

# Making Apocalypse Now

*Episode 20: Sheen's Heart Attack*



## Forward

By **CINEMATYLER**

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Thanks so much for your support! I believe this to be one of, if not the most important episode of this series. It is fun to live vicariously through the story of the making of Apocalypse Now when you know how everything turned out, but to really take a moment to confront the immense personal doubts that go into making great art is weirdly cathartic and inspiring.

If one of the most celebrated filmmakers can doubt his abilities that much and still

see his vision through, it really shows that no artist needs to feel isolated by their turmoil. No artist is alone in not only their fear of failure, but their fear of actually trying to do something they believe in and being seen as pretentious. There is no certainty in art and safety is what holds back a project's artistic potential.

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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?



## Martin Sheen (Willard):

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



## Janet Sheen:

The Saint. Janet Sheen saved the production in its darkest hour when she agreed to allow her husband to stay on the production that nearly killed him, but would go on to define his career.



## Joe Estevez:

The Double. Sheen's brother would step in to ensure that the production could keep moving forward. Estevez—an actor himself—provided a life-preserver for the production and his similar physique to his brother's made it easy for the editors to cut Chief's death scene the way they wanted.

# Coppola on Risk

## NO RISK, NO REWARD

**“You can’t make art without risk, any more than you can make babies without sex.”<sup>1</sup>**

**“Usually, the stuff that’s your best idea or work is going to be attacked the most.”<sup>1</sup>**

**“The trouble with American filmmaking is that producers don’t allow the risk of failure. If a good film can’t risk being a failure, it won’t be really good.”<sup>2</sup>**

**“If you don’t bet, you don’t have a chance to win. It’s so silly in life not to pursue the highest possible thing you can imagine, even if you run the risk of losing it all, because if you don’t pursue it you’ve lost it anyway. You can’t be an artist and be safe.”<sup>3</sup>**

**“I was twenty-three and I was making about \$1,000 a week after the first year. I lost it all by the way. I wanted to make a film so desperately that I saved all my money. And I had about \$20,000 cash. I was really frustrated, because I could buy a Ferrari or I could buy a sailboat but I couldn’t make a film. So I decided I was going to risk it all on the stock market and either have \$100,000 and make a film, or have nothing. I lost it, every penny of it. In one stock. Scopitone. That jukebox with the little films. Lost every penny on it.”<sup>3</sup>**

**“Every time I want to make a movie, every time I want to make a film, every time I want to sponsor a filmmaker, I have to go, hat in hand, to a series of studio executives who don’t have my background and my experience. So I find that frustrating. So, since I don’t have any money really, to speak of, I use what little I have to try to get to the point where we can have our own studio, where we can make films like the films we’ve made over the last twelve years—all of the quality that this film has. I will stand by this film, because I know what went into the making of it. That’s what I want. But I can’t do that if I have to be controlled by people who say what film you can make and who’s going to supervise what. So if I have my own studio, to keep the control and supervision to myself, it is taking a risk. Taking risks like this one creates some excitement. You may not have been excited, but others were. I don’t know, but it was something.”<sup>3</sup>**

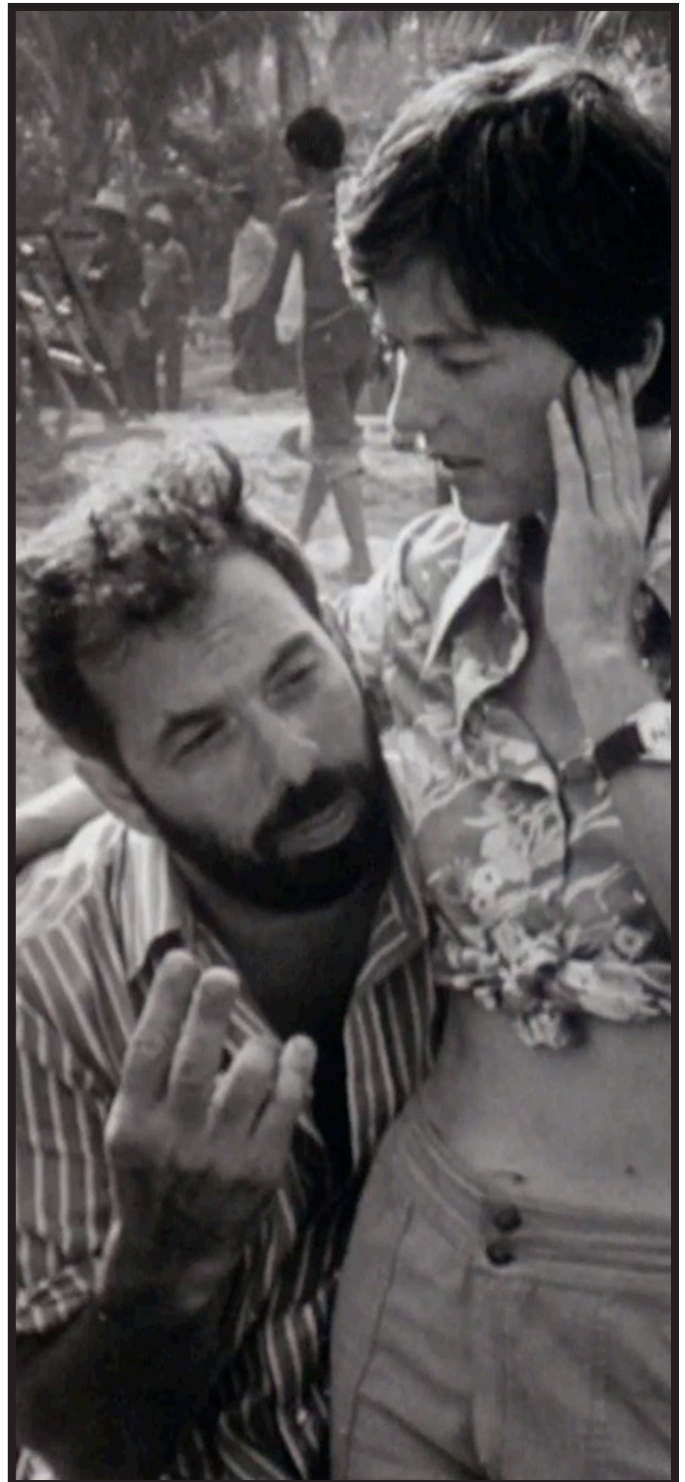
**“If you’re not allowed to experiment anymore for fear of being considered self-indulgent or pretentious or what have you, then everyone’s going to just stick to the rules – there’s not going to be any additional ideas.”<sup>4</sup>**

