

# Apocalypse Now? Seth Kim-Cohen

An unpublished piece written in 2001, shortly after 9/11 and the release of *Apocalypse Now Redux*.



The film, like each day of my life, begins in blackness. The sound of helicopters (the alarm?) Eyes open: a wall of palm trees fronting the jungle. I am on this side of the wall, the light side. We, in the theater, are viewing the jungle from the beach. Behind that wall another darkness awaits. This darkness is more troubling than the one from which we've just emerged. Unlike our sleep or the darkness at the start of a motion picture, the darkness behind the jungle's wall is not comforting, it is not "womb-like." This is the other darkness. The inscrutable kind. Because it is unknown, this kind is troubling; begging the question: what's out there?

In slow motion a helicopter crosses the screen from left to right. The chopper's blades kick up a storm of dust and sand. A vaguely middle-eastern guitar fades in. It aligns itself with the jungle. It too is unknown; exotic, mystical, alien. Another chopper crosses the screen and three enormous napalm explosions erupt from the jungle – towering plumes of black and orange fire shoot into the sky. We all know what this kind of fire looks like, having seen it again and again and again on television, on the web and in newspapers and magazines. Before the attacks on the World Trade Center, such fire was unimaginable, but our imaginations have been expanded. Such devastation now seems something more than possible. It seems almost inevitable. A few days after the attacks, I was driving north, toward the Loop

on the Dan Ryan. The skyline, framed in the windshield, was set against a luminous blue sky. My attention was drawn, magnetically, almost against my will, to the Sears Tower, lording over Chicago as the World Trade Center had over New York. I could not look at the black monolithic tower without seeing (it wasn't an imagining, but a blunt sight) a plane slicing into its upper floors like a knife into room-temperature butter.

In *Apocalypse Now*, when the bombs explode in the jungle they announce a change of status. The jungle is no longer part of nature. It has been overtaken and subsumed by us. The law of the jungle has been nullified by the presence and intent of men-turned-soldiers. The line between the darkness and the light has been breached. And, from this moment forward, the film tells us, it will be impossible to say which is which, nor to which side anyone or anything belongs. The music changes too. The song has begun: "The End" by the Doors. It changes from vague atmosphere, from being the equivalent of the dark, uncertain jungle, to being a song, a construct. Now it has intent. It changes when Jim Morrison imposes his will on the meandering, modal tune. Morrison's presence changes the film too. It's only a minute or two old, but the pictures are given context. Francis Ford Coppola's intentions are clear. "This is the end/Beautiful friend."

It's one of those odd parallelisms of history that, as *Apocalypse Now Redux* was in theatrical release, George W. Bush ventured to lead the U.S. (and whomever else he could cram in the back of the station wagon) on his very own trip into the heart of darkness. That heart revealed itself in its most hideous form in New York and Washington D.C. and in western Pennsylvania. And immediately, after staggering back to our collective feet, Bush expressed the will of the citizenry by swearing vengeance.

Since the attacks we have been told repeatedly that, in terms of scale and symbolism, there is no precedent for this devastation. But on August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One might object to the comparison – in 1945 the U.S. was formally at war with Japan. But does the formality of war alter the physical reality of such an act? Were the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki somehow more deserving of the hell unleashed upon them? The atomic bombs were seen as retaliation for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor three and a half years earlier. A sizable portion of the Muslim world sees the September attacks as retaliatory too. Comparisons of the Trade Center and Pentagon attacks to Pearl Harbor have been numerous. Why haven't I heard a single mention of Hiroshima or Nagasaki in connection with 9/11? The Pearl Harbor attacks were directed at military personnel, located at a military base. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks were directed at centers of civilian population, culture, business and industry.

The U.S. response bears a resemblance, in spirit, to the up-river journey of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) through Vietnam and into Cambodia in search of the renegade Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando.) In *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz has led a series of unauthorized, vigilante missions into Cambodia. For the sake of that story, Kurtz functions as Osama bin Laden functions in the story told by the U.S. government. In their opinion he is operating “beyond the pale” and with no consideration for human life. He has assumed military and spiritual command of a small private army. After Kurtz executes four friendly South Vietnamese officers whom he suspects are double agents, the Army decides it has had enough.. Willard is sent to “terminate” Kurtz with “extreme prejudice.”

