

FAR FROM HEAVEN

REGARDED AS ONE OF THE GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME, FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S VIETNAM WAR EPIC APOCALYPSE NOW RAN MASSIVELY OVER BUDGET, SENT ITS CAST TO THE EDGE OF INSANITY AND LOOKED LIKE IT WOULD NEVER BE COMPLETED. BUT WHAT IS THE REAL LEGACY OF COPPOLA'S OWN HEART OF DARKNESS? THIRTY YEARS ON, ONELIFE TRAVELS TO THE PHILIPPINES TO FIND OUT

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'THIS IS A 20 MILLION DOLLAR DISASTER. WHY WON'T ANYONE BELIEVE ME? I'M THINKING OF SHOOTING MYSELF.'

FRANCIS COPPOLA

On the murky brown river that runs from Pagsanjan Falls in the Philippines there is a particular bend. Every few minutes, boatloads of tourists paddle noisily by in plastic canoes, but no one takes any notice of this spot, and it's not hard to see why. There is nothing here but a small tourist office, a few grimy resort villas and a stray yellow dog stretching in the sun. You'd be excused for thinking the most exciting thing ever to happen here would be the rancour of disappointed package holidaymakers demanding their money back. But you'd be wrong. Rewind about 30 years and this unremarkable river bend was the centre of the cinematic world, engulfed in the explosive, sky-scorching finale of one of the most expensive, traumatic and spectacular film productions ever attempted.

Apocalypse Now. Take a look at any list of 'best films ever' and this Vietnam epic will be there, I guarantee it. It follows the story of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), a veteran army assassin sent on a patrol boat up the Nung River to find and eliminate Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) – who has gone AWOL and gone insane. Made by director Francis Coppola riding high on the success of his Godfather movies, and starring a cast that reads like a who's who of the 1970s Hollywood A-list, its standout action sequences, memorable performances and psychedelic soundtrack led it to achieve a slew of awards and the love of a movie-going generation.

The production caused excitement from its very inception. An anti-Vietnam film, controversial in a divided post-war America, it was to be based on Joseph Conrad's classic *Heart of Darkness* – a text that conventional wisdom dictated could not be adapted to the big screen. But these concerns aside, filming was set to be a breeze. The Philippines was chosen as a scenically correct and rather less unstable substitute for Vietnam. There would be three months of shooting – four at the most – and the company would return victorious to San Francisco to quaff cocktails and await their Oscar nominations. That was the plan.

But the gods of cinema did not smile on Coppola's foray into the jungle and sent instead a mighty host of calamities that would see the hapless crew battling on set for over 14 months. Civil uprisings, the threat of kidnap by rebels and typhoons wiping out million-dollar sets might be enough to kneecap any production. But add to that Martin Sheen collapsing with a heart attack, a tubby Marlon Brando refusing to cooperate, and a budget that exploded from US\$13 million to an alarming \$31 million – much of that Coppola's own money. Perhaps not surprisingly, making *Apocalypse Now* drove Coppola close to the insanity he was trying to draw from the recalcitrant Brando. He called it 'The Idiodysey'. The cheekier monkeys among the Hollywood press dubbed it 'Apocalypse Later'.

Shelfloads of articles, books and even an award-winning documentary film have since emerged, covering every aspect of Hollywood's big

adventure in the Filipino wilds. But what's rarely mentioned in the well-thumbed history of this film is the experience of the thousands of people behind the scenes who really made it all happen – the local Filipinos. After all, somebody had to build the sets and fly the helicopters and machete the livestock and sit in boxes underground to drip and loll about as Kurtz's severed heads. What about those whose blood, sweat and tears brought *Apocalypse Now* its full-scale grandeur?

'It changed my life, there's no doubt about it,' Jun Juban tells me as we sit down for a meal in Manila's posh Bonifacio High Street. 'It was my first movie so nothing can match it for me – and afterward, nothing was ever the same.'

