

Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 12: The Tiger



Forward

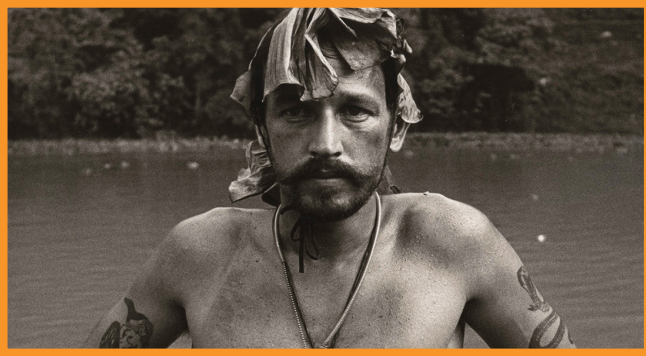
By **CINEMATYLER**

Thanks so much for supporting this series! It really means a lot. While researching this episode, I wasn't expecting much info on such a short scene, but the more I found, the more I realized how important this scene is to establishing the greater themes of the movie.

The river leads to Kurtz and the crew needs to understand just how dangerous it is to leave the boat and venture into the jungle. Each stop on their journey to Kurtz is a small slice of Western civilization embedded in the dangerous jungle (USO Show, Medivac Area, Do Lung Bridge, French Plantation, etc.).

Each of these locations is being slowly destroyed by the Viet Cong and the surrounding jungle. It is only Kurtz's army that adapts to the jungle and embraces its power.

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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?



Vittorio Storaro:

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?



Frederic Forrest:

The Cook. Having worked with Coppola before, an actor signs up for a new project to be filmed in the jungles of the Philippines. How long will this adventure last? No one knows for sure.



Martin Sheen:

The Face. An actor yearning to become a movie star will go through a journey similar to his character, Willard. In order to exorcise his demons, he must face his one true enemy... himself.

Storaro's Color Theory

BY SOPHIE

In this month's episode, we discussed Vittorio Storaro's philosophy behind the use of color in the tiger scene, which was part of his overall theory of color for the movie.

Color Schemes

Monochromatic



Analogous



Complementary



Split-Complementary



Triad



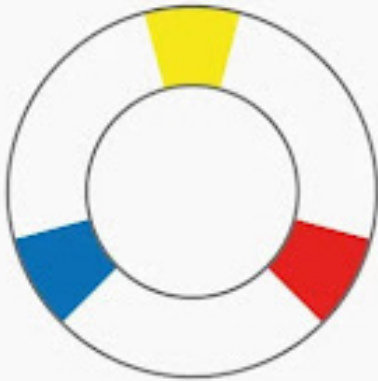
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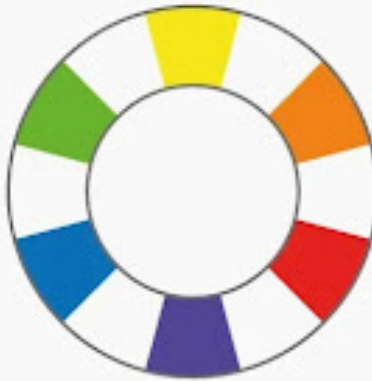
This is not to be confused with “color theory,” the guidance for mixing and pairing colors that is widely taught in schools of art and design. When Storaro talks about the theory of color he is referring more to the symbolic qualities of color.

Storaro's Color Theory

Primary Colors



Secondary Colors



Full Color Wheel



Of course, assigning meaning to color is a highly subjective process that depends a lot on the context of the movie you're watching.



Red as danger in The Descent.

Storaro's Color Theory



Red as passion in In the Mood for Love.

But Storaro's approach to color is highly informed by his studies of painting and philosophy, and for him each color holds meaning not only on a symbolic level but also a psychological and even physiological one.

