

HEARTS OF DARKNESS

Directed by Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper

Produced by Les Mayfield and George Zaloom

Distributed by Paramount Pictures

Released in 1991

Francis Ford Coppola wanted to strike while the iron was hot. With *The Godfather Part II* a big success, its director hoped to get a jump on his next filmic adventure. Once again the future of his production company would be entrusted to a movie. This time it was the Viet Nam odyssey *Apocalypse Now*, the success of which would ensure American Zoetrope financial independence. He had a John Milius script from years before, ready to go. This was thought preferable to sacrificing many months in generating a new screenplay. George Lucas comments in *Hearts of Darkness* that Coppola is an intuitive filmmaker, preferring to incorporate the challenges and opportunities of a shoot into the final product. But this kind of movie making can get very expensive, very fast. Before his production team relocated to the Philippines for principal photography, Coppola decided he was not pleased with the John Milius script. But he went ahead anyway.

This film, using reams of documentary footage and audio accrued by Eleanor Coppola, and boasting candid interviews with all the principal players, reflects on the extremely difficult shoot that Francis Coppola endured; it's a story as harrowing as the swift-boat journey, the narrative impetus for *Apocalypse Now*.

Hearts of Darkness is an excellent documentary, and drops today's viewer right into the same hole that Coppola had dug for himself in 1976. It is particularly well edited and full of dark humor. All the participants seem to have taken some difficult lessons away from the experience. However, Eleanor Coppola seems to have not changed at all, still worshipping Francis as The Artist, seeing his manifestations of the irrational as purely artistic conceits. Coppola is revealed as a very intelligent man, eager for attention—a vainglorious man of hubris and bravado. With a little more concentrated effort, before he allowed matters to get out of control, *Apocalypse Now* could have become one of history's great epic films. Instead, the story of its making can attract more interest than the story of the journey upriver to kill Colonel Kurtz.

One big problem with *Hearts of Darkness* comes near the end. After accruing 238 days worth of film, a look at the difficulty of sculpting such an ungainly mess of footage into something comprehensible would be welcomed; we've seen the tough shoot, but the edit was, in its own way, just as challenging. Here, in contrast to Coppola fighting with others, he would fight himself. But instead we leap from the shoot to the opening of the film over two years later.

Hearts of Darkness is still a remarkable effort, serving as an articulate supplement for the quixotic *Apocalypse Now*.