The Aesthetics of War:

"The Ride of the Valkyries" and "The End" in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola

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Date de soumission : **12.10.2025**
Date d'acceptation : **19.11.2025**
Date de publication : **20.11.2025**

Abstract

This article considers the way music and sound is integrated in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) through "The Ride of the Valkyries" (1856) by Richard Wagner and "The End" by The Doors (1967). It is a study of sound and music through the screen that refers mainly to Alvaro Barbosa and Kristine Dizon through their article "The Film Sound Analysis Framework: A conceptual Tool to interpret the Cinematic Experience" (2020). Putting together sound and image, the analysis reveals that Coppola uses sound, rock and classical, to blur boundaries between beauty and the brutality of the Imperial ideology, transforming warfare into a surreal aestheticized spectacle that implicates audiences in the seductive madness of violence.

Keywords: *Apocalypse Now; The Doors; Sound; War; Wagner.*

Ex PROFESSO

Volume 10 / Special Issue / Year 2025

Url de la revue :
https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484

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INTRODUCTION

"Let every nation know, whether us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success and split asunder" (Kennedy, 1961).

"The old get old
and the young get stronger
May take a week
and it may take longer
they got the guns
but we git the numbers
Gonna win, yeah,
We're taking over" (The Doors, "Five to One", 1968)[1]

John F. Kennedy's famous pledge to defend freedom "at any price" and Jim Morrison's defiant anthem of generational revolt capture how societies transform warfare into something beyond mere necessity, whether through solemn moral duty or revolutionary fervor. Kennedy's rhetoric elevates conflict into a sacred obligation worthy of ultimate sacrifice. At the same time, The Doors, through their music, channels the war's energy into a battle cry for cultural upheavals, both aestheticising violence in their respective ways. This rhetorical and artistic glorification of conflict reflects a deeper cultural impulse to aestheticise war, turning its harsh realities into narratives of honor, heroism, and transcendent purpose that artists and writers have expressed throughout history. This glorification is not new, from Homeric poetry to medieval chivalry to modern military pageantry, cultures have glorified warfare through art, music and ritual. Cinema, theatre, and music, like other art forms, have always been an integral part of the human experience. War, as a defining conflict, profoundly shaped and shapes our worldview and artistic expression. Consequently, war films with exceptionally memorable soundtracks, songs, musical compositions, that relate to war or reflect society's attitudes towards conflict, serve as powerful cultural artifacts.

***A**pocalypse Now* is a 1979 is one of the most outstanding American psychological epic war films produced and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The screenplay by John Milius and Michael Herr, co-written by Coppola, is loosely inspired by Joseph Conrad's 1899 British novella *Heart of Darkness*. The film is set during the Vietnam War. It stars, mainly, Marlon Brando as Colonel Walter Kurtz, Robert Duvall as Lieutenant Colonel William Bill Kilgore, Martin Sheen as U.S. Army Captain Benjamin L. Williard. The film follows the Captain Willard in his way to find Colonel Kurtz in the middle of the jungle. The film is selected for preservation in the National Film Registry and the Library of congress as one of the most historic and aesthetically significant American cinema products.

One of the reasons *Apocalypse Now* is a critically acclaimed film is the sound, designed by Walter Murch, Mark Berger, Richard Beggs and Nat Boxer. For the best sound, it received an Oscar and a BAFTA (British Academy Film Awards). The soundtrack includes "The End" by The Doors, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" by The Rolling Stones, "Love Me, and Let Me Love You" by Robert Duvall, "The Ride of

[1] Official audio of "Five to One" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOzpncIHCLs

the Valkyries" by Richard Wagner performed by The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, "Let the Good Times Roll" by Shirley and Lee, "Suzie Q" by Flash Cadillac and "Surfin' Safari" by The Beach Boys (Coppola). This article focuses on the way *Apocalypse Now*'s soundtrack uses "The Ride of the Valkyries" (1856) by Richard Wagner and "The End" (1967) by The Doors, as two different pieces of music, to distort the borderlines between war as a tragic historical event that implies unfair imperial ideologies and music as a beautiful art. Both pieces become associated with not only the film but also one of the most tragic events in the world's history: the Vietnam War.