# Magazine Excerpts

## LIFE MAGAZINE

*While his initial plan was to do a big action-adventure melodrama, Coppola got caught up in Conrad's journey into self-knowledge and became fascinated with the fears of failure and longing for death that were expressed in the original. Coppola has had some recent experience with failure and defeat. His grandiose dream of turning San Francisco into a private culture capital with his own magazine, theatrical company and production studios has not worked out.*

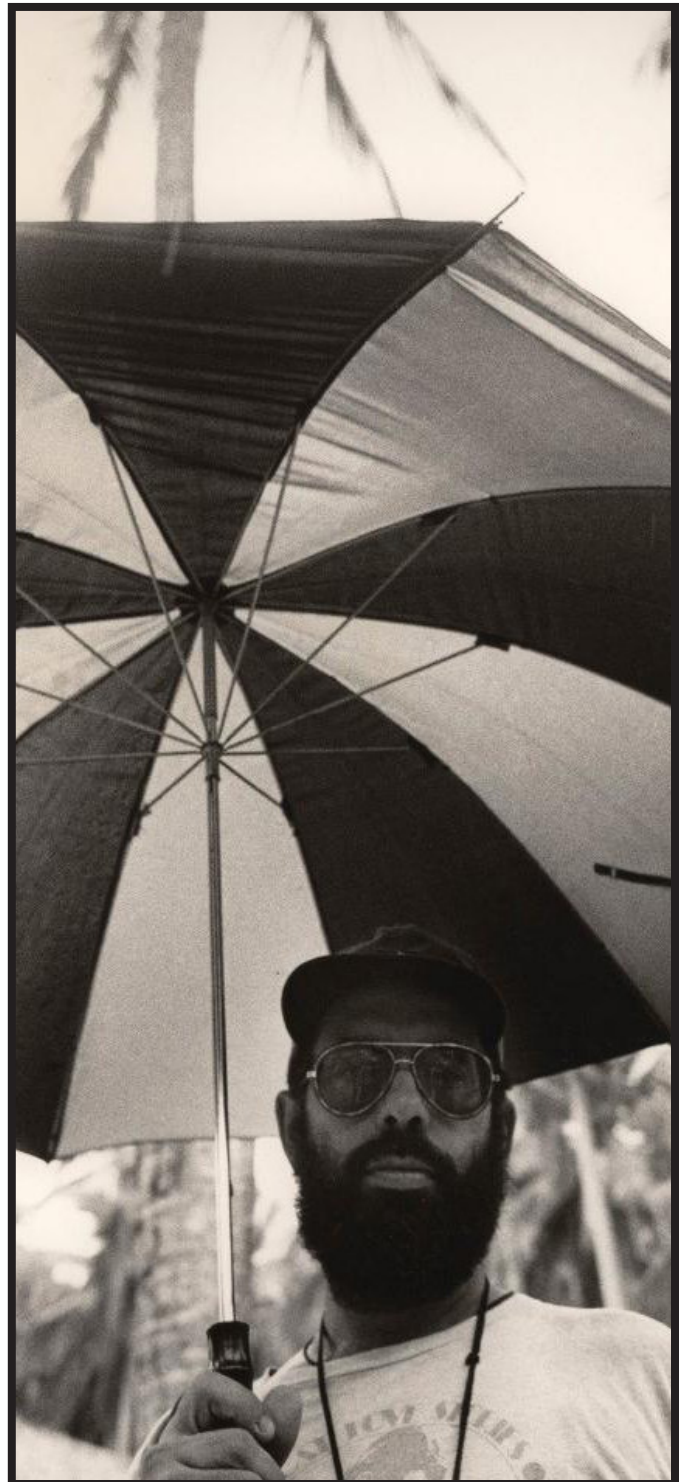
*Apocalypse Now may falter and fade too. "It is an incredible story not only as a movie but in Coppola's daring risk," says Mike Medavoy, the film executive who initially backed the movie. "Francis is at the edge of the cliff, and he'll either soar like an eagle or drop like a rock."*



