

**F**rancis Ford Coppola hasn't shied away from criticising Catholicism. Although, like Martin Scorsese, it looms large in his films, Coppola's main memory from childhood is that the nuns were "mean". Yet as the rereleased 1991 documentary *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* shows us, *Apocalypse Now* bleeds religion, intentionally or otherwise – whether via the deeply Catholic Philippines that became the location, or the near-biblical conditions on set that almost killed the project. Internally, the tormented young Martin Sheen's self-harm from a broken mirror, citing his "difficult spiritual state", made Coppola's claim that the project was all about "epiphanies and rebirth" all the more obvious.

The tortured genesis of *Apocalypse Now* has become almost as famous as the film itself. Inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, it's set during the Vietnam War, where a soldier is instructed to travel into the jungle and kill a rogue officer who has made himself the leader of a deranged, murderous cult. Typhoons and political uprisings almost destroyed the sets; dysentery nearly saw off the cast and the director, who by all accounts (rather like his antagonist) had gone mad with power and seemed hell-bent on taking others with him. In short, everyone went through their own personal end times. When you know that, it's hard not to see it seeping out of every pore of the film.

On the surface, *Apocalypse Now* is bleak – even nihilistic. It follows the standard hero's journey, which itself echoes the Greatest Story Ever Told, but the boat trip by would-be-assassin Captain Willard, played by Sheen, into Cambodia to kill Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando, is more like a trip down the River Styx than the road to Calvary. At the end lies potential damnation – not just for the characters, but for humanity. War strips away people's basic decency and exposes a primordial urge to destroy.

Kurtz's great revelation, or at least what he thinks is his great revelation, is that this instinct is to be revered

## Apocalypse how?

**Maddy Fry** on the profound spiritual lessons of a rereleased classic documentary

rather than reviled. In this world, gods die and they aren't resurrected. He makes himself a god instead, and, flat on his back at the end, he utters (like his character in *Heart of Darkness*) "the horror, the horror". It hints that he realises a life of turning himself into an idol has led only to ruin.

Kurtz's death, the film suggests, leaves room for regret. Or maybe not. Perhaps Kurtz is in on a secret the rest of aren't – that there is no logic, no endgame. The horror was always the point. Maybe a key to the film's longevity is that it warns us that while in a world dominated by multiple Kurtzes, we might not face bodies impaled on spikes or leaders sitting atop a pile of skulls, that world is never far off, if we're not careful.

Yet salvation is never far away. Sheen's character ultimately rejects the chance to keep Kurtz's legacy alive; after killing Kurtz, when he sees the villagers treating him as an acolyte, he walks away. By refusing to resurrect a false godhead – himself

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– he saves his own humanity, and his own soul. He chooses heaven over hell; life over death. It's a crucial moment, even if, like Kurtz, all he can also utter is "the horror, the horror".

This feels especially poignant given that Sheen almost died of a heart attack during filming. The documentary highlights how the pressure to turn himself into someone as morally compromised as Willard, to shut down his innate decency, almost broke him. He was read the last rites by a priest who spoke no English, and realised that whether he lived or died was "my choice". He chose life.

Sheen later rediscovered his childhood Catholicism and went on to become an activist for good causes. His life on and off set hints at destruction and rebirth, as do the wider antics that worked against the film's creation. The documentary highlights that despite the onset of warfare, disease and natural disasters, the masterpiece that came out of it in 1979 made it all worth it. Is the final message that there is always hope, even for the damned? That failure, fear and insanity all need to be seen to be born anew?

In the 2000s, Sheen's description of working with Brando could only be said by someone following Jesus: "He would say to me, 'Be human, be open, be free. Trust, come, follow me. Be ruled by me. Feel secure in that.' Marlon doesn't look over his shoulder, he doesn't make any apologies, he doesn't edit. Whatever is, is."

By contrast, Brando's final words to Sheen before the younger actor killed off his character were tellingly different from those of Kurtz. As Sheen put it, "I had to sneak up on Marlon and bash his brains out... I raised the implement to hit him. He turned around, looked me right in the eye, and said, 'Pray for your father.'"

Going back to the beginning to find the end. Perhaps we should all try that from time to time. **CH**

*Maddy Fry is a journalist and author. Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse is streaming on Apple TV+*