Looking at the scholarly attention to the sound design through *Apocalypse Now*, critics have predominantly focused on Murch's technical innovations and their narrative functions through interviews explaining the choice of the soundtracks. Michael Sragow's article "Sound of Vietnam", for instance, calls Murch "a wizard" for putting together a soundtrack of "horror" (2000). The 2006 documentary "The Music of Apocalypse Now" reveals that other songs sere suggested; but only "The End" remained. This suggests that Coppola was aware of aware of creating or contrasting different sounds in the movie (Aubry, 2006). Critics ignore the examination of the use of The Doors' psychedelic nihilism against Wagner's romantic militarism. These two sonic registers collectively construct a seductive, aestheticised spectacle that implicates audiences through violence and beauty.

Coppola's product uses two iconic pieces of music to highlight the dramatic aspect of the Vietnamese conflict. To study the utilisation of these pieces, I refer to the Film Analysis Framework (FSAF) as an analytical methodology used to examine and understand the role of sound in cinema. It provides a structured approach for analysing how audio elements contribute to storytelling, meaning-making, and audience experience in Films. The framework analyses film sound through four intersecting perspectives: Syntactic Taxonomy, Sematic Taxonomy, Applied Syntax, and Applied Semantics. They are a matrix that examines the structures of sound (syntax) and its meaning (semantics), from both conceptual (taxonomy) and practical (application) angles. The theory is developed by Alvaro Barbosa and Kristine Dizon in their article "The Film Sound Analysis Framework: A Conceptual Tool to Interpret the Cinematic Experience" (2020).

I. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE COLD AND THE VIETNAM WAR

The Cold War was a continuous state of threat and fear that started by the end of the Second World War until 1991. The end of WWII gave birth to two blocks: the Eastern and the Western Bloc as each is supported by a different power, economy and political ideology. The period was characterised by political conflict, military tension, proxy wars, and economic competition between the communist and the Capitalist world, under the leadership of the Soviet Union, from one side and the United States of America for the other. Although the chief military forces did not engage in a direct battle, military coalitions, strategic conventional force deployment, extensive aid to states deemed vulnerable, proxy wars, espionage, propaganda, conventional and nuclear arms races, appeals to neutral nations, rivalry sports and technological competition such as the space race. The most intense zone of conflict and periods were The Korean War (1950-1953), the Berlin Crisis of 1961, the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (Gaddis, 2005).

The Vietnam War was a Cold War-era military conflict that occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1 November 1955 to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. This war followed the First Indochina War and was fought between North Vietnam, supported by its communist allies, and the government of South Vietnam, supported by the United States and other anti-communist countries. The Viet Cong (also known as the National Liberation Front, or NLF), a lightly armed South Vietnamese communist common front directed by the North, largely fought a guerrilla war against anti-communist forces in the region (Gaddis, 2005, p, 129-134).

The U.S. government viewed involvement in the war as a way to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam as part of their wider strategy of containment. The North Vietnamese government and Viet Cong viewed the conflict as a colonial war, fought initially against France, backed by the U.S., and later against South Vietnam, which it regarded as a U.S. puppet state. American military advisors arrived in what was then French Indochina beginning in 1950. U.S. involvement escalated in the early 1960s, with troop levels tripling in 1961 and tripling again in 1962. U.S. combat units were deployed beginning in 1965. Operations spanned international borders, with Laos and Cambodia heavily bombed. American involvement in the war peaked in 1968, at the time of the Tet Offensive. After this, U.S. ground forces were gradually withdrawn as part of a policy known as Vietnamization. Despite the Paris Peace Accords, signed by all parties in January 1973, fighting continued. U.S. military involvement ended on 15 August 1973 as a result of the Case–Church Amendment passed by the U.S. Congress. The war exacted a huge human cost in terms of fatalities (Anderson, 2005).