Coppola's film, like the novel it was based on – Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* – deals with a classic Western literary theme: the threat “they”

pose to “us” and the structures, values and expectations “we” impose on “them.” Kurtz has “gone native.” In the process of confronting a different culture and a different set of values, he has been transformed. He has assumed the primary characteristic of the other kind of darkness: he is inscrutable. He no longer accepts the Army’s version of the truth nor his country’s vision of the world. The canvas upon which Western capitalism and American democracy have painted their rendition of human nature, of freedom, of value and of morality have been wiped clean; returned to the wild. On this newly-blank slate, Kurtz struggles to depict a reality of which he can make some sense. Kurtz, in a letter to his son, writes “I am beyond their timid, lying morality. So I am beyond caring.”

Willard is not the first man sent to “terminate” Colonel Kurtz. The previous operative, Captain Richard Colby, has joined Kurtz. The Army has intercepted a crookedly scrawled letter he tried to send to his wife: “Sell the house. Sell the car. Sell the kids. Find someone else. Forget it! I’m never coming back. Forget it!!!” As a convert to Kurtz’s view, Colby renounces his former life, his former values. He rejects not only the value of commodities: his house, his car, but he rejects their symbolism. He rejects the comforts, stability and security of home. He rejects the freedom offered by his car. Captain Colby goes even further in his rejection, commodifying his children. In his new value system, the kids are expendable.

Ultimately, *Apocalypse Now* is about the fragility of identity; personal identity, national identity, moral identity. Who we are is a product of our environment. There’s a common core in all of us which is nature, but the rest, the part which each individual identifies as “I” is nurture. When the environment (family, religion, nation, culture) which nurtured is destroyed or debunked, the pillars of the palace of I begin to collapse. The accepted order of the elements which define I (values, goals, morals, love, hate, truth,

beauty, honor, etc.) are rejected. This rejection defines one as abnormal, insane, unacceptable. But the subjectivity of environment-specific ideals – the concepts to which participants are expected to subscribe – calls the very ideas of abnormality, insanity and acceptability into question.

Jim Morrison is speaking Kurtz's mind when he sings "of our elaborate plans, the end/of everything that stands, the end." Kurtz speaks his own mind too. On confronting Willard, his executioner, he asks, "Have you ever considered any real freedoms – freedom from the opinion of others, even the opinion of yourself?" In pursuit of Kurtz, Willard has traveled the same route as his prey. He has witnessed the same barbarity, confronted the same absence of reasons. And Willard has reached the same nihilistic conclusion as Kurtz. The structure in which he operates and the authority in whose name he acts are fictions created to justify the aims of a very few men. All structures are constructs of will. All authority is a product of its initiating structure's acceptance. So, authority can be maintained only as long as acceptance holds. Willard, as he moves in for the kill, the completion of his mission, says "They were gonna make me a Major for this. And I wasn't even in their fucking army anymore."

In the current crisis, I am the armchair Willard. I am not being sent to kill bin Laden, but my taxes are being used and my consent is assumed. I am being asked to tag along, morally, as the assassins bear down on their target. But my acceptance of the structure which the U.S. response is meant to defend is waning.

Willard emerges from the boat, docked on the river bank, his face painted black-green like the river and the night. In slow, slithering movements, he snakes toward Kurtz. The asp in the nest. Willard is shirtless, glistening, bestial. By all appearances he, too, has gone native. As Kurtz's Cambodian

and Vietnamese followers ritualistically butcher a water buffalo, Willard approaches Kurtz. The weapon in his hand is not government issue, not a rifle or a pistol, not even a knife or a bayonet. The weapon in Willard's hand is not even a sword. The weapon which will fell the primeval force Colonel Kurtz has become is not a weapon designed to be used by man against man. "Even the jungle wanted him dead. And that's who he really took his orders from anyway." Willard enacts a macabre dance, swirling around the bald, mountainous figure of Kurtz, delivering swooping machete blows. The Doors shed their restraint, come out of their skins. Krieger momentarily forgets his preference for mannerisms and spills torrents of feedback, disjointed, disruptive notes, shards of reverbed noise. Even the jester, Manzarek, delivers breath-stealing body blows, capitalizing on the organ's percussive capabilities. Drummer, John Densmore, often prone to ride-cymbal jazz inflections, provides the final convincing, cathartic presence with a chaotic hurricane of toms which gives the cacophony a form, rising to an impossible pitch and then dissipating in the soundtrack of falling rain. The anarchy suggests a blue print for the Birthday Party, the Australian band of the 1980's who made a career of such fever. And only the Birthday Party have rendered it as convincingly.

