

RESTAGING THE WAR

Fantasizing Defeat in Hollywood's Vietnam

No one will go out of the house to see the Vietnam war on a movie screen. The American people don't want to confront the war yet. Every one of these movies will die.

—American movie executive, quoted in Earl C. Gottschalk Jr., "After Long Study, Movie Makers Find a New War to Fight," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 1977

Between 1964 and 1977 only a single Hollywood film, *The Green Berets* (1968), starring John Wayne, attempted to directly represent the Vietnam War. Considering the close collaboration between Hollywood and the government during the Second World War, which saw dozens of war films made during the war itself with the blessing and even help of the U.S. military and the Office of War Information, this paucity of Vietnam films may seem puzzling.¹ Perhaps it was the competition of the "living-room war," playing out for free on television screens over the course of the conflict, that dissuaded fictional films from competing with this constant flow of images. Or perhaps, according to the armchair psychology of various Hollywood executives, the war was too fresh a wound in the American psyche, putting a damper on the profit motive of the film industry. In any case Hollywood's diagnosis was a self-fulfilling prophecy, as studios and producers shied away from financing any venture that did more than obliquely reference the war, despite the circulation of numerous scripts and projects: Morrell's *First Blood* was optioned as early as 1972 by Columbia Pictures, and the original screenplay for what became *The Deer Hunter* was written in 1974.² Even as a "Viet Nam blitz" of films began to be slated for release in 1978, many doubted that these films would turn a profit. Echoing the traumatic violence of the war, these skeptics predicted that the films would "die," thus doubling the defeat of the war itself.

This is not to say that the Vietnam War was completely absent on American movie screens during this time. In fact Vietnam haunted many films made in this era, often through the presence of Vietnam veteran characters, even as the war was relegated to the background of these narratives. As Paul Schrader, the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver* (1976), itself a prime example of the Vietnam veteran genre and its avoidance of the war, said in 1975, “The war is still too close to most Americans for them to sufficiently detach themselves. . . . One must work in metaphors for the moment (i.e., Mexico is Vietnam).”³ Among the metaphors employed to represent Vietnam were contemporary issues, such as street crime (*Dirty Harry* [1971]), rural poverty (*Deliverance* [1972]), racism (*Hi Mom!* [1970]), drug dealing (*French Connection* [1971]), and historical events such as the Indian Wars (*Little Big Man* [1970]), the Second World War (*Tora! Tora! Tora!* [1970]), and the Korean War (*M*A*S*H* [1970]). But just as the American 1968 belatedly emerged as a complex condensation of disparate events, the nachträglich appearance of the Vietnam War in Hollywood film revealed a very different Vietnam than the one viewed live through the flow of television. As Max Youngstein, an American consultant to the production company Golden Harvest, based in Hong Kong, explained:

Did the American public want to hear about Vietnam—in any form? Forget about what position [they] took. . . . Did they want to see anything about it and be reminded of something that turned out to be probably the only losing war that American has ever been involved in? Plus all the sociological and human aspects of 50,000 young men killed in the prime of their lives, with the quarter of a million that nobody talks about being anything from quadriplegics to maimed to where they are totally dependent on somebody else for their life.⁴

The spirit of defeat in the body politic would be mirrored by the “maimed” bodies of American soldiers, both as filmic representations and as “sociological” referents. After the withdrawal of American troops in 1973 and the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese forces in 1975, it would be impossible to represent the Vietnam War to American audiences except through the lens of defeat, and even the most heroic depictions of American soldiers would be marked by this melancholic tone.

Going Native, or, The Return of the White Man's Burden:
Apocalypse Now (1979)

Coppola makes his film like the Americans made war—in this sense, it is the best possible testimonial—with the same immoderation, the same excess of means, the same monstrous candor . . . and the same success.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