II. THE SOUNDTRACK OF WAR IN APOCALYPSE NOW

Barbosa and Dizon explain that the music used in film "contributes to the meaning of the visual images presented to the audience," chosen either by directors working with composers to design a particular piece or working on a pre-existing sound (86). The opening of *Apocalypse Now*'s screenplay refers to moving Vietnamese and Americans, flames and to loud electric rock music, without specifying which song or music it is. It reads:

> "OUR VIEW MOVES AWAY, along with the running sandals of a Vietnamese soldier, MOVING FASTER AND FASTER, only to be stopped by still another of the savage-looking AMERICANS with primitive ornamentation, wearing only a loin-cloth and green beret. He opens his flame-thrower directly ON US and the NVA soldier and we are incinerated in flame, bright psychedelic orange-red flame. Outrageous, loud, electric ROCK MUSIC OVERWHELMS the SOUNDTRACK: MAIN TITLE: APOCALYPSE NOW" (Milius, 1975, p. 03).

Rock music refers to the Rock and Roll that knew its official beginnings with Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" in 1954 and the Elvis Presley's performances (Dawson, 1992). Psychedelic rock emerged during Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, first with the Beatles and then Pink Floyd, The Jimi Hendrix Experience and The Doors (Misiroglu, 2009). The Cultural Revolution gave birth to a new consciousness that defined new perspectives for music and film and popular culture.

The second piece I am concerned with in this article is a Classical music piece that can be contrasted to popular or folk music. Classical music is an art form and a type of music characterized by its formality and that is rooted in churches and royal

courts. It is often related to names such Joseph Hayden, Wolfgang Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert as the first composers from the Viennese School of late 18th Century and early 19th century. From this tradition, Beethoven's "Symphony No. 7", used in *The King's Speech* (2010), Mozart's "Requiem in D Minor", in *Amadeus* (1984), and Richard Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" (1854) and "The Ride of the Valkyries" provided some of cinema's most memorable soundtracks.

As a foundational work, Michel Chion's work *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen* (1990) reflects on the function of sound in moving images. He uses the concept of "audiovisual" to explain that we never perceive sound and image separately in cinema, but rather experience a unified "audiovisual" phenomenon where sound and image mutually influence our perception of each other (Chion, 1994). Barbosa and Dizon build on his vision of sound intercepting syntax, semantics, taxonomy and application, taking into consideration that some sound in film has a "hybrid nature" (83). It encompasses the difference between Diegetic and non-diegetic formwork, sound categories, temporal relationships, and special dimensions, which are the placement of the sound in relation to the image. *Apocalypse Now* combines psychedelic Rock and romantic opera and classical music in the context of the Cold War as narrative devices to give one of the best examples of the way beauty and brutality can be used, proving the exceptional talent of the director.

I.1. "The End" by The Doors

The Doors are an American rock band formed in 1965 in Los Angeles, California, with vocalist Jim Morrison, Keyboardist Manzarek, drummer Densmore and guitarist Robby Krieger. The band took its name from the title of Aldous Huxley's book *The Door of Perceptions* published in 1954. They were among the most controversial rock acts of the 1960s, mostly due to Morrison's wild, poetic lyrics and charismatic but unpredictable stage persona. After Morrison's death in 1971, the remaining members continued as a trio until finally disbanding in 1973. They were signed to Elektra Records in 1966. They released ten albums and collected 19 gold, 14 platinum and 5 Multi-Platinum awards album awards in the United States alone. In 1993, The Doors were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.[1]