In the documentary, *Hearts of Darkness*, filmed during the making of *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola expresses doubt about satisfying the demands of the project he's begun. He's mortgaged his house, risked most of his own money, put himself, his family and his crew through months of discomfort and deprivation and he doesn't know if he can fulfill his obligations to the contract between author and art. "The questions that I kept facing, I couldn't answer. Yet I knew that I had constructed the film in such a way that to not answer would be to fail." What makes the final scene of *Apocalypse Now* so satisfying, so successful, is the case made for Willard's equal claim to both sides of the line between darkness and light, between Kurtz and himself,

between primitive and modern, between nature and culture, between past and present. Pursuit of, or confrontation with, the other requires one to adopt his modality, his manner, his form. "You have a right to kill me." Kurtz tells Willard, "You have a right to do that. But you have no right to judge me." Judgement is predicated on a set of consistent, accepted terms of conduct. But, Kurtz is saying, your laws don't apply here. Your perspective is not valid here. There can be no objective definition of such terms as "insane" or "cult" or "justice." When confronted with extreme circumstances, natural human behavior boils down to concepts which do not include a moral component: hate, retribution, domination, submission; survival of the fittest: the law of the jungle. All else is construct, as likely to be false as true.

Art has produced great works on the theme of cultural and personal imperialism. *Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean's masterpiece about confronting the other, portrays a T.E. Lawrence who adopts Arabia as his home and the liberation of the Arabs as his *raison d'être*. For a time, he is able to convince himself and the English Army and the world that he has become an Arab. But, in the end, his imposition and all his good intentions are useless against centuries of cultural construction and the immutability of locus. All truth is local; an outsider, no matter how strong, can not impose his own reality where a previous reality exists. He can, however, act as a mirror in which others may truly, and for the first time, recognize themselves. Paul Bowles' story "A Distant Episode" is less optimistic. A linguistics professor travels against the advice of locals into the Moroccan wilderness to study the Reguibat tribe and, perhaps, to purchase some boxes made of camel udder. He is armed only with his sense of cultural superiority. He is attacked and bound with brutal, amoral quickness. His tongue is cut from his mouth in a bloody miasma. He is dressed in a suit made of the tops and bottoms of tin cans and forced into a new career: dancing for the amusement of the Reguibat. All truth is local.

To his American superiors Kurtz has achieved *other* status. He is utterly inscrutable. His motives can not be parsed by the same old Western thesauri. There are no English words for the thoughts in his head; no hermeneutic, exegetic, exculpatory texts to explain what he's done. Lacking a suitable category, Kurtz is labeled *insane* – the catch-all category for behavior which, willfully or incidentally, rejects the ideals of the environment. But Willard comes close enough to his subject to adopt his modality. Willard has come to understand Kurtz, an understanding that requires a breakdown of Willard's sense of his self as an exclusive and essential consciousness. He can kill Kurtz because he realizes (and he realizes that Kurtz also realizes) that this is the inevitable outcome. Kurtz can see himself in Willard. He can see that Willard can see himself in Kurtz. They have reached an understanding. In so doing, Willard has lost himself. After the execution, he thumbs through a manuscript beside the typewriter on Kurtz's desk. He stops at a page where Kurtz has scrawled across the typewritten text with a red magic marker: "Drop the bomb. Exterminate them all!" Willard sits down at the desk, in front of the typewriter. He is the author now. But he has nothing to say. He has exterminated his right to narrate, to control. When nothing is true, everything is permitted. And when everything is permitted the idea of an author is obsolete.