Juban is one of the Philippines' most successful producers, having worked locally for decades on international film projects including Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Thirteen Days*. He has a signed *Platoon* poster with a personal message from Oliver Stone: 'To Jun, who made the impossible happen'. He's currently busy filming a new series of *Survivor* for Belgian television, but has squeezed me into his schedule to talk about his *Apocalypse Now* experience, as he says, '30 years and 50 pounds ago'.

'I was 15,' he says, 'and my job was to look after the helicopter pilots, making sure they were fed and on set when they needed to be. But my brother was the main Filipino production assistant, so I saw it all – the best and worst of human nature; what makes a film brilliant or a total disaster.'

On set, tales of Coppola's flamboyant artistic temperament were legendary. 'Every day we had a walkie talkie count,' Juban remembers. 'Coppola had a habit of getting so frustrated that he would throw his walkie talkie into the sea or out of a helicopter. The crew had a big chalkboard where we would make bets on how many he would break or lose. "We're on 15 now," we'd say. "How about tomorrow – up to 17? What do you think?"'

Money was no object, Juban recalls. 'If Coppola shouted "Bring me a pink elephant!" we were told to say "Sure, it's coming," and figure out later how we would actually get it. You could not say no to him,' he says.

He takes a moment to polish off a mouthful of cheeseburger. 'If I'd been the producer, I'd have strangled him a million times,' he says, laughing. 'But he's an artist. One of the best Hollywood ever saw. And you have to have director's prerogatives – just look at what he achieved with *Apocalypse Now*. It's unbeatable. I don't think you could question what he did.'

Right page, clockwise from top: Martin Sheen as Willard getting roughed up by Kurtz's men; Brando and Coppola could not agree on the best way to play the character of Kurtz – the debate raged for three days before Brando admitted he had not even read *Heart of Darkness*, the book that the film was based on; hundreds of tribal extras give an eerie welcome to Kurtz's lair; Dennis Hopper on set; Coppola himself was driven to near-madness during the production





Left: there is almost no trace of the immense Kurtz compound that dominated this location over 30 years ago. Below: the Discovery 3 makes its way through the picturesque palm forests of Laguna. Right: Martin Sheen's Willard prepares to assassinate Kurtz at the climax of the film



“THE HORROR, THE HORROR.” COLONEL KURTZ

Manila is known for its ridiculous traffic, and this morning it does not disappoint. Our guide Dennis suggests that to beat the worst of it, we leave at 6.30am. It's now 6.35 and we're already stuck in a bumper-to-bumper snarl. We're on our way to a small tourist town called Pagsanjan to see where the most intense period of *Apocalypse Now* filming took place, and to investigate a mysterious local 'curse' involving the production crew, a truckload of dynamite and a family of dwarves...

The Discovery 3 manoeuvres carefully between carbon-choked lanes through streets that are by turns lined with imposing glass skyscrapers and pungent, scrap-strewn slums. After about two hours driving south, we turn off the main road and take the scenic route along the mountain road and down through the coconut farms of Laguna into Pagsanjan.

This whole area provided a number of locations for *Apocalypse Now*, but most notable of all was the monumental 'Kurtz compound', a full-scale Cambodian temple reminiscent of Angkor Wat built with huge 300-pound adobe blocks by hundreds of local builders.

The area is now no more than the unremarkable river bend you might recall from the start of the story. A local mechanic by the name of Argel Ual and his father Albert show me around the site, pointing out the only two pieces of evidence that Hollywood ever came to town: a small pinkish patch of clay from a submerged adobe block, and the crew toilet. Argel is now 47 and was a schoolboy of 15 when he experienced his first and only brush

with stardom – as a loincloth-wearing extra on the set of *Apocalypse Now*. 'Most of the town worked on the film,' he recalls, 'and everyone at school wanted to work as an extra, but most of them were too embarrassed to wear a loin cloth.' He grins. 'I wasn't. It was fun – and good pay, too.'

Diverted though I am by a hint of adobe and a public toilet, I'm keen to know more about the so-called 'curse of *Apocalypse Now*'.

'Ah yes,' Albert says. 'Well, the problem was that they used real dead bodies on the set. And they say that when the Kurtz compound was blown up, a family of dwarves was killed. So because of that, a shaman said that there was a curse on everybody associated with the film.'

