

BLURRING A CONSERVATIVE VISION:

COPPOLA'S TRANSFORMATION OF MILIUS' *APOCALYPSE NOW*

In 1969, Francis Coppola made a deal under his Warner Bros.-Zoetrope agreement that paid John Milius \$15,000 for writing a screenplay about the Vietnam ~~war~~War. Milius was in the Warner Bros. ~~d~~Ddevelopment ~~p~~Program at the time, and his finished script was meant to be directed by ~~a~~a fellow USC alum ~~by the name of~~ George Lucas. The movie, which Milius named *Apocalypse Now*, was projected to be ~~made as a~~ \$1.5 million ~~dollar~~ low-budget film.¹

To keep within ~~these costs~~that figure, the filmmakers planned to use a cast of unknowns, and to mix existing documentary war footage with their own 16mm material. The desired effect ~~was to~~would create a visceral tale that showed a Vietnam ~~war~~War ~~that~~ the rest of America had yet to witness on TV: ~~A~~a war laced with drugs, rock & roll, and unimaginable carnage.

Interestingly ~~enough~~, Milius' screenplay ~~was not~~didn't ~~critical~~criticize America's involvement in Southeast Asia. Instead, the 1969 draft, ~~solely~~ly-authored by Milius, was a macho journey in which, ultimately, the

soldiers discover they'd rather remain and fight to the end, than be rescued and taken back home alive.²

However, the young filmmakers' [\[JSA Note1\]](#) best laid plans soon went awry. Warner Bros. shied away from the project, but retained ownership. George Lucas finished *American Graffiti* (1973), and went on to prepare a small movie about "a galaxy far, far away." It was 1975, and, Francis Coppola had achieved great critical success, the year before, with both *The Godfather II* (1974) and *The Conversation* (1974). Coppola decided to buy back the rights to *Apocalypse Now* from Warner Bros., ~~so it could become~~ [and make it](#) his next film.

~~The project was~~ [He](#) re-budgeted [it](#) at 13 million dollars, to ~~fit~~ [Coppola's accommodate his new](#) stature, and the writer-turned-director left for the Philippines to begin ~~the shooting.~~ -What followed has become part of the folklore of American filmmaking-gone-wrong, and the anecdotes of the \$35 million ~~dollar~~ (give or take five million) making of *Apocalypse Now* -still serves [as](#) a cautionary tale of a director's descent into near-self-destruction.

BEYOND THE MYTH

At the time of its release, *Apocalypse Now's* story ~~became~~ [was](#) overshadowed by the way ~~it's~~ [its production](#) was ~~drawn~~ [depicted](#) in the media: -a money pit that almost consumed the career of its promising director Francis Coppola. - [These](#) accounts created ~~an~~ [the](#) impression that Coppola ~~found himself improvising~~ [improvised](#) most of the film on his Philippine location. This perception remains

today. Even the documentary *Hearts of Darkness* (1991), which combined footage of Coppola's shoot with contemporary interviews with the surviving players, perpetuates the mythic tale of the improvisational nature of the more than 200 days- plus-of shooting.

That's nNot to say that Coppola didn't alter the screenplay, -was not altered by Coppola, nor that the production was no't plagued by severe problems, including: replacing a leading man (Harvey Keitel)- during filming, surviving a powerful typhoon that destroyed sets and prevented shooting, and enduring an uncooperative Brando that-who arrived on location over-weight and unprepared with an immovable immmutableimmutable three week work-window.

Coppola himself admitted in his-a press conference at Cannes in 1979 that "there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment." His next words continued-to fueled the story that he constantly beratese the press for promoting. - He said, " ...and little by little, we went insane."³

However, the record of how the film was made, including the way it is told-portrayed in the Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper documentary, have-has been restructured to serve the dramatic tale of -the "genius gone mad [JSA Note2]." At the time, the media compared-linked the director and the fictional madman at the end of the river, and that their link became-overshadowed the way that the film's reception was-generally-understood. The effect was such that when the

Colonel, played by G.D. Spradlin in the finished film, says that Kurtz "is out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct." he might as well have been describing the reportage of Coppola's ~~making the film on location~~ shoot.⁴

What has been lost in the telling of this popular myth is how much of the Milius screenplay actually remains in the film. The first draft, dated 12/5/69, reveals that a large majority of the screenplay managed to make it onto the screen. Coppola's contributions to the story as co-screenwriter are only limited to in certain sections of the film. Specifically, in the opening sequences, in one significant scene in the middle of the film, ~~and in the reforming of the last forty-~~ five minutes of the one hundred and fifty-three minute picture.

