

The use of lighting in coppola's apocalypse now



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Following the journey of a man traveling through a river on a mission to kill an insane Colonel Kurtz, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* consist of very similar storylines. With many of the same quotes, character names, and symbols, there are numerous parallels between the two works. However, *Apocalypse Now* provides visual aspects of life on the river that *Heart of Darkness* cannot, such as set, lighting, sound effects and costumes. While he uses all of these cinematographic features along with other filmic elements, lighting is an aspect that is utilized throughout the entirety of the movie, providing a greater understanding of the effects of war. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* employs strategic lighting throughout the film in order to offer insight on the physical and emotional pain that drove soldiers to insanity during the horrors of the Vietnam War.

The opening scene of Coppola's film depicts the Vietnam landscape as one of demolition and terror as the entire terrain is illuminated by enormous fires. While in some contexts fire can be a symbol of warmth and comfort, here it is used as a destruction tactic in war. The span of trees are mere shadows behind the intensity of the fire's light, demonstrating the power that it has to affect a large space in a short time. With its harsh, orange glow, the fire gives off a sense of urgency. Even before showing any combat or dialogue, the film is able to portray the war as a highly disastrous time that would, undoubtedly, affect the lives of millions of soldiers.

Once the plot of the movie begins, Coppola uses lighting to establish Captain Willard's mental state as one of post-traumatic stress and insanity. Willard is seen pacing, drinking, doing karate-like moves, and punching a mirror in a

bedroom early on in the film. In each scene, the lights of the room are turned off and either the sunlight of the early morning or small lamps on all sides of Willard's room light the set. When the sun is shining outside and the room is dark inside, Willard is usually in his bed, lying still. This gives the illusion that Willard's world has temporarily stopped while the rest of the world continues with the day, especially since the room is still partially darkened. However, it seems that Willard is most active at night when the lamps are the source of light, further indicating his separation from reality. His karate motions are very mechanical and unnatural during these times, reflecting the artificial light of the lamps. The lamps also give a shadow to Willard's body which portray him as even more eerie and insane as he looks more like a dark figure moving rather than a human being. These lighting strategies are very fitting for this scene as they help to shape a character that has been emotionally pained by the traumas of war in the past. While the main focus of these series of scenes is clearly Willard's strange actions, the lighting aids the fact that Willard is in his own artificial world, oblivious to life outside of his room due to his past experiences with war.

Throughout the soldiers' time on the boat, the lighting also adds a majestic tone to the storyline that contrasts with the foggy sky as the men progress through the river, emphasizing the cruel, ruthless nature of life on the river. In one scene, the American boat comes across a Vietnamese boat transporting vegetables and other goods. After the Vietnamese woman on the boat insists on guarding one barrel in the back of the boat, the American soldiers proceed to violently and mercilessly kill all of them to find out that she was only protecting a small puppy. Following this massacre, the

American boat rides off into the distance with the setting sun in the background. After such a brutal attack, it seems ironic that this is the image that Coppola leaves with before fading out to a new scene. The light of the sunset reflects onto the water, leaving a peaceful image that contrasts with the incident that previously occurred. Coppola could have used this lighting mechanism to highlight that the Navy men on the Patrol Boat River are not thinking straight and that their reactions and tendencies are not matching with the tone of the war. This strategy also makes the killings seem even more savage when they are looked at side-by-side with the serene picture of the fading sun. Moreover, a similar incident occurs when the PBR is attacked by natives along the shore of the river. In this scene, however, the boat is blinded by fog surrounding the river. This overcast, hazy lighting represents chaos and confusion as the arrows fire aimlessly at the PBR and the soldiers shoot mindlessly into the forest. It reiterates the idea that life on the river is seemingly senseless as the soldiers are literally and figuratively blind to the world outside their boat as seen through the cloudy shootings. After this attack, though, Chief, an American soldier and captain of the Patrol Boat River dies. Following the painful death of being struck in the chest with spear, Chief's body is laid in the river as another setting sun brightens the background. While this sunset seems a little bit more fitting as the soldiers are putting one of their own to rest, it still highly contrasts the vicious nature of the killing and the physical pain brought upon the soldiers. The use of lighting in these sunsets is effective because it not only establishes the irony and puzzlement that war has on the soldiers, but also emphasizes the cruel deaths that many of them encounter.

The complete darkness (save for some torches and string lights) that the men faces at the Do Lung Bridge is representative of the ominous and foreboding events that they will soon experience on the island. Throughout the entire journey on the river, the lighting becomes increasingly dimmer until this moment of utter darkness, stressing the progressive danger and insanity that the Vietnam War brings. At this point in the film, the American Navy men are everything from crazy to inhuman to dead, and the darkness is a perfect representation of this descent from reality into savagery. Since they have not yet reached the final destination of island of severed heads, dangling bodies, and the insane Colonel Kurtz, there are string lights and fires still guiding the way. However, the soldiers are still mostly shadows during the scene, foreshadowing the confusion of what is to come of the final stop on the voyage. They are, literally, in the dark about the real mission of the journey - Captain Willard knows that he is on a mission to kill Kurtz, but he doesn't quite know what to expect once he reaches him, as depicted through the actual darkness on the bridge.

Once Willard reaches Kurtz, the insane captain that has been dominating the natives on an island in Vietnam, it is evident that he is also shaped by the lighting features that the film uses. Kurtz's face is never fully illuminated - he is always in some sort of shadow that covers half of his bald head. This, however, differs from Willard who is always more completely covered in the shadows of something during his talks with Kurtz. This emphasizes that, at this point, Kurtz may be more sane than Willard - he feels like he has some purpose to ruling the natives while Willard is aimlessly killing a man with whom he has never had an interaction. The lighting scheme and plot

climaxes as Willard slaughters Kurtz in a scene of complete shadows with a dim light in the background. This depicts the most psychotic part of the film as the lack of light suggests no way out of the insanity that the war has now brought upon Willard.

Apocalypse Now would not depict the Vietnam War as accurately and horrifically without the use of light features. It aids in understanding everything from chaos to pain to irony throughout the entire film and helps to demonstrate how the characters' mental states progress during the journey, ultimately proving the insanity that war brings upon soldiers who are placed in the middle of it.