The use of real cadavers has been documented (Coppola's wife Eleanor wrote in her diary that she had asked a prop man about this, and he replied: 'The script says "a pile of burning bodies"; it doesn't say "a pile of burning dummies"!'), but no record of a dwarf family was ever found. Still, Coppola may well have felt cursed as he sank further and further into debt.

Juban himself remembers this shaman's pronouncement keenly, as it affected him very personally. In 1978, after the filming of *Apocalypse Now*, his brother Dennis was killed in a helicopter crash on the site of the Kurtz compound. 'There were no survivors from the crash, so I can only surmise that he was showing them the movie site when they hit a high-tension wire and went down,' Juban said. 'Also, during production the son of one of the US team was killed in the area. To me it was kind of odd.'



“I LOVE THE SMELL OF NAPALM IN THE MORNING.” COLONEL KILGORE

When Robert Duvall uttered those immortal words, he could not have known that he was making an addition to the ‘famous movie phrase’ hall of fame. And he said it right here, on the beach at Sabang Bay in the small coastal town of Baler, where the Aguang River meets the sea.

Back then, this spot was known as Kagewad, but today it’s Charlie’s Point. ‘You know that line in the film?’ Noel Dulay of Baler Tourism asks. ‘Where they say “That’s Charlie’s Point,” and Kilgore says, “Charlie don’t surf!” After that, the locals renamed it in honour of the film.’

Baler is a nine-hour drive northeast of Manila via a thin, lurching track through the Aurora mountains. It’s difficult to see how all the kit that comes with a big Hollywood film could be transported along this road – especially when we pass a fish truck stranded in a tough river crossing along the way (of course, we used the Discovery 3’s winch to help). But transport it they did, making Baler a major centre of production for the film.

If you remember one scene from *Apocalypse Now*, you remember the Baler scene: 14 Huey helicopters appear in formation over the sea as the rousing climax of Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ blasts out of tinny speakers. ‘I use Wagner – scares the hell out of them,’ Kilgore bellows. ‘My boys love it!’ Interestingly, when the scene was being filmed, right at the moment when the light was perfect and the helicopters were in formation and cameras were rolling, the Hueys were suddenly called away to fight rebels in the south, leaving the crew open-mouthed (and presumably resulting in the death of at least one walkie talkie). The helicopters were on loan, you see, from the Filipino Air Force.

This incident was highlighted in the award-winning ‘making-of’ documentary, *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, as an

example of the production’s trials. But it may not have been the whole story, according to Jun Juban. ‘As far as I’m concerned that was pretty unfair,’ he said. ‘There were many times when we were all ready and waiting with choppers standing by, and we would sit around for days because Coppola wasn’t ready to film. Then there is one occasion where they have to be taken away. Why highlight that one incident?’

Compared to Pagsanjan, the legacy of *Apocalypse Now* on Baler is much clearer to see – and it’s not just in the name of Charlie’s Point. After Hollywood moved on south, the surfboards that were used in the filming were left behind, starting a local craze and creating an entire industry. Charles ‘Mac’ Ritual from the local surfing association fills me in. ‘The locals had been interested in surfing for a while, but had no boards,’ he says. ‘So they would use whatever they could to get the same effect, like bits of Styrofoam. Then when the production left behind those boards, people could actually learn properly for the first time, and it took off.’

We wander down to the lifeguards’ tower, where a small cluster of drink stalls and surf shops face onto the beach. Sabang Bay is grey-sanded and crescent shaped, cupped on either side by the Sierra Madre Mountains dropping down to the coast, and it’s a rare spot for surfing, Mac tells me. ‘Usually there is just a reef break or a beach break, but here we have both.’ Sure enough, it’s mid-morning and the sea before me is filled with small figures riding the waves – at least a dozen locals, and more than a few foreigners.

‘Surfing is by far the biggest factor in bringing tourists to Baler,’ he says. ‘We are the birthplace of Filipino surfing, I’m proud to say. And if it weren’t for *Apocalypse*, maybe that wouldn’t have happened.’