The Doors' "The End" is an epic song, originally written because of a breakup experienced by Morrison with his ex-girlfriend (Farley, 2005). It was released on January 4th, 1967, but continuously interested critics, especially after its appearance in *Apocalypse Now*. The song appears in the film as a Non-Diegetic sound that is added for the audience (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, p.87), which transforms the song from a break-up tune to a war anthem. Paradoxically, however, "This is the end" is the verse that announces the beginning of *Apocalypse Now*. The shot opens on the burning forest and an upside-down close-up shot of Captain Willard fading into the flames of the thick jungle in Vietnam. In this case, and from a semantic taxonomic perspective, the sound raises feelings of fear and discomfort. It goes:

"This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end

of our elaborate plans, the end

[1] See The Doors' official Web site: https://thedoors.com/the-band

of everything that stands, the end
I'll never look into your eyes again

Can you picture what will be?
So limitless and free
Desperately in need
Of some stranger's hand
In a desperate land

Lost in a Roman wilderness of pain
And all the children are insane" (The Doors, "The End", 1967)[1]



Figure 01: Close-up shot opening *Apocalypse Now* with "The End" (00:02:12)

The intertwinement of the song and the shot creates a "dream-like state". They, the music and the shots' content, represent the altered consciousness of the character. The unclear cut creates an ambiguity between hearing the soundtrack and Willard's internal dialogue that reflects the dissolution of reality that the war produces. This oneiric moment is a transition between one reality and another presented by Barbarosa and Dizon through,

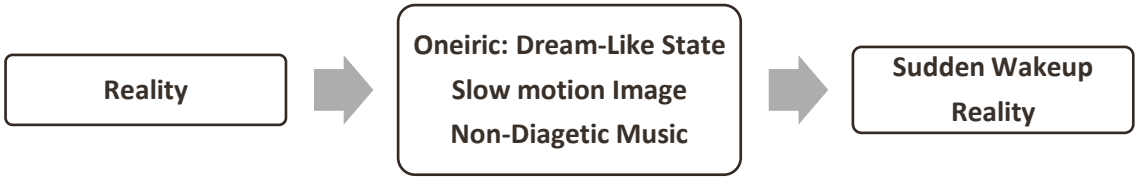


Figure 02: Transitioning to, and from, an oneiric moment (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, p. 89).

This moment can be applied of *Apocalypse Now* through Captain Willard's arrival to Vietnam. He dives into the past in a dreamy state while the audience can hear the track by The Doors, something that he is not aware of. Captain Willard awakens to his reality in Vietnam, through the sound of the helicopters. Thus, it seems Captain Willard is trapped between two realities: the past and the present, only

[1] Official audio of "The End" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXqPNlng6uI

the song remind us the audience that it is only about present moment. Liam Bradford uses this shot to refer to Captain Willard tormented by his memories in the Vietnam War (Bradford, 2020).



Morrison was a vocal critic of the Vietnam War and embodied the counterculture's anti-establishment ethos. The Doors' music represented a rebellion against the military-industrial complex and conventional American values. "The End," with its themes of death, dissolution and the breaking of social taboos, became an anthem for a generation questioning authority and rejecting the war, resonating with the American youth watching their world collapse under the weight of an increasingly unpopular war. When Murch is asked to comment on the use of rock 'n' roll in the film, he says:

> "The funny thing was that wherever we put whatever piece of Doors music we had, it was as if we had Jim Morrison in the room looking at the images and coming up with words to describe them…. They were simply duplicating what you were seeing visually or commenting too exactly on it. … But I think "The End" becomes even more powerful because of its placement at the beginning and at the end and nowhere in between" (Sragow, 2000).

The text itself does not refer to any war. It captures, however, Willard in a stranger's land, obeying people that he seems to know but with whom he shares nothing. He is, like all the characters in *Apocalypse Now*, "Lost in a Roman wilderness of pain" (The Doors, "The End") In this context, as is the case with *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, the Roman Empire is used to refer to the decline of a great civilisation. Rome serves as the archetype empire that destroyed itself through excess and endless warfare. This image becomes potent with the United States representing the modern Rome, lost in the "wilderness" of Southeast Asia, destroying itself and its agents and the wilderness around it. The face of Willard suggests that this is also the journey or the story of Captain Willard, lost in the United States' war machine and thus questioning the purpose of the war.

