

By what means does ford coppola convey his message

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Before analysing Ford Coppola's means of conveying his message and their effectiveness it is obviously imperative to define the nature of that message, not as a simple statement, as the purpose of all art is to transmit personal subjectivity open to interpretation and not an objective declaration, but as the general idea that the film tries to suggest. Judging by the title, the overall content of the film, its conflictive and violent setting, and the visual crudeness of certain scenes it is apparent at first glance that the message concerns a negative aspect of human reality.

However, it is the psychological insight presented in the movie, evident on a first level by the fact that the events are narrated through Willard's perspective and on a deeper one by the intra and interpersonal changes that the characters are subject to as they proceed with their journey, which puts forward the true nature of the message, not the violence and death themselves, but their cause, human mind and therefore human capacity for evil. Furthermore, the unclearness of human thought and perspective in relation to the unconsciousness of the perpetration of such evil is underlined, as it is observed in various scenes discussed later.

The first feature of the film perceived by the receptor of the message, the spectator, even before the film has started is its name. "Apocalypse Now" is related to the book of revelation in the bible, in which the last battle between good and evil is narrated ending with the salvation of worthy souls and the damnation of evil ones. The title suggests that such a universal and enormous battle will be occurring "now" (during the playback of the movie) and creates great interest on the public.

However, once the movie starts the spectator has to put his expectations to see such a battle behind as, firstly, the movie is set in the past (the film was released in 1979 and the Vietnam war ended in 1975) and secondly, the camera uses a close-up shot of the main character lying in bed (superimposed with a long shot of the battle front), suggesting more of a personal rather than a universal approach to the theme. Therefore, the name of the movie, after a few minutes of film, conveys that the Armageddon to take place will not occur to a biblical scale, but in a personal, more human one.

The slowed and distorted helicopter sound in the first scene, without sight of the source, immediately creates confusion as a natural landscape is being shown with this alien sound: a natural view is juxtaposed with an unnatural sound. This confusion, followed by the seemingly indiscriminate destruction of the nature portrayed conveys an immediate sense of unconscious evil. Innocent and defenceless life and beauty is being burned without previous justification hence the abusive and senseless nature of war is underlined.

The fact that this is the very first scene in the movie suggests that this type of event will be recurrent in the rest of the film. The image Captain Willard's face is then superimposed upside down with this destruction scene, thus reinforcing the sense of awkwardness and confusion transmitted by the director. Again an indication of unnaturalness is portrayed, as it is not a normal position for a human or for a cinematographic take to be upside down. The face of rock idol is then faintly seen on the opposite side of the captain's, right side up, while the destruction is still persisting.

This suggests that Willard's natural state at this point is opposed to the evil of the mayhem being shown, and that the idol is in fact symbolically related to this wickedness. This factor is especially important when analysing the ending of the film, as we shall see. Mental unclearness is then further emphasised by the series of takes that follow. Willard's face is seen as staring at one point, as if he were thinking, therefore making the spectator think about his mental state and his thoughts and relate them to the conflictive images seen before. Then a close up is made to some cigarettes and liquor that he has in his hands.

As both of these contain substances that alter the state of mind we are suggested that Willard's thoughts are not at all clear, factor further reinforced by the take of the fan in his visual perspective with the helicopter sound still on: the sound is related to the movement of the fan, but does not actually coincide with the source object, a " mental mistake" by Willard's part. The background music throughout the opening sequence, repeats the phrase " this is the end", transmitting the apocalyptic tone of the title but also adding to the unnaturalness effect seen before, as it is in fact the beginning of the movie and not " the end".

As unnatural states are often related to evil (as seen for example in Macbeth) all of the characteristics of this type mentioned add to the malevolent sense conveyed by the destruction itself, apart from expressing mental confusion and blurriness. Ford Coppola is very effective in establishing the main theme of the film, that of the capacity of the human mind for evil, not only presenting by indiscriminate violence which by itself is

meaningless, but also by overlapping this images with others and using sound effects to convey mental states which are the root for this violence.

The main and central portion of the film is indeed a journey up the river towards Kurtz lair, being not only a physical journey towards the paradigm of evil, but also a mental journey towards " death's other realm" as the personalities of the characters change (while some others die, factor which also influences the attitudes of the remaining ones) as they get closer to their destiny. It is a sort of descent into a surreal underworld that is not only closer in the physical sense as they proceed with the journey, but that also manifests itself in the actions of the men creeping deeper into their attitudes as they go further into the jungle.

