

Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 25: Brando's Improv



Forward

By **CINEMATYLER**

Thanks so much for supporting the channel! I've been waiting a long time to make this episode because I find Brando's process really interesting. Also—sorry if I ruined The Godfather for anyone by pointing out that Brando may have been reading cue cards. I don't know if every time he looks offscreen he's looking at a cue card, but according to Coppola, that's how Brando worked. So it's very possible that literally every time he looks off camera, that's what he's doing.

One of the reasons this episode stood out to me is because of the situation Coppola was in. He had full creative control, he financed the movie himself, and

he had access to a lot of resources. He was also open to changing the script. In fact, part of the plan was to use the script as a kind of loose structure, and let the actual production and Coppola's thoughts during the shoot help shape the story.

That led to one of the most interesting things I've ever seen happen in a movie. There was a kind of collision between Coppola and Brando. Brando already needed to have control over his performances. He was in a period where he didn't really have to do anything he didn't want to do. He wasn't even sure he wanted to act anymore.



But Coppola offered him enough money to support his lifestyle for just three weeks of work, Monday through Friday. And I have to imagine that on some level, Brando felt like he owed Coppola a little—The Godfather had pulled him out of a career slump and made him a big deal again.

So in a way, Brando became the fourth writer of the movie—after John Milius, Coppola, and Michael Herr. He wrote his character into the story that already existed. I find that completely fascinating. I don't know of another time that's ever really happened.

What ended up happening is that Brando came onto the movie basically to improvise the ending. And because of the way Coppola worked, this became possibly the most interesting role of Brando's career. He had to be so inside the character that he was helping create the story as the character. That's something even the most method actors don't usually get to do, since they're stuck to a script no matter how committed they are.

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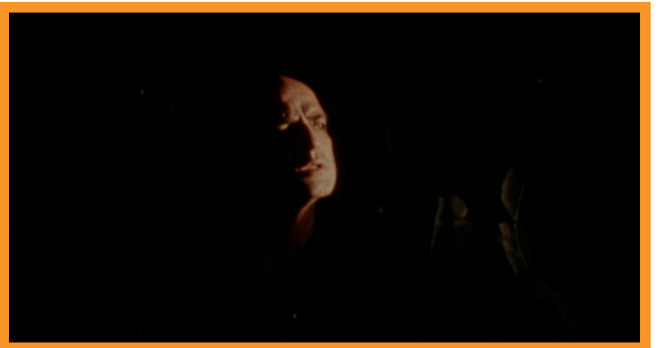
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CHARACTERS



Francis Ford Coppola:

The Hero. A director coming off the massive success of *The Conversation* and *The Godfather* parts I and II is about to embark on a journey that will test his limits—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Will he change the film industry? Will he survive?



Marlon Brando:

The Mega-Star. Brando's career leading up to *Apocalypse Now* left him jaded with the industry and acting in general. With a string of paycheck movies under his belt, Coppola would offer the biggest paycheck yet for the least amount of work. Coppola wasn't sure what he wanted to do with the character that the entire story led to. Could Brando save the ending of the movie?



Jerry Zeisler (Assistant Director):

The Left-Hand. Along with playing one of the most mysterious characters in the movie, Zeisler would assist Coppola in completing his vision. He would give everything to the project, including giving up his chance to rest by staying behind during the hiatus to make sure the production was getting back on its feet.



Vittorio Storaro (Cinematographer):

The Genius. An Italian cinematographer apprehensively accepts perhaps the most important role on this team—capturing the images that will tell this epic story. A true student of light and color, Storaro must bring these grand ideas into reality. Failure would bring a potential end to Coppola's career. Can he do it?

The Hollow Men

BY T.S. ELIOT

It was also really interesting to look deeper into T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* as part of understanding *Apocalypse Now*.

The poem fits really well with the story. But it's not just a good fit—it also connects directly to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Eliot even references *Heart of Darkness* in the epigraph.

The poem feels like a way of explaining Kurtz and what the movie is trying to say overall. It's especially interesting when you apply it to warfare. On one hand, you could say the military is taking action. But on the other hand, you could say it's full of hollow men—people shaped by a society that would send them to die, no matter the reason.

And when you think about the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese were much more committed to their cause. They were more willing to die for it. They were more willing to do whatever was necessary to win.

