

Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 19: The French Plantation



Forward

By **CINEMATYLER**

Thanks so much for your support! The French Plantation sequence in *Apocalypse Now* is such a fascinating look into a master director's process because we get to see what it looks like when an artist's technique doesn't work as intended, yet the scene is still completed. The scene acts almost as its own short film and is filled with many of the aspects of Coppola's directing that sets him apart from others.

The scene is rich with history and parallels to the themes of the movie and is all contained within a structure that, itself, is thematically relevant. Everything about the scene screams quality from the

(unexpectedly) lavish and detailed set to the difficult and ambitious practice of trying to shoot during magic hour.

I also have to mention how much I love how Hubert takes the sunlight with him when he leaves. It both transitions the light to the next part of the sequence and displays the final exit of the familial warmth represented by Vittorio Storaro's color theory in the orange of the magic hour sunlight.

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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 (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?



Christian Marquand (Hubert):

The Ghost. Marquand would work tirelessly to carry a sequence that wouldn't be shown to the public for more than twenty-five years after filming. Sadly, Marquand would pass away before *Redux* was released.



Aurore Clement (Roxanne):

The Romancer. Clement's character would be the only tenderness Willard would receive on his journey. Roxanne gives closure to Willard's failed marriage and shows him a glimpse at a possible life beyond Kurtz and the life of a warrior.

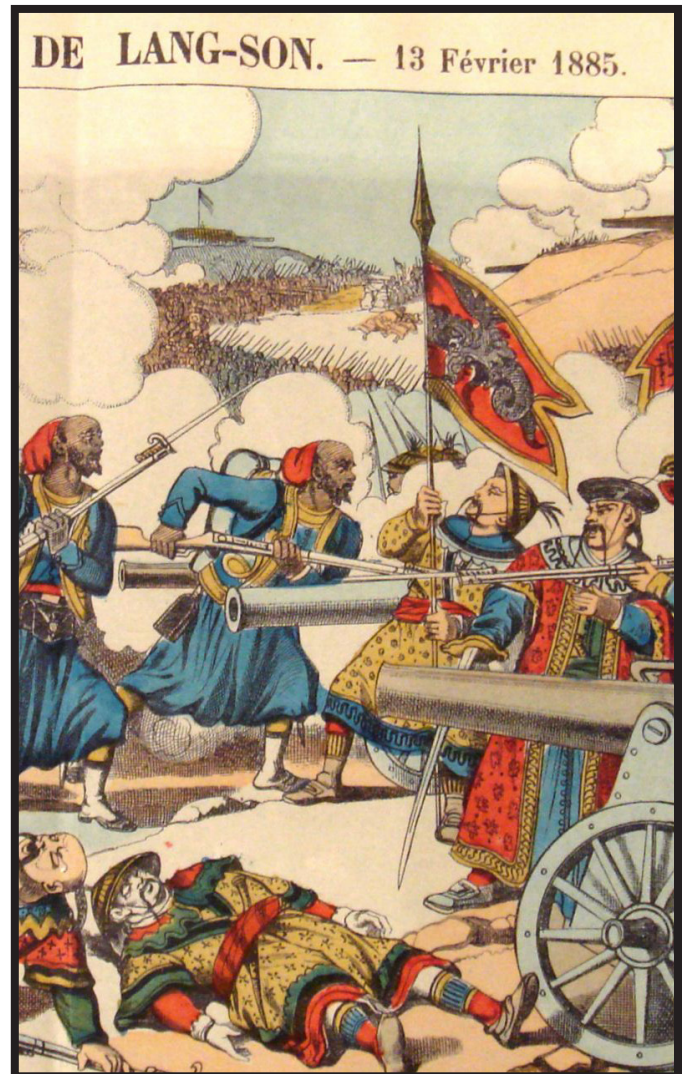
France and Vietnam

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

French leader, Napoleon III, decided to take control of Vietnam in 1857 because France wanted more land and trade opportunities. They first captured two large cities, Da Nang and Saigon and despite Vietnamese resistance, by 1862, France had secured a peace treaty that gave them key territories and within the next five years, France controlled several more territories in the south. By 1893, France controlled several territories in the region including Cambodia.