Although it was the first of the Vietnam War films to go into production (in 1975), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* was the last of this group to appear in theaters, going into general release in August 1979. In many ways the long-running story of its production was read by many film industry commentators as a recapitulation of the Vietnam War, and this analogy was also embraced by Coppola, who announced at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979, "My film is not about Vietnam, it is Vietnam."⁵² Unlike Cimino, who drew upon his personal biography and the experiences of his actors to authenticate *The Deer Hunter*, Coppola transforms the film's production into a restaging of the Vietnam War. As he explained at Cannes, "The film was made the way the war was fought. There were too many of us, too much money, too much equipment." Publicity for *Apocalypse Now* often focused on the materials consumed by the film, a list that reads like an inventory of weapons: "1,200 gallons of gasoline burned in ninety seconds . . . over 500 smoke bombs, 100 phosphorous sticks, another 1,200 gallons of gas, 1,750 sticks of dynamite, 500 feet of detonating cord, plus 2,000 rockets, flares and tracers."⁵³ The massive expenditure, estimated at over \$31.5 million, led the critic Sol Yurick to call the film "the Coppola complex," a military, cinematic, and industrial system that succeeds, like the war itself, in "redistributing wealth and power" and capitalizing on "expensive technological means" and the "psychic commodities" of trauma and loss associated with the Vietnam syndrome.⁵⁴ As a stunning example of vampire capitalism, *Apocalypse Now* not only recapitulates the labor involved in producing spectacular acts of mass violence, but it also submerges Coppola's cast and crew into the neocolonial power relations of Southeast Asia that organized the Vietnam War as well. Thus it is not only the well-known characters of Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) and Captain Wil-

lard (Martin Sheen) in *Apocalypse Now* who go native and internalize the violence of Vietnam, but the film itself also restages a descent into primitiveness that marks its own peculiar version of the beating fantasy of Vietnam.

While many contemporaneous reviewers condemned *Apocalypse Now* along the same lines as they dismissed *The Deer Hunter*, insofar as both films' surrealistic tone and deviations from historical accuracy misrepresented the true horrors of the war, more sympathetic commentators have interpreted *Apocalypse Now* as a critique of American imperialism, by way of its allusions to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.⁵⁵ Interestingly what this link between the Vietnam War and European colonialisms from the nineteenth century obscures is a more direct comparison between *Apocalypse Now* and American colonialism, in particular the early twentieth-century colonization of the Philippines, where *Apocalypse Now* was filmed. It is worth remembering that Rudyard Kipling, another British author cited in *Apocalypse Now*, was referring to the U.S. invasion of the Philippines in 1899 after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War when he wrote his poem "The White Man's Burden." The film's citation of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is also symptomatic of this repressed relation between American and European colonialisms; not only does Eliot's poem allude to Conrad in its epigraph, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead," but Eliot's early writings on primitivism were influenced by a visit to the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904.⁵⁶ This fair featured the infamous Philippine Reservation, a human zoo that displayed nearly 1,200 Filipinos living in authentically "tribal," semibarbaric conditions and served to validate the paradigm of "benevolent assimilation" wherein the newly colonized Filipino subjects were unworthy of self-rule and yet were worthy recipients of American tutelage.⁵⁷ These links point to the historical depths of American empire in Southeast Asia, far predating the American intervention in the Vietnam War which *Apocalypse Now* ostensibly critiques.

In fact one might argue that the on-location filming of *Apocalypse Now* from 1976 to 1977 in the Philippines is itself proof of the continuing force of American imperialism in the independent Philippine state, both in the film's complicit relationship with President Ferdinand Marcos and in its choice of locations and local actors, themselves living ghosts of the Philippines' multiple colonial pasts. Coppola initially considered working directly with the U.S. Department of Defense for access to the military equipment he required to recreate the Vietnam War, but those negotiations ended when he made a deal directly with Marcos in October 1975.⁵⁸ During the film's production the Philippines was in the midst of a nine-year period of martial law (1972–81), which Marcos had initially declared to silence his opposition and overcome

term limits on his presidency. Despite such political turmoil, Marcos gave Coppola's crew access to "40 Philippine armed forces 1968-era Huey helicopters, fighter jets, military trucks, an arsenal of M-16s, and other assorted material," charging only for expenses and insurance. He reserved the right to take back these resources at a moment's notice for use in his ongoing battles with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao Province and communist guerrillas in the New People's Army.⁵⁹ Marcos came to possess such military technology in the first place because of his neocolonialist relationship with the U.S., which supported his regime as an important cold war ally despite his authoritarian tendencies. Beginning in the colonial era of the the early twentieth century the Philippines was host to several large U.S. bases, which according to Benedict Anderson "had nothing to do with the defense of the Philippines as such, and everything to do with maintaining American imperial power along the Pacific Rim," including supplying and servicing the armed forces during the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ Along with another cold war neocolonial ally, South Korea, the Philippines also contributed token troops to the war in Vietnam, helping the U.S. justify the war as a multinational effort.⁶¹ In short, Coppola's choice of the Philippines as a substitute for Vietnam is unintentionally befitting, as his patronage of Marcos's regime continued previous eras of colonial and neocolonial involvement and mimicked U.S. support for various South Vietnamese governments during the course of the war.