"The End" opens the film, turning patricide and violence into a druggy, apocalyptic tone poem. This musical choice suggests a kind of ecstatic madness. Morrison's death in 1971 before the film's production meant he could not consent to or context the use of his work, but his stance against the war is recorded. The anti-establishment song that once soundtracked protests against the operation in Vietnam is now inseparable from cinematic images of the American military occupation.

I.2. "The Ride of the Valkyries" by Wagner

As a Revolutionary product of the 1970s, *Apocalypse Now* gathers the rock as a music of the counterculture and the classical piece that represents "civilisation" and culture with a capital "C." "The Ride of the Valkyries"[1] is the prelude of the first

[1] Trodheim Symphony Orchestra and Opera in Olavshallen on March 11th, 2021, conducted by James Gaffigan, playing "The Ride of the Valkyries": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQM97_iNXhk. See

scene of the last act of "Die Walkure" or "The Valkyrie". It is the second of the four epic music dramas that constituted Richard Wagner's cycle "The Ring of the Nibelung." It was performed as a single opera, at the National Theatre Munich, on 26 June 1870 and received its first performance as part of the Ring cycle at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in August 1876. Historical films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by G.W.Griffith, action thrillers like *Wrath of Man* (2021) by Guy Ritchie and even animations like *Rango* (2011) by Gore Verbinski use this piece in their soundtrack.

"**T**he Ride of the Valkyries" is triumphant, exhilarating and violent, capturing both the glory and horror of battle. Wagner (1813-1883) was a German composer, theatre director, essayist and conductor of his operas. His music became associated with WWII and power, especially during the Nazi Control of Germany. Frederich Spotts discusses a special friendship that developed between Hitler and the Wagner family (2003).



Figure 03: "The Ride of the Valkyries" scene in *Apocalypse Now (00:37:53)*

There is a temporal relationship between "The Ride of the Valkyries" sound and the long shot here of the U.S Army arriving in Vietnam. The sound is used to match the visual action. The Valkyries, in Norse mythology, are minor goddesses and battle-maidens of Freya and choosers of the slain. They are the ones who select the ones to fall in Battle and thus join the Valhalla or be with Freya. The ones who enter the Valhalla are destined to fight on the side of the gods at Ragnarock. There are different depictions of the Valkyries, which can be maidens or bloodthirsty giants (Colman, 2007, p.1072). They are literally the angels of death, beautiful, powerful, and terrifying figures who decide fate in war. Murch's sound design blurs diegetic/non-diegetic boundaries to collapse distance between viewer and participant.

The arrival of the helicopters, as a diegetic sound that exists on the scene (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, p. 87), on this foreign land is like the arrival of the Valkyries to the battlefield. The sound that starts as diegetic becomes Meta-Diegetic sound as the characters have a personal appreciation of the sound (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, 88). This kind of sound is referred to by Claudia Gorbman as "secondary narrator" as it has also a story to tell (Gorbman, 1976). This technique reinforces the

"The Ride of the Valkyries" illustration by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939) at https://artvee.com/dl/the-ride-of-the-valkyries/

film's surreal, operatic nature of modern warfare, as the soldiers mythologize their own violence making it a theatrical spectacle. The strong presence of the American and Western culture in the film can to be contrasted with the absence of the Vietnamese sonic identity. This silence itself is political and enforces the reproduction of the imperial stance between the British and the Africans in *Heart of Darkness.*

In the context of *Apocalypse Now*, "The Ride of the Valkyries" tells the story of powerful and terrifying creatures coming to choose those souls to take. More than the Valkyries themselves, the Helicopters are associated with the war. The association of the composer and this piece of music with one of the most tragic and controversial figures of WWII evokes the fascist aestheticization of violence. The scene demonstrates the mythological arrival from the sky of the technologically superior god-like people brought in "decaying machinery". However and instead of taking warriors, they are killing civilians, women and children, and farmers.