France held all of the power in Vietnam with the Vietnamese citizens having little say in their own country. The French built railroads and bridges, but these were to help France enrich itself by taking Vietnam's resources, making quick profits, and preventing any industry to grow in Vietnam. The Vietnamese peasants were exploited for their labor and their land was given mainly to French investors. The people of Vietnam lacked proper medical care, education, and basic freedoms, leading them to resist and protest against French control and carry out attacks against the French occupiers.

In the early 1900s, a nationalist movement arose and focused on liberation from the French leading to a failed uprising in 1930. Out of that, a new Communist movement



emerged led by Ho Chi Minh, and with training from the Soviet Union and China, it soon became the leading nationalist movement in Vietnam. During World War II, the French-controlled territories were under French and Japanese control. In 1941, Ho Chi Minh formed a nationalist alliance called Viet Minh. Post-war, they

France and Vietnam

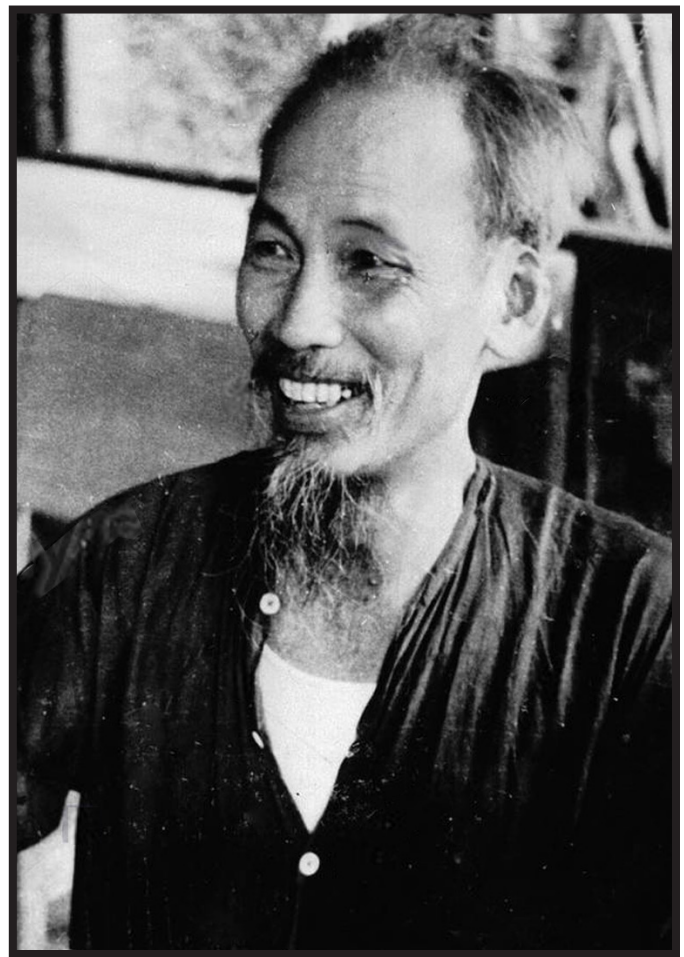
CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

took control of northern Vietnam, while the French regained the south, leading to a divided Vietnam by 1946.

In 1946, the French and Ho Chi Minh negotiated for a free Vietnam state under the French Union of Territories. However, conflicting goals led to the First Indochina War in which the United States secretly helped the French side. The Viet Minh, aided by China, sought full independence. The conflict peaked with the French suffering a major defeat in 1954, prompting peace talks.

Vietnam was split into two parts. The North was led by communists and the South by a new government led by a president backed by the United States. His rule was controversial—favoring Catholics and suppressing opposition—leading to the rise of a rebel group known as the Viet Cong in the south and his overthrow and assassination in 1963. The new government had problems as well and by 1965, the Viet Cong posed a large threat to the government.

The U.S. initially supported South Vietnam with equipment, money, and military advisers. However, as the Viet Cong grew stronger, U.S. involvement increased, leading to the deployment of over 500,000



American troops by 1968. Despite intense bombing and combat, the Viet Cong remained resilient, launching major attacks like the Tet Offensive in 1968. This led to growing U.S. doubts about continuing the war, prompting peace talks in Paris. Under President Nixon, U.S. troops began to withdraw, but opposition to the war grew due to expanded attacks in Laos and Cambodia. Meanwhile, peace discussions continued in Paris.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu

HOW IT WENT DOWN

Background: After World War II, France wanted to control Vietnam again, which was part of French Indochina (including Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia). The Vietnamese group called Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, fought for independence from France.