The jungle itself is mentioned to have some sort of evil persona as it " reclaimed for Kurtz" and therefore going deeper into it in a physical sense also means going deeper into the evil within. Coppola shows this gradual mental change at different stages. Firstly the incident with the playmates suggests some sort of unusual wildness invades the men at that point in the jungle. Shortly afterwards more evil acts are perpetrated, as the killing of the innocent peasants in their river boat exemplifies, though the killer is not conscious of his evil until after he committed his crime, suggesting mental confusion.

Finally, the last communal battle scene conveys an advanced state of mental and perceptive alteration by the effective use of lighting and the lack of it. Unclear sights, unclear speech and unclear situations all add to this effect. In

the context of this progression, increasing evil (from uncontrolled sexual arousal to war actions) also means increasing confusion and "moral blindness" factor which re-gauges the conscience of evil to a level in which it can be perpetrated and seen as natural, if not "correct" during that given moment.

The ending sequence is of vital importance to the message of the film as a whole. When Willard decides to finally kill Kurtz he is shown shirtless and with a camouflaged face emerging from the river, in a sort of manner that reminds us of a hunting animal, perhaps a crocodile. The following take shows him in a low angle shot, a classical means to make the focused character look powerful and menacing. The caribou is then shown as being prepared for the sacrifice, the dominating colour of this scene being the orange and yellow of fire.

Willard then reaches the base of the temple where Kurtz lives, in the background; one half of the screen shows the orange colour of the sacrifice location and the other, separated by a wall, the blue background of the night. One take after, the positions of this background colours are inverted as Willard has walked closer to the entrance: the place in which Kurtz is seen orange and yellow while the outside is seen as blue.

A clear parallel between the caribou and the Colonel is drawn at this stage and is an effective means to anticipate the nature of his death. This also shows how Willard has chosen the path of evil when presented with two options (represented by the two colours) as those who sacrifice the caribou

are in a morally unconscious state of savagery which is, as seen before, related to evil. Throughout this scene the dramatic tension is emphasised by the music which acquires a faster beat as the moment of sacrifice approaches, where it climaxes.

The parallel seen is then effectively emphasised by the simultaneous killing of both the caribou and Kurtz and by them having the same relative colours (due to the very low lighting) and size on screen. This leads us to think of the assassination of the Colonel as a sacrifice. Even though it is never clear why exactly he established that community to his cult, we can deduce that he wanted to be killed because he gained conscience of his own unfixable evil nature (probably due to his advanced education and thought capacity), unwanted factor for the perpetration of evil in the context of the film.

This is connected to the caribou sacrifice in the following way: as the caribou is paralleled to Kurtz, we can see it as his iconic representation. Furthermore, this idol of Kurtz is being sacrificed to the idol of evil (as we stated when discussing the stone face in the opening sequence) therefore the actual Colonel is being sacrificed to evil itself as he has gained a "prohibited understanding" (remarked in some way by the reporter) that obstructs his very human nature.

When finally Kurtz is shown lying on the ground saying his last words: "the horror, the horror", we get the sense that he was as defenceless and perhaps as innocent as the caribou, victim only of his own circumstances. His last words underline the evil that has been unleashed by Willard making him

changing him completely and the whole capacity for horror that human nature has. As Willard heads back to his boat he is seen standing at the gate of the temple, with an eerie and atonal music filling the silent background.

The shot portrays symmetrically a rock idol and the Captain to each side of the screen, then all the people of the community kneel. As we do not know exactly who the people kneel at because of the exact proportion of both sides of the take containing both " individuals" (although we suppose it was literally at Kurtz) we can infer that both entities have symbolically fused into a single one with Willard's passing on into evil and that the people are in fact kneeling to this conjunction.

The last shot of the film reinforces this view as Willard's face is shown in the same close-up manner as in the opening sequence but right-side up (which according to our interpretation means that Willard's natural state is now that of evil as opposed to the beginning of the film) drifting towards the rock idol's face portrayed in the same position at the right side of the screen as in the opening, meanwhile Kurtz's last words are repeated once again as both faces combine while the screen fades to black.

Ford Coppola is very successful in effectively transmitting his message using various classic and original cinematographic techniques, both visual and audio based. The intricate relationships between symbols, characters and atmospheres convey productively a shocking realistic message about human nature using a surreal ambience that by no means escapes reality, as it is set on a psychological base, in the realm of the mind where no atmosphere

can be too fantastic. Deep issues concerning human attitudes are raised which invite questioning by the spectator and overall, his method proved to be both interesting and efficient.