition, and which, largely through its use of Heart of Darkness, seeks sanction from that tradition for a deafening silence on the crucial question about Vietnam. Somewhere in the unilluminated darkness at the heart of Apocalypse Now lurks the unasked and unanswered question: What the hell (to use Apocalyptic terminology) was the American army doing in Vietnam in the first place?

Not to mention Cambodia. Very particularly not to mention Cambodia.□