Left page: Robert Duvall makes film history on the beach at Sabang Bay, Baler. This page, from top: a young member of the ‘Baler Boys’ surf gang takes a moment away from the waves; the Discovery 3 drives by one of cinema’s most famous spots: Charlie’s Point, where the film’s famous helicopter bombardment took place



“THESE ARE ALL KURTZ’S CHILDREN, AS FAR AS YOU CAN SEE.”

PHOTOJOURNALIST

Wise visitors to the Cordillera region would once come armed or, better still, avoid the area altogether. The local tribe – the Ifugao – were notorious headhunters, who, when they weren’t tending their rice crops, were hacking off heads in the name of vengeful ancestors. Their headhunting ways continued until well into the 20th century, making this a ‘tread very carefully’ zone as late as the 1960s. As we near Banaue, it appears that the formidable Ifugao reputation has long been left behind: bright ‘Welcome’ signs hail our approach and eager-faced roadside stall keepers wave genuine Ifugao woodcraft in our Discovery 3’s wake.

Banaue is a busy little town with a humming marketplace, several hotels and inns, and seemingly hundreds of ‘trikes’, the motorbike-and-sidecar taxis used as a popular form of public transport. (Very popular, in fact – we see one three-seat trike carrying eight passengers. Our guide Dennis tells us this is nothing – they often hold up to 12.) Tourists come here to view the spectacular rice terraces, hand-hewn from the mountainsides by the Ifugao over two millennia. But when a team from *Apocalypse Now* came here in 1976, it was not the stunning location they were scouting for...

The original screenplay of *Apocalypse Now* by John Milius describes the mysterious ‘Montagnards’ thus: ‘a people more primitive and more savagely barbaric than any seen since the time of Captain Cook’.

Hundreds of these tribal people were required to act as Kurtz’s Cambodian warriors. So to achieve this effect, did Coppola merely find some local extras, dress them in tribal clothing and get on with the production? Did he hell. That would have been far too easy. A young production assistant called Eva Gardos was tasked with finding a real

Filipino tribe and convincing hundreds of them to come to live at the set for three months. ‘It has to be real, it has to smell real,’ Coppola directed.

A search up and down the Philippines revealed the Ifugao to be the perfect candidates. They lived in native huts, wore traditional costume and still clung to their (less murderous) tribal customs. So in July 1976, a convoy of army trucks packed with bewildered Ifugao arrived at the set in Pagsanjan. They built traditional nipa huts, kept livestock, weaved baskets and generally provided all the primitive colour – and odour – that the production might require.

Given the close-knit community in Banaue, it’s not long before I track down the woman I am here to see. Her name is Lily Luglug, a diminutive Ifugao lady with a bright smile who had the unenviable task of convincing the local people to embark on this very strange adventure, and looking after them on set. ‘At first, the people were hesitant,’ she tells me when we meet in the foyer of the Banaue Hotel. ‘They said it was too far, and who would take care of their homes, feed their animals, tend the rice fields? We really had to convince them. So we recruited our own families as an example, and it went from there.’

On her lap is a worn blue album full of photographs showing Lily (at age 26, heavily pregnant with her second of eight children) with members of the cast, living in their special on-set village and chatting with Coppola. ‘It truly was an adventure,’ she continues. ‘People here always say “Why can’t that thing be repeated?” and reminisce. They also say we should get together and watch the movie, because about two thirds of the Ifugao people who took part have never actually seen the film.’