According to Storaro, the most basic element of imagery is the contrast of light and dark.¹ He recalled that when he was studying film back in the sixties, light and dark were what was emphasized in the schools and he wasn't really taught anything about the use of color.² Similarly, he was mostly taught about the technical side of filmmaking rather than the artistic.³ While he believes these elements are very important, he felt this approach was missing "half the equation" of visual storytelling.⁴ Storaro is fond of a quote by Leonardo Da Vinci: "Colors are the children of light and darkness."⁵ Mastery of the "children" gives a

cinematographer full access to their creative tools. Storaro likens individual colors on film to notes on a piano, that when skillfully combined evoke the desired response in the audience.⁶

Storaro said that he quickly rebelled against his classical film education and began to explore color, drawing much inspiration from renaissance painters such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Caravaggio.⁷ His experiments with color at this time "sprang from emotion, an innate instinct, and being in love with the image."⁸

Storaro's Color Theory

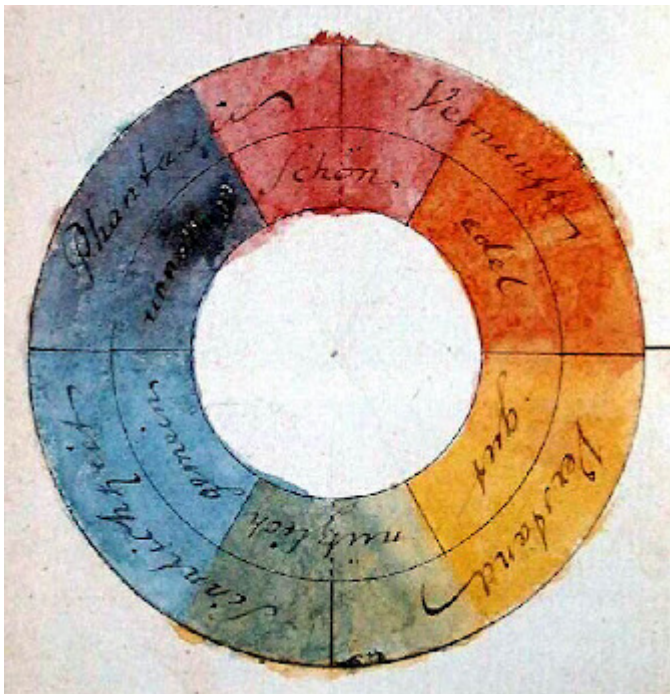
It was actually only after *Apocalypse Now* that Storaro began to formalize his thoughts on color. Immediately following *Apocalypse Now*, Storaro took a year to dedicate himself to the study of color.⁹ He studied “Isaac Newton, and Goethe and the symbolism, dramaturgy and physiology of colour.”¹⁰ In case you didn’t know, Newton contributed the “corpuscular theory of light,” regarding the composition of white light based on his experiments with prisms, and identified the seven primary colors of the rainbow (I’m not about to get into the accuracy of that number).^{11,12} Goethe’s book, *Theory of Colours*, details his experiments regarding the perception of color in varying conditions.¹³

Storaro also drew on the work of Hippocrates,

who is often referred to as the father of medicine.¹⁴ Hippocrates studied the effect on the human body of different elements, including light or “visual energy.”¹⁵ According to Storaro, different colors have different effects on the metabolism and blood pressure of the human body, and as such, color is not only seen with the eyes but felt in the body.¹⁶

While Storaro may not have begun his formal study of color until after completing the filming of *Apocalypse Now*, his interest in the subject was very much present in his approach to the movie based on his own instincts about color. In the documentary *Writing with Light: Vittorio Storaro*, Storaro said that in thinking about how to visually represent the journey into the self that underlies the story, he had the idea to present it as a journey through the color spectrum, with each color signifying an aspect of the human psyche or life cycle.¹⁷

It’s hard to say how closely Storaro stuck to the color definitions that appear in the episode, but let’s see if we can apply some of these color definitions to their appearances in the movie.