It also made me think about the kind of warmongering we see in America today. I kept thinking of this quote from Ronald Reagan: "Never again should we send our young men to fight and die for a war that their country won't allow them to win." On one hand, it sounds like he's saying young soldiers shouldn't be treated as disposable. But it also seems like he's missing the point—that to win, you'd have to be willing to totally destroy the enemy.

The Hollow Men

Mistah Kurtz—he dead
A penny for the Old Guy

I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom

The Hollow Men

BY T.S. ELIOT

These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer-

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this

In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

The Hollow Men

BY T.S. ELIOT

V

Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

Behind the Hollow Men

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* is a dark, powerful poem about emptiness, fear, and the collapse of meaning in the modern world. It's not always easy to follow, but when you break it down, it becomes clear that Eliot is showing us a world filled with people who have lost their purpose.

The poem is about people Eliot calls "hollow men"—they look alive but are emotionally and spiritually empty. They have no strong beliefs, no sense of direction, and no real voice. They go through life whispering, leaning on each other for support, but never acting with courage or clarity.

Eliot uses the image of scarecrows—stuffed figures with heads full of straw—to describe them. He writes:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

These men aren't evil, but they're paralyzed by fear and confusion. They don't stand for anything, and they avoid anything that might force them to face the truth about themselves.

The poem starts with two strange lines:

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.
A penny for the Old Guy.

These are references. The first is from *Heart of Darkness*, a book by Joseph Conrad about a man named Kurtz who becomes a cruel, hollow version of himself while leading a violent mission in the Congo. Eliot uses Kurtz as a symbol of someone who had power and intelligence but lost all moral

grounding.

The second line is from Guy Fawkes Night in England, when children ask for money to build a straw figure to burn in honor of a failed revolutionary. Together, these two lines hint at the poem's big theme: hollow men as burned-out leaders, empty heroes, or failed revolutionaries.

Eliot paints the hollow men as figures who are physically and morally weak. They have no real voices. They whisper. Their heads are full of straw. They don't speak honestly or act boldly. Even when they are together, they can't communicate. Eliot writes:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless

These are people who have lost their connection to tradition, religion, and morality. They exist in a kind of spiritual wasteland.

Eliot talks about different "kingdoms" in the poem. "Death's dream kingdom" seems to represent a kind of afterlife—or maybe a place where truth and clarity exist. The hollow men are afraid of it. They don't want to face judgment or reality, so they wear "deliberate disguises"—like a "rat's coat" or "crowskin." These details make them look like scarecrows or people stuck in old rituals.

Yes. Eliot includes pieces of the Lord's Prayer, but the hollow men can't finish it. They start to say "For Thine is the Kingdom..." but the lines trail off. This shows how far they've drifted from faith, hope,

Behind the Hollow Men

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

or spiritual strength. They want to reach out to something greater—but they can't.

The poem ends with one of the most quoted lines in modern literature:

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Instead of imagining the end of the world as loud and dramatic, Eliot says it might come quietly—because people like the hollow men won't stand up, fight back, or do anything at all. The line is haunting because it feels real. The end won't be a grand explosion—it'll just fizzle out.

Here are some cool facts that help explain the poem's impact:

- Eliot originally wanted to quote Heart of Darkness in *The Waste Land*, but poet Ezra Pound told him Conrad wasn't "important enough." He saved it for *The Hollow Men*.

- "A penny for the Old Guy" connects the hollow men to the tradition of burning straw effigies—literally, stuffed figures.

- The poem includes a twisted version of a children's rhyme: "Here we go round the prickly pear." The prickly pear replaces a healthy bush with a dry desert plant—symbolizing a dead world.

- "Life is very long," another line in the poem, is a quote from another Joseph Conrad story, where a man is kept alive just to suffer longer.

- The phrase "Falls the Shadow" appears again and again, showing how something always gets in the way—between thought and action, love and connection, life and meaning.

The Hollow Men is about what happens when people lose their way. They follow orders. They avoid truth. They pretend to be strong, but inside, they're full of straw. Eliot's poem is a warning: if we don't hold onto meaning, purpose, or faith, we'll end up whispering in the dark—watching the world end not with a bang, but with a whimper.



Brando's Version

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

What follows is an overview of what Brando wrote in his autobiography—*Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me*—about his experiences working on *Apocalypse Now*. As you'll see, it is very different than Coppola's and many of the crewmembers' accounts of what happened.

