



The Perception of Warfare on Society and Combatants

By Michael Sofie

Although the impressions of the Second World War and the Vietnam War are distilled to just two words, “madness, madness” in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and “horror, horror” in *Apocalypse Now*; and these motion pictures arrive at these final statements differently. Societal values that are held by the character of the civilian population and soldiers assign significance to war, which can be positive or negative. To comprehend these films the viewer is required to fully understand the historical context of the time and setting where the action unfolds.

The Bridge on the River Kwai is set in 1942 at a southern Burmese Japanese prisoner of war camp and Calcutta when the Japanese still had the advantage in the Pacific. As Boyer et.al. relate, the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway in May-June enabled “the United States regain naval superiority in the central Pacific,” and “begin the American counteroffensive” (2000:781). To further stretch the resources of the Allies, German successes in North Africa and the thrust toward the Suez Canal threatened “the British oil lifeline” (Boyer et.al.,2000:764-765). America was still reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor and war declared on Japan a mere six months before and although public opinion was favorable, the U.S. was not ready for global war.

Apocalypse Now is set in 1968 at Saigon, the Nung (Mekong) River, and Cambodia at

the height of the War in Vietnam after four years of American involvement. As Boyer et.al. comments, with the massive Tet offensive of January 31, "America's hopes for victory in Vietnam sank," and U.S. public opinion about the war was evenly split (2000:875). The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy that spring, plus college student protests and growing opposition to the war placed tremendous political pressure on President Lyndon Johnson (Boyer et.al., 2000:878). American society and the political climate were in turmoil and LBJ announced his decision not to seek reelection, so the office of President went to the republican candidate, Richard Nixon, that fall.

The central theme of a righteous war compared to an immoral conflict is demonstrated in the personalities of the film's anti-heroes, Shears in Burma and Willard in Vietnam. Shears takes advantage wherever he can; switched uniforms with an officer to get preferential treatment in Calcutta, and cavorts with a nurse as he seeks a medical discharge. When his actual identity is uncovered by Force 316 and he is requested to join the mission back to the Kwai, he tries several times to discount his value to the team, and is finally coerced into volunteering. Shears pleads with Warden, "Major, I just got out of there. My escape was a miracle and now you want me to go back. Don't be ridiculous." When Warden is injured on the trek back upriver, Shears begrudgingly takes over command and relinquishes it just as quickly. Back to his womanizing ways he even romances one of the women porters, who bathe him in the river. On the trail Shears has several profound statements to Warden that may sum him up, "I don't care about your rules," and "the only important thing is how to live like a human being." Later, he is reminded of Warden's remark, "there is always the unexpected, isn't there?" as when he was attacked in the Botanical Garden as part of a

training exercise. At the critical moment that the PE charges are discovered, he finally takes responsibility, swims across the river to attempt to intercept Nicholson, and is fatally wounded by a poor long-range rifle shot from Warden.

Willard on the other hand is willing to undertake the mission to assassinate the rebel Kurtz, but is a debauched, drunken, and self-destructive individual that can only exist in the chaos of Vietnam and the jungle. When he is questioned about his previous assignments by the CIA man and his superiors, Willard insists, "I am not deposed to discuss previous missions." He is aloof and confident about his abilities and is intrigued by the apparent contradictions of Kurtz's military record, his recent behavior, and the order to "Terminate with extreme prejudice." In the trip upriver Willard continues to digest Kurtz's dossier and is not fazed by the situations he and the boat crew encounter in his single-minded focus on his mission. The attack by the surfing enthusiast, Lt. Colonel Kilgore, on a village; the arrival at U.S.O. Show at the Hau Phat supply Depot and the out of control soldiers; the killing of the family in the sampan; and their final destination of Kurtz's empire are all experienced by Willard with no emotion. He reveals to Chef, the substitute boat captain, his real mission, "My mission is to make it up to Cambodia. There is a Green Beret Captain up there who's gone insane. I'm supposed to kill him." He just as well could be talking about Shears going up the Kwai to eventually kill Lt. Colonel Nicholson. In the somewhat ambiguous dénouement, it is unclear whether Willard will go back down river with Kurtz's documents after his killing to exonerate or leave the empire intact. In keeping with his character, I believe that he is so thoroughly corrupt, immoral, and that he can never return to civilization.

Although much of the morality of these two films is invested in the narrators, the struggle of the primary characters of Saito and Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River*

Kwai and schizophrenic personality of Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* serve to define the basic human values of good and evil. Saito and Nicholson have so much pride and self-worth built into their being that they are both willing to die to preserve those values. The perseverance of Nicholson in the “oven,” to overpower the camp authority, and the commission of ritual suicide for honor by Saito emphasize their symbiotic relationship. Colonel Saito desperately needs British cooperation to complete the bridge on time and Nicholson firmly believes in that cooperation, the men under his command will become fit and well-treated. The irony of the picture is the submission and detachment of Saito as he lets Nicholson take over design, construction, and logistics of the railway bridge and views the progress with binoculars. The other ironic moment occurs when they both admire the beauty of finished structure; Saito planning suicide the next day and Nicholson reminiscing about his life as a soldier, “it’s been a good life....I wouldn’t have it any other way. But there are times when suddenly you realize you’re nearer the end than the beginning. And you wonder, you ask yourself, what the sum total of your life represents. What difference your being there at any time made to anything. Hardly made a difference at all, really.” It is significant of that scene is when drops his swagger stick as a symbol of losing his grip on reality. In other scenes he also admonishes the doctor, “Clipton, there are sometimes I don’t understand you,” because they do not share the same army philosophy.