Goethe's symmetric colour wheel with associated symbolic qualities (1809)

Storaro's Color Theory

APOCALYPSE NOW

Here's a quick breakdown of how Storaro used color in Apocalypse Now.



According to Storaro, the heart of darkness itself is represented by black, which is the color of the unconscious, or the Id.



Red, the color of blood, is the first step away from the unconscious. It makes sense that Willard is bathed in a reddish glow after killing Kurtz, as he seems to be in a primal state here.

Storaro's Color Theory

APOCALYPSE NOW



Orange represents the warmth of family, and the color has a heavy presence throughout the scene in which Willard has his intimate encounter with Roxanne Sarraut.



Yellow is the color of the consciousness, or the Ego. Obviously, much of the movie takes place in the sun, so yellow appears a lot. But the scene that is most heavily lit in yellow is the visit to the plantation, which may be representative of the brief return to something that feels safe and normal to the crew in their journey into the dark.

Storaro's Color Theory

APOCALYPSE NOW



Green is the process of knowing, or learning. Similarly to yellow, the movie's setting means that the whole movie is pretty darn green, which works out thematically. I think it's interesting that the scene when the crew kills the civilians on the boat—which is a pretty sharp loss of innocence and awakening to the reality of war—has a kind of greenish tint to it that is reinforced by Lance's painted face.



Blue is the color of the intellect, which appears prominently in the tiger sequence. Perhaps this is Willard learning about the true nature of the danger he is facing.

Storaro's Color Theory

APOCALYPSE NOW



Indigo represents material power or wealth, which makes a brief appearance in the conspicuously elegant plantation.



Violet represents the final chapter of a human life, so it may a kind of foreshadowing that the color appears just as the patrol boat is attacked and Mr. Clean is killed soon after.

Storaro's Color Theory

APOCALYPSE NOW



White, the last color which is composed of all the others, denotes balance. Now, it might seem like a bit of a stretch to say the meeting with General Corman is “balanced” given its nefarious undertones, but it is the last time Willard experiences something close to stability before embarking on a journey that gets progressively more chaotic and surreal.

SOURCES

Endnotes

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Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



Nataloff

I'm pleased and honored to have had so much of my work ("Big Bad John" info and interview footage used in the documentary "Milius") quoted in this fine profile of John. For those who want the whole book, "Big Bad John: The John Milius Interviews" is available from Amazon and also from Bear Manor media. Thanks, Tyler.



Capital Flash

Excellent essay. It's always mindblowing how close the club of Milius, Coppola, Spielberg, De Palma, Schrader, & Lucas, etc were in the '60s/early '70s. That's like Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, & Tchaikovsky attending the same high school in the same year.

And Jeremiah Johnson is a masterpiece.



George Bailey

The fusion of Milius and Coppola working from opposite ends of the political spectrum to create this masterpiece, it's brilliant. It needs the absolute madness of Milius' hawkish outlook to convey the full reality.



Alex

You sort of see how Apocalypse Now which is meant to be an anti war movie in it's final form, is often seen through a pro war lense espically the Ride of The Valkyries scene. Through John Milius's influences, and not re-reading Heart of Darkness again, seen as it's an anti-imperial book.



Jim Tuner

Like Heart of Darkness, the film was designed to show the war in a growing more brutal and negative night as you go up the river. The Ride of the Valkyries is at the mouth of the river and its all high tech warfare in clean uniforms with beach parties. But at each stage up the river, it becomes more brutal and chaotic. You get to the bridge scene in the jungle and nobody is in command, the fighting is senseless and nobody wants to be there. The book had the same structure. At every stage deeper up the river you get further from the civilization and the values of the people on the outside.

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



Alex

For a man who says he was born into the wrong time. He had an exceptionally lucky life and even a year earlier he wouldn't have known Lucas or Coppola getting a \$77,000 job and no need to work up the tanks. His families wealth being a big help also for him to go on this weird winding life path..