When Brando arrived in the Philippines to shoot *Apocalypse Now*, he found Coppola anxious and overwhelmed. The production was falling apart, the script didn't make sense, and it barely resembled *Heart of Darkness*.

Brando claimed he urged Coppola to return to the original *Heart of Darkness* story, saying, "You have me for a certain number of weeks and I'll do the best I can, but I think you're making an enormous error." He wanted the film to follow Marlow's journey to find Kurtz, an idealist who had become a remote, haunted figure involved in "unspeakable rites."

This directly contradicts Coppola's account, where he said Brando hadn't read the book and kept rejecting its ideas—until finally reading it on location and embracing the character.

Brando thought the original script portrayed Kurtz as a cliché—a fat, drunken, immoral caricature pulled from a hundred other movies. The character had about thirty pages of dialogue that, in his view, went nowhere. He found the script idiotic but didn't say that directly to Coppola. Instead, he took a softer approach, telling him, "This may be all right the way you're going to do it, but I think we're missing a bet by not changing it."

Brando told Coppola that in *Heart of Darkness*,

Kurtz is a mythic, larger-than-life figure—mysterious, distant, and mostly unseen. What makes the story powerful, he argued, is that people talk about Kurtz endlessly without the reader ever meeting him until the end. He suggested the film do the same: keep Kurtz in the background, let him build in the audience's mind, and only reveal him at the end as the "heart of the *Heart of Darkness*."

Brando said Willard's journey should be filled with uncertainty and fear—he shouldn't know what he'll find. As he moves upriver, both he and the audience grow more anxious. By the time he reaches Kurtz, worn down and unsure if he'll survive, Kurtz can fully embody evil. Brando warned that sticking to the original script would kill the mystery around Kurtz—because what's truly ominous should stay unseen. He offered to rewrite the script using the book's structure, and Coppola agreed. Brando then spent about ten days on a houseboat reworking the story and imagining how Kurtz should appear.

Brando was inspired by Conrad's description of Kurtz as "impressively bald... like a ball—an ivory ball." Without telling Coppola, he shaved his head, dressed in black, and asked to be filmed under strange lighting—half in shadow with a distant, eerie voice. He later showed the footage to Coppola and suggested Kurtz's first appearance be just a voice from the darkness, followed by a glimpse of his bald head, then part of his face before he fades back into shadow. For Brando, this mirrored Kurtz's own mental state—drifting in and out of darkness, lost in a world with no moral boundaries, just like the Vietnam War itself.