~~In the interest of screenwriting~~ For this analysis we'll, let us focus on the structure of ~~the~~ events in the original script and note differences between the first draft and another, later draft (1976) both written by Milius. This will serve as create a context ~~to for~~ understanding how Coppola's ~~the~~ changes, ~~made by Coppola and his collaborators,~~ transformed ~~the voice of~~ Milius's conservative screenplay.

~~By~~ If we ~~looking~~ beyond the popular myth that the film was created on location, we can learn two valuable screenwriting lessons. The first is a great example of how the meaning of a screenplay can ~~be~~ changed entirely by rewriting its conclusion, ~~and t~~ The other is a good example on how new elements

can be woven into an existing screenplay ~~so that we story-canto~~ prepare the ~~viewer-audience~~ for a resolution that was not the writer's original intent.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DISSENT

At the end of the sixties, John Milius, USC film school graduate, seemed to be an ideological exception among~~st~~ his peers. While most of ~~his~~ classmates did everything they could to ~~get-out-of-being~~~~avoid the~~ drafted, Milius craved any excuse to be close to the war. By his own ~~reports~~~~admission~~, ~~asthma prevented him he was not allowed to from~~ enlist~~ing~~, ~~because of his asthma, b~~But this did ~~ne't~~ stop the war-obsessed, California surfer ~~to-who~~ wanted ~~to~~ get close to Vietnam. He nurtured several friendships with veterans, and ~~he kept~~ collect~~ed~~~~ing~~ their stories ~~so that he could put them infor~~ a film about the war.

Once he finished *Apocalypse Now*, Milius'~~s~~ obsessions~~vely went so far as to~~ ~~try and~~ pitch~~ed the~~ executives at Warner Bros. to ~~convince them to~~ take the actors and crew ~~an-on a~~ shoot in Vietnam while the war ~~was~~ rag~~ed~~~~ing~~ around them.

He recalls:

We would have arrived in time for Tet probably... and all these people ~~that-who~~ were in school with me, who had done all these terrible things like planning to go to Canada, and do something as drastic as getting married to avoid the war... ~~T~~they were willing to go to Vietnam. They didn't care. They wanted to carry lights... sound equipment over mind fields. ~~a~~And I think Warner Bros. probably backed off because they figured most of us would probably be killed.⁵

George Lucas puts this in perspective by countering "that was John's idea. I was the one that-who was going to have to go over there and do it. John is very good at being grand."⁶

And grand he was. Looking back, he emerges as a seemingly sole-lone conservative voice from-in a generation that-is associated with "flower power." Milius's own career as a writer/director has left the impression of us-with-a romanticized Teddy Roosevelt as he forged ahead with his "big stick" policy to resolve a kidnapping in the Middle East in *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), and a-the nostalgic memory of -three California surfers, written almost as archetypal heroes, in the semi-autobiographical *Big Wednesday* (1978).

In the eighties, Milius's conservatism would be brought-into question-challenged by a multitude of film critics when-they reviewed-reviewing *Red Dawn* (1984). In this film, Milius created a scenario in which the Soviet Union invades the U.S. with-only-and-it-is-up-to a group of high school teenagers to lead the resistance and-preserve-for the country's freedom. Arguing that John Milius is not conservative, therefore, would be like trying to convince the world that -Oliver Stone is not paranoid-of-the-establishment.

MILIUS'S VIETNAM

It was this self-described "zen-facist" who wrote *Apocalypse Now*. For his title, he subverted -the 60's hippie call "Nirvana Now" to a radically different

end^[JSA Note3]. When-w/Waxing rhapsodically about the title's s-meant-meaning-to

him, Milius described a vision of a ~~pin-on~~ button pin with the picture a nuclear mushroom ~~erowd~~ cloud -- the words *Apocalypse Now* written ~~boldy~~ boldly over the top of it. Yet like ~~some-many~~ writers with an overwhelming point-of-view, Milius ~~described~~ claimed his intent with *Apocalypse Now* was ~~to be a~~ political.