Jake Kilka

Well, having this conflict between the present time and nostalgic ideas of the past can be very inspirational to a writer. For example, if you spent a few months living on the mountains, the ruleset you live by gets simpler each day, and it can feel surprisingly natural, reasonable and meaningful. When you come back to "the civilized world", chances are you will be shocked by it's superficialities and falsehoods. Then you'll remember "Oh yeah, there's still culture, there are books, music and movies in this place", which makes it meaningful but on an another level. Maybe Milius' experience was something like this? Without any conflict it's hard to know what to write about, except nice post cards, so it's well possible Milius, being a good writer, sort of creates conflicts on an ideal level just to excel in his work.



Aaron Thompson

Luck is relative. His career was also cut short due to Hollywood politics and he had a stroke that has crippled him for the last 12 years. Coppola gave him that 70k because he knew his talent; he became the Hollywood golden boy script writer without Coppolas help- remember he wrote the script for Apocalypse Now ten years before it came out. I highly suggest you watch the documentary Milius, it's free on YouTube.



Derek Gorman

Just want to say a big thank you for this episode. It's nice to see you do an episode dedicated to Milius' involvement. It is something that is usually side-lined or completely ignored (for whatever reason) in celebrating or acknowledging the epic that is Apocalypse Now.

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



Dan Roy

This is a really fine Milius tribute. I feel like I came away with a much better understanding of him than with the usual profiles, even his big documentary. There are contradictory elements with his work that you reconcile - basically he's a crypto aristocrat and vitalist rather than a clever philistine. (Knowing that his dad attended Harvard is certainly instructive.) Thank you for all your great work.



Hank S

The true stories that got written in are the best part. My dad's best friend in the Mekong Delta was the guy who got court martialed for water skiing behind the boat.



quazzie1

Only 2 movies in history have made me actually feel something other than surficial tension or laughing: The Exorcist, viewed when I was 9, scared the living hell out of me, and Apocalypse Now, at 51, left me feeling shaken. From the time they meet the girls at their camp after the show – girls that seemingly have lost their minds, through to the end of the movie. Those are the parts that really got me. It made me think of all the horrors (no pun intended) man regularly visits upon man.



valis14

Definitely on tap for the Michael Herr post edition because APOCALYPSE NOW minus the Herr narration is like cutting The Doors or Wagner out of the soundtrack; it might be one of the best V.O.s of all time. It surprises me it's not mentioned more. Anyone who picks up a copy of Herr's DISPATCHES about his time embedded in Vietnam can instantly understand where the deadly, war-torn, jungle-drenched pathos of Willard originates.



George M

It certainly explains the Kurtz Is Right subtext to the movie, which thanks to Coppola I guess is also subverted aggressively.



Broseph DudeGuy

Idk what it is but it's fascinating to me that two opposing political sides created one of the greatest movies of all time. Great video.

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW

M

Michael Tariga

Left, Right, Middle. Everyone just wants to create a god dang good movie.

M

Michael Hall

That I detest his politics in no way diminishes my respect for what John Milius accomplished with APOCALYPSE NOW. It was a brilliant concept, and there's no question that many of the best moments in the film originated with him. That said, there's also no underlying theme or structure without Joseph Conrad, who is referenced frequently in Coppola's draft revisions and Michael Herr's narration, both of which thankfully substituted Conrad's thematic ambition and literacy for Milius' macho posturing. And the end result of all of these varied perspectives is an extraordinary work, for all its flaws. So why, when it came time to give Joseph Conrad his due, did Milius have to be such a dick about it, fighting with Coppola before the Writer's Guild to keep Conrad's name out of the film's credits? Asserting that "if APOCALYPSE NOW is based on 'Heart of Darkness' then 'Moby Dick' is based on the Book of Job" may have satisfied John Milius' need to sound clever, but of course you can't say that and then go on to pat yourself on the back for succeeding where Orson Welles failed.

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