Brando writes. "I was good at bullshitting Francis

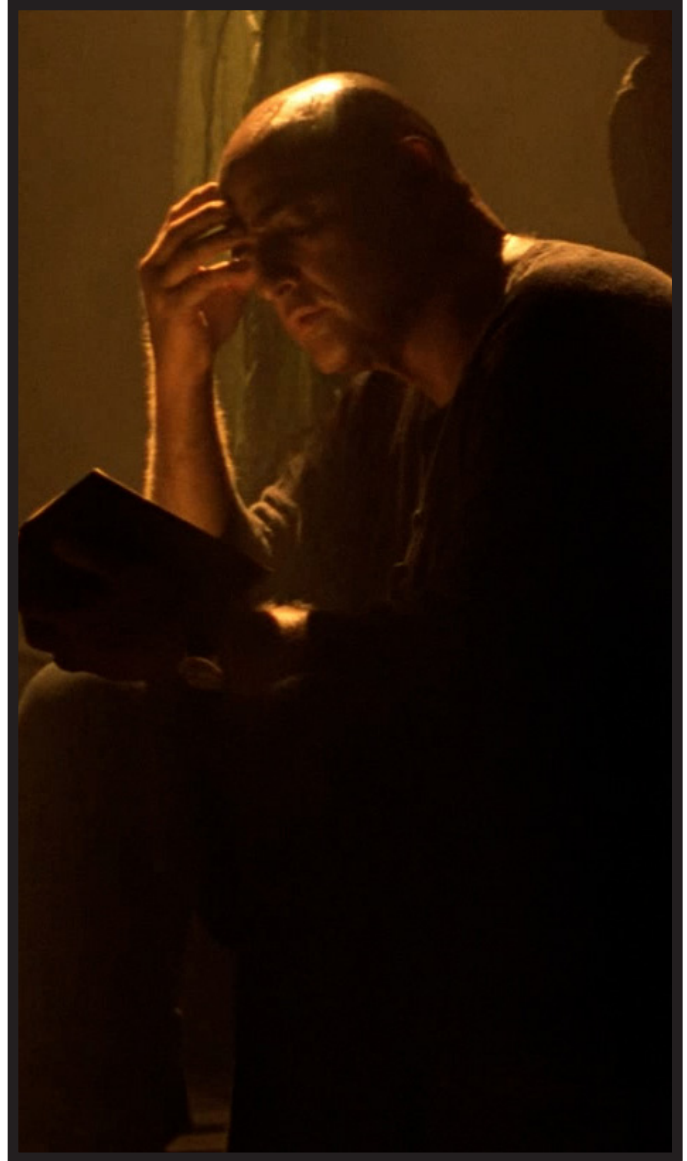
Brando's Version

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

and persuading him to think my way, and he bought it, but what I'd really wanted from the beginning was to find a way to make my part smaller so that I wouldn't have to work as hard."

Brando loved shaving his head—it was a first for him. During the hot days in the Philippines, he'd rub witch hazel on his scalp and stick his head out the car window while driving to set. He described it as pure heaven.

Brando said he not only helped restructure the plot but also wrote Kurtz's speeches, including a 45-minute improvised monologue for the character's death. He called it one of the most intense performances of his career, saying he got completely lost in the part and had to keep himself under control. He improvised images like "a snail crawling along the edge of a razor," laughed, cried, and called it a powerful scene. Coppola shot it twice, but used very little of it in the final film. Brando never saw the full footage and wasn't sure if it was cut for tone—but he believed it was effective.



Selected Comments

MEETING KURTZ

aa

@aac7183

I love this movie and am really impressed by this and the other Cinema Tyler series. However I have never understood why Brando was so essential to this movie . For me he caused Coppola to engineer a long list of compromises due to Brando's basic unsuitability for the role as written . I am of the opinion that another actor could have been cast whilst maintaining or improving the film's qualities.

V

@acetate909

Nominate Klaus Kinski as Kurtz.

aa

@aac7183

Well Kinski wasn't grossly overweight and does have the intensity box ticked! His on-set behaviour could perhaps be a slight issue.

V

@vincentgoupil180

No problemo, Klaus Kinski's accompanying handler Werner Herzog would have freed up Coppola to work on the movie rather than baby some actor

Your nomination to replace Brando?

aa

@aac7183

This is a very pertinent point. I was going to say that Kinski's accent could have been problematic ,then I remembered Brando's approximation of the English language . Lee Van Cleef could have been interesting as well.

V

@vincentgoupil180

Yea, Lee Van Cleef, agree. He would have been fifty-five. Not a hindrance. Ironically there was another Lee on the set at the time Lee R. Ermey who had Vietnam experience. Lee Marvin would have been more authentic than Brando.

Brando did mumble.

Guess an American actor was wanted for the part regardless if he had pebbles in his mouth or not.

*This conversation is quite interesting and goes on. Definitely worth checking out.

Selected Comments

MEETING KURTZ



@IndieAuthorX

Work prints are not supposed to be great, great films are made through editing.

The obesity of Brando oddly helps as it shows that he is leaving the traditional military discipline and is lost in a personal depression, he has left the US military to become deity in a cult of personality.

Also, this is a very rare case where voiceover helps. I think that this might be because the source material involves a story being retold.



@Derpy1969

Does every director refine utter garbage into a work of art or are they just lucky and all films are garbage at the beginning and most don't get perfected?



@George_M_

See the original Star Wars - a disaster saved in the edit. Most filmmakers kind of have no idea what they're shooting. On the other hand there's films like Fury Road, edited in the storyboard phase and shot exactly as it should be.



@zombieleaf

I wouldn't say that every film is garbage at the beginning, but the entire editing process is cutting out or rearranging everything that is unnecessary, or distracting, or just doesn't work, so it is inherently a process of making the film better. Though I'm sure there are also plenty of films that got ruined in the edit.



@loganstroganoff1284

Wow i don't like the images lightened at all lol. The darkness of so many scenes really amplifies the fever dream ambiance for me.



@TheHandsomeman

Funny, Brando shaves his head, making his head the shape of a Heart, and its filmed in darkness. Heart of Darkness.

SOURCES

Endnotes

1. <https://genius.com/Ts-eliot-the-hollow-men-1925-annotated>
2. *Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me* by Marlon Brando with Robert Lindsey

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