Kurtz is at once a literate and educated man, but also a ruthless killer and overlord of a savage empire. The crazy photojournalist tells Willard, “You don’t talk to the Colonel, well, you listen to him. The man’s enlarged my mind. He’s a poet-warrior in the classic sense...he can be terrible and he can be mean and he can be right. He’s fighting the war....You don’t judge the Colonel.” Willard confronts Kurtz who asks him if

he is an assassin and he replies that he is a soldier and to that Kurtz puts him in his place, "You're neither. You're an errant boy, sent by grocery clerks to collect the bill." Later Kurtz explains his belief that, "you have no right to call me a murderer. You have the right to kill me...but you have no right to judge me." The symbolic killing of Kurtz coincides with the ritual sacrifice of a water buffalo to the gods.

Civilians are portrayed as chattel to provide a means to the end. In *Apocalypse Now*, you cannot distinguish the Vietcong from the villagers and people are killed either for no reason, indiscriminately, and without much emotion as in the Mobile Calvary helicopter attack and the napalm strike. The U.S.O. show replete with the sexual symbol of women, Playboy Bunnies, was chosen to show the degradation of females in the culture of war; few other scenes are offered with women in the foreground. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* portrays the porters as no more than pack animals and a carefree dalliance, other than the scene where they help Warden with the mortar.

In these films the enemy is portrayed as almost opposites; the Japanese soldiers as crude, dumb, and bumbling, but in charge, and the Vietcong as resourceful, smart, and able to run circles around the much better equipped Americans. Kurtz's subjects are portrayed as a menace, but never articulated as an enemy by deeds but only by the heads displayed. The character of Colonel Saito is drawn in sympathy with his frustration of not only told to be an engineer and not an artist by his father, but in the execution of his responsibilities. He and Lt. Colonel Nicholson could both savor enjoy the beauty of the finished bridge and the glory of it for the future "600 years." Saito's pending suicide would not be at his own hand to salvage his honor, but by the Canadian Joyce, who had never killed before.

Since Willard and Shears are both anti-heroes, that fact belies the issue of heroism. Shears is a reluctant hero and when the need arises to save the mission of blowing up the bridge, he unflinchingly swims across the river without concern for his own life. Joyce is also heroic in finally coming out of his hiding place and killing Saito. Major Warden is heroic in continuing on when wounded; Nicholson is a hero to his men for standing up to Saito and championing their welfare; and Saito loses face in his submission to the British officers, thus not a hero to his men. Willard, however, is dead set on completing his assignment and is in danger, but he is driven by other demons to kill Kurtz without understanding the ethical and moral complications. The other soldiers and sailors in *Apocalypse Now* are flat, static characters and will do whatever it takes to survive, right or wrong. Even Kurtz is an enigmatic character that we are not given the right information to understand. The values of heroism present in the Second World War film are missing in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic, due in some part to his adaptation of Joseph Conrad's book , Heart of Darkness and the difficulty in transporting 1902 characters and situations to 1968.

Victory could be gauged by the success of completing the given assignment, but it is unpalatable in 1968 with the loss of the moral conviction of all involved. Although the 1942 struggle was successfully won, Nicholson was the big loser because pride and other motives blinded him to the fact that he was assisting the enemy. If victory and defeat are measured by the loss of lives for the cause, then the Japanese and Vietcong are clearly the winners in these films. With maximum hindsight Coppola bludgeons the viewer with the causes and realities of the stalemate of the War in Vietnam. David Lean handles the material much more reverently and takes time to flesh out his characters by

showing and not telling. Therein the directors are diametrically opposite in the film techniques of lighting and cinematography.

Lean uses the long shots to detach the viewer from the action and subtlety enhance the “madness” of what transpired. He also employs quick short cuts from one scene to the other to build the suspense, for example, as the men are setting the charges under the bridge and the scene reverts to the Japanese sentries above. The flying bird at the beginning and end of the film symbolize freedom, whereas the jungle sounds or their absence signifies danger.

The subtle pacing and camera work by Lean expertly engages the viewer. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai* the viewer is an observer of all that transpires on both sides of the conflict, whereas in *Apocalypse Now* rigidly examine everything from the American viewpoint. Coppola uses light, shadow, and darkness in a heavy-handed manner; from the time the boat is dropped in the river, the scenes become darker and darker until all we see is partial faces lit with reflected light at Kurtz’s compound. Darkness symbolizes death and Willard’s increasingly dark psyche as they journey up river. The stark lighting of the U.S.O. show dramatizes the absurdity of the participants who are all so far from home. Coppola’s use of the 1960’s music of the Doors, Stones, and other rockers, and his incessant use of pyrotechnics and colored smoke flares add to the unearthly foreignness of the setting, almost to the point of repugnancy. The surfing scene, the drug request for “Panama Red” at the supply depot, the arrival of the mail boat, the innocent puppy, the Church bell tolling, and sacrifice of the water buffalo all contribute to the ridiculousness of the war.

War is hell, but the American people chose to remember past wars differently; the Second World War which is generations removed, was the good war for the

important values of liberty and freedom. Vietnam, an unresolved conflict which divided and tore the country apart, is still too fresh in memory; it still resonates in families today and serves to remind us not to meddle in regional affairs. America fought against nationalistic Fascists in the Second World War to save the world, whereas, the United States was involved in southeast Asia for more imperialistic ideals. Revisionist historians may view the Vietnam War more favorable in the future, but they will have to weight the facts, the American consciousness, and prevailing world opinion.

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