The writer, who would later ~~would~~ joyfully describe ~~joyfully~~ his story *Extreme Prejudice* (1987) as a right-wing Costa Gavras film, could only make this claim about his draft *Apocalypse Now* because it was so centered in his own belief system: One that sees that mMan's nature is bestial, and that war is a necessary extension of that nature.⁷

But criticizing, or disagreeing with Milius's view of mankind does not serve ~~the purpose of~~ this analysis, except to ~~set the stage as~~ understand how it influences d the shape of his screenplay. The way his characters act, the joy in their actions, and the choices they make, are all informed by Milius' his beliefs. His conservative themes are most resonant in ~~how he chooses to conclude~~ the endings of both his drafts.

~~Milius' politics are evident to the reader from his~~ His own author's note ~~before preceding the~~ page one of both the 1969 and 1976 drafts makes his politics clear, ~~The story told in the note and~~ sheds some light on Milius' his perception view of Vietnam as a challenge worthy of a special kind of hero.

_____ In his opening sentence Milius wrote, "Several years ago, during the height of the troop build-up in Vietnam, a company of paratroopers from the

101st Airborne division (Screaming Eagles) was lined up at the San Francisco International Airport waiting to embark on their great adventure."

Milius continues describing with admirationingly how the paratroopers "stood rigid" for hours while their plane ~~got~~was repaired. Then, two war protesters decided to pass out leaflets to "the boys" to see if they could try to change their minds about the Vietnam war. At the end of the line, a young paratrooper from Texas exchanged smiles with one of the hippies, and then took off his steel helmet, and "bashed the long-haired youth over the head causing a dull metallic clang."

The story concludes by with the other hippies demanding justice from the company's sergeant. When the sergeant asked his men "which one of you bastards hit the boy?" The entire company yelled out -- "I did sir." Milius describes this act as "stunning esprit de corps" and adds that it failed to impress the injured hippie who called the paratroopers "animals, just a bunch of animals."

The other hippie, however, looked at the Screaming Eagles in awe and delivered the punchline of the story by replying: "Just think what they'll be like when they come back." This story is emblematic of Milius's approach to the Vietnam experience. Unlike the rest of his generation, his screenplay reflects a perception of Vietnam as a descent into a battle that opens consciousness, instead of dulling it with the meaninglessness of war, that allows its characters to descend into a battle that somehow opens up their consciousness instead of dulling it with the meaningless of war.⁸

This serves as a good sample of Milius's passion for war, the military, and violence, and ~~this-his~~ tone informs the intent of the character's actions in both ~~his~~ drafts of the screenplay. At the time of the film's releases, Milius spoke candidly of how he saw violence as "an incredible impulse." He even goes so far as to equate it ~~to-with~~ a sexual release, and his ~~screenplay for his~~ first draft of ~~Apocalypse Now~~ is built on a series of violent crises that escalate to what he refers to as an "exhilarating battle" that finally consumes the character of Willard into Kurtz' world of total death and annihilation^[JSA Note4].

¹Ronald Bergan, *Francis Ford Coppola: Close Up*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998),53, and Richard Thompson, "Stoked (interview with John Milius), *Film Comment*, (1976),10.

²John Milius, *Apocalypse Now, First Draft*, 12/5/69.

³ Michael Goodwin and Naomi Wise, *On The Edge: The Life and Times of Francis Coppola*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1989), 263.

⁴ *Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. With Martin Sheen, Robert Duvall, Marlon Brando, and Laurence Fishburne. United Artists, 1979. (18:56-19:04)

⁵ *Hearts of Darkness*. Dir. Fax Bahr with George Hickenlooper. With documentary footage directed by, Francis' wife, Eleanor Coppola. Paramount, 1991. (8:07-8:35)

⁶ *Hearts of Darkness*. (8:00-8:06)

⁷Richard Thompson, 13.

⁸ John Milius, 12/5/69 and 1/29/76, Author's Note.

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[JSA Note1]If this is intended to be a single filmmaker, it should be filmmaker's. if plural, it should be filmmakers's.

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[JSA Note2]I'm not clear on the intent of this sentence. Do you mean: However, the record of the film's making, including the Fax ... , has been restructured... Perhaps you could simplify by saying: The tale of the making of Apocolypse Now was dramatized into the story of "genius gone mad."

Page: 6

[JSA Note3]I haven't got a clue here. He subverted a person to a different end? Please clarify.

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[JSA Note4]Would it be awful to make a joke here about how this reads like orgasm?