# Magazine Excerpts

NEW YORK TIMES

*It took a long time for Hollywood studios to see this offbeat variation on “Heart of Darkness” in a favorable light. Indeed, after seven years, Milius and Coppola seemed to have reached a dead end. Warner Brothers and Columbia both turned the project down, believing that few moviegoers would be interested in seeing a picture about the Vietnam War. But Coppola was determined, and in 1975, he finally made a deal with United Artists. “Francis told me one day, ‘I’ve got to do this picture,’” Milius said. “‘I consider it the most important picture I will ever make. If I die making it, you’ll take it over, if you die, George Lucas will take over.’ “*



# Selected Comments

## FRENCH PLANTATION



@thelastperfectman4139

I really love the French Plantation scene; it feels like an encounter with phantoms—literally the phantoms of Vietnam's history.



@PolishGod1234

I see the whole scene as a dream of the boat crew. Everything looks so shiny, there is good food and peace. It starts and ends in a fog, like it wasn't actually real.



@loganw6156

I really like this scene. I always thought they were ghosts. The scene is really important. It's about America not heeding the lessons of the past and represents Vietnam's past colonial presence. Some find that the scene drags but it's such an essential scene imo



@PolishGod1234

@loganw6156 agreed. It also serves for Willard's character development. The French lady tells Willard about the duality of man. I'm sure those words had some influence on Willard when making his final decision of not dropping the bomb on the tribe.



@vincentgoupil180

The whole movie is a dream by Willard while still in the opening hotel room regressing into himself by alcohol, followed by weed, acid and opium finally confronting himself as Kurtz. As Roxanne is opium, Kurtz is Willard's addiction to drugs. By finishing off Kurtz he's breaking free of his habits.

To ask if each stopping point on the river is one of the Bardos of the Tibetan Inbetween or chakras on the spine might be of interest.

# Selected Comments

## FRENCH PLANTATION



@travismiles5885

When I saw Apocalypse Now, with the French Plantation scene put back in, it gave me a Hotel California vibe. I can see why they cut it for theatrical release but it does really add a layer of madness to the movie. It's Kubrick's Odyssey.



@KvasirBlut

I actually met Aurore Clément some months ago in a small cinéma in Paris for the projection of Lacombe Lucien during a Louis Malle retrospective. Still a very élégant, simple and nice person. She was perfect for the rôle in the french plantation, solemn and ethereal. Btw this Making Apocalypse Now série is excellent, one of a kind.



@michaelfontana4689

The plantation scene is entirely necessary IMO. If you look at the story just through the perspective of moving up-river in a constant battle against the environment, it might seem out of place, but for me, it was the perfect moment to pull back and remind the crew and audience of the futility and misdirection of the war effort in the context of previous historical failures. It sits at the back of your mind as the final part of the film unfolds.



@QED\_

This scene is even more necessary if you end the movie as I've always felt it should end: in their eventual dialogue, Willard is convinced by Kurtz that he (Kurtz) is in the right and that the madness and futility that he (Willard) has witnessed is not a fact about the war but about the corrupt manner in which French, American, and South Vietnamese politicians have conducted it.



# Selected Comments

## FRENCH PLANTATION



@rufust.firefly6352

My main takeaway from the Redux version of these plantation scenes was a conversation that Roxanne and Willard had -- Willard said after the war was over, he wasn't going back. That changes a lot of the tone of Willard's journey in the remainder of the movie, IMHO.



@CoolGobyFish

I had a feeling that both Willard and Killgore were going to drink themselves to death after the war. there is no way they would go back to normal life.



@VNExperience

I love how the Frenchman in the cut scene says that up the river are the "moi", which in Vietnamese translates to "savages" (a very derogatory term). This was and still is reality. The ethnic minorities like the Bru still hunted with bows and arrows when the Green Berets started working with them against the Northern forces (famously exemplified by the MACV-SOG on the Ho Chi Minh trail). Having been living in Vietnam for a decade, I've had the opportunity to meet some of the remaining minorities, however in a more peaceful context.



@vincentgoupil180

Hubert de Marais surname means swamp and as a French derogatory term\* frogs (toads) live in swamps.

Who woulda thought ?  
Hubert the Frog

\* from Wikipedia's "Plain" referring to the Marais during the French Revolution.

# SOURCES

## Endnotes

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