Coppola put his Filipino military resources to extensive use in his infamous scene of a village being napalmed, which begins with fifteen Huey helicopters flying in a row over the horizon toward the camera to the sounds of "Ride of the Valkyries." Lest we assume the music is part of the soundtrack, Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), the commander of this air cavalry unit, explains that they blast Wagner from huge speakers on the helicopters because "it scares the hell out of the slopes." Thus not only technological but musicological modernity is employed to attack the Viet Cong, who reside in a bucolic, orientalist past, as a jump cut switches us from the noise of the helicopters and music to the silence of a peaceful Vietnamese town square in the calm before the attack. Vinh Dinh Drap, the Vietnamese village in this scene, was built from scratch by Coppola's crew in the remote coastal town of Baler, in Quezon Province, only to be destroyed almost in its entirety by the copious explosives Coppola had ordered (fig. 28). The production displaced local residents, swelled the population, and drove up the price of local goods in a display of what the political scientist Gerald Sussman derided as "Yankee showmanship."⁶² For additional filmic veracity in the scene Coppola even employed Vietnamese refugees sojourning in the Philippines—the first wave

of refugees from the fall of Saigon—even though their indexicality as real Vietnamese barely registers in the long shots of them fleeing from the helicopters' assault.⁶³ At the end of this scene Coppola filmed five F-5 jets flying overhead while his production crew ignited 1,200 gallons of gasoline along a tree line at the edge of the village. This spectacular destruction and expenditure seemed solely designed so that Kilgore could utter one of his infamous lines: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning. . . . It smells like victory."⁶⁴ In this one line Coppola resignifies the napalm that was the object of so many antiwar protests into an empty sign for the absurdity of the war, as a mere spectacle of violence without casualties or traumas. Incinerating flora and human fauna alike, napalm leaves nothing behind in the wake of its attack except for its scent, not even "one stinking dink body," as Kilgore reminisces about a previous battle, as if erasing the "Napalm Girl" from historical memory. And all this so that Kilgore can clear the riverbank and have his soldiers surf the waves, a plot device that infuriated some reviewers as a "California cliché that had nothing to do with the reality of South Vietnam."⁶⁵ In the film the military rationale for attacking this village appears as nonsensical as Coppola's motivation for diverting millions of dollars of resources into this scene.

Even more extravagant construction projects were undertaken in Pagsanjan, a popular tourist site in Laguna Province on the Laguna de Bay, where Coppola's crew built a faux-Cambodian temple for Kurtz's compound and a bridge for the Do Lung sequence, fashioned upon the bones of a structure destroyed by the Japanese during the Second World War.⁶⁶ The sets for these scenes were based on images of Angkor Wat from *National Geographic* that Coppola's production designer, Dean Tavoularis, had seen (fig. 29).⁶⁷ But the most uncanny relic of American imperialism in *Apocalypse Now* was its use of over two hundred extras from the Ifugao tribe to play the part of Montagnards, a French term for indigenous Vietnamese highlander tribes who were recruited into the war by the U.S. Special Forces. The Montagnards were reputed to be more savage than the South Vietnamese, and thus were prized as anticommunist fighters in the mountains near Cambodia; many Montagnards were persecuted by the Vietnamese after the war for their intimate collaboration with the U.S. As an American Green Beret describes them in a British documentary, *The Siege of Kontum* (1972), "The Montagnard is a very primitive type of person, they don't really understand modern technology. Special Forces trained them in modern weapons and gave them the weapons that they use. They paid them—the first time the Montagnards had ever seen money. They didn't even know what money could do. They gave them



28. The Vietnamese village of Vinh Dinh Drap, built and destroyed in Baler, Quezon Province, Philippines, and staffed with Vietnamese refugees as extras. The Huey helicopters in this scene were borrowed from Ferdinand Marcos's military. Frame enlargement from *Apocalypse Now*.

29. Kurtz's Cambodian temple compound, constructed in Pagsanjan, Philippines, and based on images of Angkor Wat. Frame enlargement from *Apocalypse Now*.

clothing, which the Montagnards had never had before. They were like fathers to them.”⁶⁸ This combination of paternalism and primitivist fascination also governs Kurtz’s interactions with “his people,” Montagnards “who worship him like a god and follow every order, however ridiculous.”