Wagner's classical composition serves as the primary sonic element during the attack sequence. The sound is diegetic as it is played from the helicopter speakers within the scene, and the Vietnamese villagers can hear. It is intentionally broadcasted. On one of the helicopters, Captain Kilgore says, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." Napalm is an incendiary mixture of a gelling agent and volatile chemicals that is mixed with the sound of the helicopter and Wagner's piece. The volume swells dramatically as helicopters approach, creating depth and intensity. In this scene, the sound "exists equally on-screen" (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, p. 87). In some instances, there is a fluid boundary where the music functions both as a part of the scene's reality and as an emotional orchestration for the audience.

The juxtaposition of Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" with the helicopter attack in *Apocalypse Now* is one of cinema's most powerful explorations of war's terrible beauty and the way violence can be choreographed into something aesthetically overwhelming even as it depicts horror. Wagner draws on Norse mythology's warrior-maidens who chose the honoured dead. Coppola, through Kilgore, uses this mythology to soundtrack napalming Vietnamese villagers. In addition to the use of the soundtracks, the silences, the loudness also participate in the meaning making (Barbarosa and Dizon, 2020, pp. 90-91).

"**T**he Ride of the Valkyries" performs an ironic inversion of Wagner's intended mythology. It exposes the colonialist fantasy that is recycled across empires. The music reveals that the American military has transformed Vietnam into its Wagnerian fantasy, a stage for performing heroism, completely disconnected from the reality of what they are actually doing, humans committing atrocities. The scene does not glorify the soldiers; it exposes their self-delusion, showing how the empire requires mythology to function, as these soldiers see themselves as agents of peace and civilisation. The Valkyries theme becomes associated with American military power and Kilgore's characters throughout the film. It creates a jarring juxtaposition between European culture and brutal colonial violence. In addition to reconstructing "the imperial Gaze" and producing the American imperialist discourse, *Apocalypse Now* attempts to undo and redo, reconstructing the image of the Whiteman through the horrors of the Vietnam War. The film critiques the war and anesthetises it through the very music that represented opposition to it. Both pieces are beautiful forcing the viewers to experience aesthetic pleasure during scenes of horror, which creates a moral discomfort.

CONCLUSION

By the Twenty-first century, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is still referred to as one of the most revolutionary films in the history of cinema. It "beautifully" immerses the viewer in the authorities of Vietnam War through the story, characters and events and also through the dramatic choices of the soundtrack.

Throughout this article, the FSAF, Film Sound Analysis Framework, explores the film's ability to adapt to different musical genre representing two different cultures like rock and classical steams from the genius of direction and sound design. Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" and The Doors' "The End" transform the film into a stage for performance, both dramatic and engaging. Together, these opposing sonic registers, one an operatic celebration of mythological warfare, the other a psychedelic meditation on dissolution, force viewers into complicity with the film's aestheticized violence, creating ab unbearable tension between the pleasure of experiencing beautiful art and the horror of witnessing imperial atrocity.

Apocalypse Now proves how important sound to cinema and the impact the right sound on its content, especially in case of controversial issues, as is the American involvement in Vietnam.

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THE APPENDICES



Close-up shot opening *Apocalypse Now* with "The End" track playing.



"The Ride of the Valkyries" illustration by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), https://artvee.com/dl/the-ride-of-the-valkyries/



"The Ride of the Valkyries" scene in *Apocalypse Now*

TO QUOTE THE AUTTHOR :

TERKI, Nassima (2025), « The Aesthetics of War: "The End" and "The Ride of the Valkyries" in A*pocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola », Ex Professo, V 10, Special Issue, pp. 19- 29, Url : https://ww.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484