French Strategy in Dien Bien Phu: In November 1953, French troops landed in the Dien Bien Phu valley, a remote area in northwest Vietnam. They set up a base with an airstrip, planning to cut off Viet Minh supply lines to Laos and force them into a big battle.

Viet Minh Preparation: The Viet Minh, under General Vo Nguyen Giap, didn't immediately attack. They spent months preparing, surrounding Dien Bien Phu and moving artillery into the hills.

The Siege Begins: On March 13, 1954, the Viet Minh started attacking the French base. They destroyed the airstrip, making it hard for the French to get supplies.

Trench Warfare: The Viet Minh used trench warfare tactics, slowly getting closer to the French positions. The French air force tried to drop supplies, but it was difficult because of Viet Minh's anti-aircraft guns.

Outcome: After 57 days, the French were defeated. Over 2,200 French soldiers died, and about 11,000 were captured.

Aftermath and Significance: This defeat ended French rule in Indochina. The 1954 Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into North (communist) and South (non-communist). The battle set the stage for the Vietnam War and increased American involvement in the region.

Casualties: The battle was costly for both sides. The French suffered heavy losses and many soldiers were captured. The Viet Minh also faced many casualties.

Long-Term Effects: The fall of Dien Bien Phu was a turning point in global politics, showing that colonial powers could be defeated. It also led to significant changes in Southeast Asia's political landscape and set a precedent for guerrilla warfare tactics.

Vietnam Post-War: Vietnam eventually became a unified communist country in 1975, with Saigon renamed to Ho Chi Minh City.

Selected Comments

CLEAN'S DEATH SEQUENCE

No

@Finkelthusiast

Great video as always! The boat going under the downed plane was always one of my favourite scenes. I interpreted it as a fallen angel because planes and helicopters are so closely associated with saviours, either when the GIs cling to its legs while it takes off from the show or when Kilgore's cavalry of helis approaching the attack are backed with angelic vocals. This emphasized the place (hell) has no return, even if some heavenly aircraft was there to take you home.

I

@lawrencedavid9728

A point about the B52 tail. The production proly sourced a 1:72 model kit for the drawings and approaches for the carpenters to fabricate

That scene always spooked me, The bombing of Cambodia (Operation MENU) was Top Secret at the time having only started in March of 1969, about six months earlier then when the story was set. The crew must have been shocked and confused to see it and wondering if there were any units nearby large enough to have surface to air missiles powerful enough to blow the tail of a B-52 off. I have actually walked under the tail of a B-52 and it is a peculiar feeling. It is such a large object at such a close distance that it is difficult to understand that it is even quite real.

P

@Pibat1299

Saw this movie in 1983 as a 12-year old. Second run movie house that didn't check age very diligently. Launched me on a lifelong obsession with Vietnam, up to my M.A. thesis on JFK and Vietnam and a birthday trip to Saigon, since Ho Chi Minh and I share May 19th as our birthday. Thank you for this ongoing masterpiece series of film analysis and appreciation. It has added many new layers to my relationship with this singular cinematic masterpiece. You do amazing work. Much respect from Germany.

Selected Comments

CLEAN'S DEATH SEQUENCE

L

@camo_for_cocktails

An alternate scene of Clean's burial was filmed and released in 1981 for the re-release. I remember the camera was at water level as Clean's lifeless head looms large in the foreground. It slowly rolls over to regard the audience and sink out of sight as the boat disappears around a bend out of focus while the music rises to a mournful crescendo. It is the same musical cue heard for this scene heard on the original vinyl soundtrack LPs. It was very like Chief's burial scene later that was done with much less fanfare.



@liltick102

I have definitely watched this film over 80 times — I have read the novels written by both cast members and all available material out there, by Eleanor and whoever—rewatched the workprint again and again, watched analysis and theory after theory.

Yet still, hearing that tape while looking into the Chiefs eyes— gives me chills and brings me to tears each time.

M

@markmaioli4

Mattel made model plane & jet kits too, no B-52 Hot Wheels.

V

@vincentgoupil180

Story goes Mattel made the stock and handgrip for the M16 rifle though it's disputed nowadays.

Remember being told not to use the rifle stock for hitting someone cause after they stop laughing they will finish you off.

Mattel did make a toy Marauder M16 version. And the early actual M16 was considered a joke for field use, jamming from carbon deposits in the bolt was one problem.

SOURCES

Endnotes

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