The extras playing the Montagnard people were not recruited from Pagsanjan, but were brought in from the village of Batad in Ifugao Subprovince, over two hundred miles to the north in the Cordillera mountain region. A casting director, Eva Gardos, first encountered the Ifugao, a subgroup of highlander peoples, while on a visit to the Nayong Pilipino, a theme park located in Manila that reproduces tribal villages in a style similar to the Philippine Reservation at the World’s Fair. According to an Ifugao interpreter, Jerry Luglug, Gardos “preferred pure Ifugao, and not ‘hybrid Ifugao’ born of intermarriages and who didn’t have ‘the look’ that the film required. She didn’t want Ilocano or Tagalog-looking Ifugao.”⁶⁹ Thus *Apocalypse Now* recapitulates the logic of the early twentieth-century American colonial administrators in the Philippines, who also fetishized the “wildness” of these noble savages over the hybridity of Christianized mestizo elites who were less malleable to the cause of benevolent assimilation.⁷⁰ The Ifugao of *Apocalypse Now* function much like the half-naked, dog-eating “Igorots” paraded at the Philippine Reservation, which a contemporary Filipino American filmmaker, Marlon Fuentes, skewered as America’s “long awaited dream of Filipinos in the flesh” in his film *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995).⁷¹ Like American Indians in the late nineteenth century, they designate what Philip Deloria has called an “authentic reality in the face of urban disorder and alienating mass society,” in contrast to assimilated natives who denote modernity’s corruption of the noble savage.⁷² The politics of indigeneity in the modern Philippines were deployed by Marcos in a similar fashion, as he was accused of helping to orchestrate the discovery of a “new” and untouched Stone Age tribe, the Tasaday, in the early 1970s in order to promulgate a source of Filipino uniqueness untouched by Spanish or American influence. The continuing association of a history of headhunting and animal sacrifice with these modern Igorot groups, including the Ifugao, mirrors the savagery of the Montagnards which the U.S. Special Forces esteemed.⁷³ In effect Coppola has not only resurrected an old colonialist logic romanticizing indigenous peoples but also connected it to neocolonial hegemonies in both Vietnam and the Philippines.

Colonel Kurtz, modeled on his namesake in *Heart of Darkness*, is the American in *Apocalypse Now* who has most explicitly gone native, as he has abandoned the U.S. military chain of command to conduct his own private Vietnam War with his Montagnard army in the mountains bordering Cambodia.

The American commanders who order Willard to assassinate Kurtz explain, "Out there with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God. . . . Walt Kurtz has reached his [breaking point], and very obviously, he has gone insane." The crime that Kurtz is officially accused of is ordering the assassination of four Vietnamese double agents, but his larger transgression is fighting the war "his way," essentially absorbing the amorality of the oriental enemy. When Willard finally reaches Kurtz's compound, Kurtz justifies his methods to Willard by way of a long anecdote about how the Viet Cong would cut off the arms of children that the Americans had inoculated against polio. Rather than shocking him, this example led to Kurtz's epiphany that the enemy was stronger than he was; they had the strength to realize the full extent of violence necessary to win the war. Kurtz rhapsodizes, "If I had ten divisions of those men, then our troubles here would be over very quickly. You have to have men who are moral, and at the same time, who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment. Without judgment. Because it's judgment that defeats us." If the Americans must become the Vietnamese in order to be able to kill them, this suggests an intimacy between violator and victim often disavowed in critiques of violence. In a sense Kurtz's going native parallels *The Deer Hunter's* allusions to James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer* (1841), whose hero, Natty Bumppo, enacts the mythos Richard Slotkin has called "regeneration through violence" through his identification with Native American hunting rituals.⁷⁴ But in *Apocalypse Now* the native Montagnard substitute for the Viet Cong, providing not only a link to the "primordial" violence shared by all Vietnamese but also signifying an ahistorical relationship to the land that bypasses the historical claims made by the Viet Cong and National Liberation Front on behalf of an anticolonial war.

While Kurtz may symbolize for Coppola the extreme absurdity of the Vietnam War that led to so many deaths on both sides, Coppola's reverent portrayal of Kurtz in these final scenes reveals the ambivalence of his critique. Shot in close-up with chiaroscuro lighting, Kurtz's face dissolves during his many monologues into a montage of gigantic carved idols and native bodies, lending a mythic rather than satirical quality to these identifications. These stylistic elaborations confused reviewers, who complained, "But all this exhilaration and lyricism of war . . . what is an allegedly antiwar filmmaker doing mucking around in this tainted ecstasy?"⁷⁵ Kurtz's death at Willard's hands is filmed with the same adoration. Coppola reportedly struggled for a way to end his film, and the Ifugao extras inadvertently provided him with a solution when they requested a carabao (water buffalo) for use in a ritual sacrifice.



30. A carabao (water buffalo) killed in an Ifugao ceremony stands in for the fallen body of Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who is never clearly shown in the film. Frame enlargement from *Apocalypse Now*.