Left page: hundreds of Ifugao people appear for their big onscreen moment at the climax of the film. This page, clockwise from top: the extraordinary rice terraces of this region cover 155 square miles and took over 2,000 years to create; local resident Martin Abigat displays the bones of his grandfather, kept bundled in the house as part of an ancient Ifugao ritual; 85-year-old Ba’a Cabigat is now retired after decades of work on the rice fields



Left: Marcos Batton, the last Ifugao priest left from the five who conducted the famous 'carabao sacrifice' scene in *Apocalypse Now*. Above: Nicole, aged four, keeps an eye on her parents' roadside stall in Banaue. Above right: the Discovery 3 is flanked by the Philippines' favourite form of public transport, each of which is unique and highly decorated with everything from religious figures and dragons to superheroes and scantily clad women

As it turned out, casting the Ifugao was not a frivolous extravagance on the part of Coppola, but a masterstroke that would come to shape the climax of *Apocalypse Now*. As the shoot drew to a close, Coppola still had no idea how he was going to finish the film. By chance, one day he was invited to watch an Ifugao ritual where a carabao (a local water buffalo) was cut down with machetes, and he had a flash of inspiration. He would film the Ifugaos performing their ceremony and cut the footage into the shots of Willard assassinating Kurtz to heighten the horror of the act...

We hear of a local man who not only appeared as a chanting 'Montagnard' holy man in this scene, but who is also a real *mumbaki* (Ifugao priest) to his local district of Bocos and still presides over the rituals today. I know he must be an elderly man – he was in his fifties in 1976 – but I am shocked when I meet Marcos Batton.

His mouth is partly caved in through decades of chewing 'paan' (a toxic mix of chewing tobacco, betel nut and slaked lime), and his feet deformed, with toes splayed out and curved grotesquely inward like the legs of a dead spider. This trait, my Ifugao guide Henry tells me, is common in older people of this region, resulting from a lifetime of walking the rice paddies and never wearing shoes. 'We call it *ba-eng*,' Henry murmurs discreetly, 'it actually helps you walk on the rice fields – it allows you to hold the earth like a claw.'

Despite his age, Marcos is amazingly spry, with a cheeky cackle and a definite twinkle in his good eye. '*Apocalypse Now!*' he says, 'What a good time that was. I was a warrior!' He mimes shooting an AK47 and laughs again. He tells us how he once read the bile of a pig to divine Coppola's fortune, and is now the only one left of the five *mumbaki* who appeared in the film. So what did he make of the strange request to be part of the film? 'When they came up here,' he says, 'they told me I had to go to Pagsanjan. I said, "What is this Pagsanjan? Let's go! Sounds like an adventure!"'

In 1976, Eleanor Coppola wrote in her diary: 'Everyone who has come out here to the Philippines seems to be going through something which is affecting them profoundly, changing their perspective about the world

or themselves.' Over 30 years on, there is little outward evidence that *Apocalypse Now* has left a corresponding mark on the Philippines itself. There are no 'Apocalypse' cafés, no cheap 'napalm slogan' t-shirts being hawked, no cheesy movie location tours. *Apocalypse Now* remains a must-see film throughout the Western world, yet there's no sign of any Middle Earth-like influx of tourists. In fact, there's almost nothing here to show that Coppola and his increasingly un-merry band ever set foot in the place.

Scratch a little below the surface, however, and it soon becomes clear that the mighty production did leave its mark, but it left it, as my friend Mr Dulay from Baler put it, 'only in the hearts and minds of the people', whether it was adding curses to local folklore, kick-starting a surfing craze or broadening the horizons of these isolated mountain people.

While we photograph Marcos, his son José stands under the eaves of a nearby nipa hut, chewing paan. He was 13 in 1976 and took a year off school to take part in the production. 'Before the film,' he says, 'I knew only rice terraces and mountains. There were no roads – you had to walk everywhere on foot – and life was only working in the fields and carrying wood. But then Coppola took us to Pagsanjan and I saw the big river and the town, and rode in a boat and on a truck. It was amazing to me.'

I ask him what legacy the film has left with him, 30 years on. 'Sometimes I meet up with people today that worked on *Apocalypse Now*,' he says, 'and we talk about how exciting it was to go so far from home. Those of us that took part were like adventurers.' He grins and expertly spits a brown squirt of tobacco. 'We became men of the world.' 



JUNGLE FEVER
 To celebrate the 30th anniversary of Coppola's Vietnam epic, a new version of the film has been released: *Apocalypse Now: The Complete Dossier*. Intended for true fans, it includes the original 1979 version, plus Coppola's extended version.
www.amazon.co.uk

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