Coppola ended up restaging and intercutting shots from the sacrifice, including documentary images of a real carabao being killed with machetes, with images of Willard attacking Kurtz with a machete, allowing the indexical images of the dying carabao to literally stand in for Kurtz, whose body remains in shadows during the entire sequence of his death (fig. 30).⁷⁶ In choosing this method of killing Kurtz, Willard not only takes on Kurtz's role as assassin but goes native as well, mimicking Kurtz's earlier appearance in camouflage makeup by emerging with his face smeared with mud as if in brownface. The anthropologists Deirdre McKay and Padmapani Perez liken Coppola's sponsorship of the Ifugao sacrifice to *cañao*, or ritual feasts, organized by American colonial administrators for highlander tribes as a way of channeling their primordial violent tendencies away from headhunting and tribal warfare and toward more "civilized" pursuits such as sports. But these American elites still valued the spectacle of primitiveness that these *cañao* offered, and often persuaded or coerced tribal leaders to perform exotic rites such as dances and animal sacrifice as a substitute for the censored headhunting rituals that fascinated American imaginations.⁷⁷ Because the carabao was a symbol of colonial power and beneficence, McKay and Perez suggest that the sacrifice was a way of "symbolically assassinating the imperial donor." Even as Coppola practices his American largesse on his Ifugao extras, extracting the surplus value of their ritual for his own creative use, he stages Kurtz's death as an invitation to the natives to kill their American benefactors by effigy, and Coppola's symbolic self-destruction mirrors the production of

Apocalypse Now and, by extension, the war as a whole. The end credits of the film scroll over footage of the explosive destruction of the set for Kurtz's compound after filming concluded, an ending that parallels the film narrative's implosion even as it satisfies the studio's demand for a use value to be extracted from the absurd expenditures of Coppola's production.

KUNG FU FIGHTING

Pacifying and Mastering the Martial Body

I'm here a week now, waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. Every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger.

—Captain Willard, *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

At the beginning of *Apocalypse Now*, as Capt. Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) awaits his new orders in a Saigon hotel room, he passes the time drinking, smoking, hallucinating, and practicing what appear to be martial arts forms (fig. 33). This momentary glimpse of kung fu, in the midst of a major film about the Vietnam War at the close of the 1970s, gestures toward a hidden link between the Asian martial arts and America's Vietnam syndrome. Willard's "soft" body, weakened by ennui, idleness, and alcohol, stands in contrast to the imagined but unseen Viet Cong body, hard and strong from its martial labors. Thus Willard's attempt at drunken kung fu, which ends violently when he punches at his own image in a mirror, is an attempt to recapture that hard body through a different mode of orientalized violence. Kung fu becomes another form of going native, different from the descent into primitive, tribal violence as intimated by the flash-forwards in this scene to the end of the film, where Willard dons Montagnard "brownface," emerging from the river slick with mud, to assassinate Kurtz. Whereas brownface allows Willard to access a primordial violence that takes him outside his white American body and permits him to sacrifice Kurtz, the violence of martial arts in this opening scene is directed inward, toward the self. After smashing the mirror he grasps his bloody hand and rubs it all over his face, as if trying to awaken from his drunken daze and his nightmarish memories of the Vietnam War. If kung fu can create a hard body for the traumatized American soldier, it



33. Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) practices kung fu in his Saigon hotel room as he awaits orders at the beginning of the film. Frame enlargement from *Apocalypse Now*.

does so by redirecting that soldier's violence back onto himself through the oriental obscene, through the phantasmatic scenarios now provided by Asian martial arts.

Chop-Socky as Vietnam Syndrome

Asian martial arts entered the mainstream of American popular culture many years before *Apocalypse Now* appeared, just as the violence of the Vietnam War began to fade from popular consciousness with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the withdrawal of American troops in 1973. The “kung fu craze,” also referred to in film industry journals as “eastern Westerns,” “Chinese actioners,” and “chop-sockies,” features what appears to be a new brand of film violence: actors engaged in direct hand-to-hand combat, their violence originating and ending in the unadorned body itself.¹ Such fights differed from the traditions of American stage and film violence; they employed a baroque repertoire of weapons, poetically named their moves “Flying Tiger” and “Iron Fist,” choreographed their movements to an almost dance-like rhythm, and, most shocking to some, emphasized prolonged bodily contact and showed its effects on the body in gory, fantastic detail. American audiences flocked to urban, second-run theaters to see these cheaply made and wretchedly dubbed productions. Their enthusiasm for kung fu film's kinetic energy spilled over into other areas of popular culture, where kung fu became a hobby, a sport, a diet, a disco dance, a means of self-defense and feminist empowerment, an initiation at Christian youth camps, and even a motivator