

Surfing:

A Transcendent Tool for Social Criticism in *Otelo Burning* and *Apocalypse Now*

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While athletic events are often portrayed in films as light-hearted sources of entertainment, they serve as valuable mediums to establish greater social and political criticisms. Sara Blecher's 2011 South African film *Otelo Burning* provides a powerful commentary regarding the social impacts of Apartheid in the context of two friends who attempt to pursue careers as surfers. Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 epic war film *Apocalypse Now* is a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and serves to apply Conrad's criticism of imperialism to American intervention during the Vietnam War. However, Coppola made the creative decision to implement surfing as a source of commentary in his film, which was absent from Conrad's original work. While these films are remarkably different in terms of their plots, both utilize surfing as a tool to facilitate their political and social criticisms of the historical events that they examine. Both *Otelo Burning* and *Apocalypse Now* provide opposing perspectives towards surfing through their photographic presentation. However, the films utilize it as a vehicle to expose disparities between the communities they discuss and criticize the detrimental effects of male hubris to achieve their overarching criticisms.

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Through its use of specific shot angles and lighting, *Otelo Burning* evokes feelings of respect and admiration for the art of surfing. For example, whenever surfers are portrayed in the film, they are the dominant subjects of the shot, usually appearing in the center of the screen to attract the audience's focus. For example, when Otelo and New Year watch Mandla surf for the first time, the camera observes Mandla from a low angle, depicting him at the crest of the wave with the lighting of the sun illuminating his body. Through this angle and lighting, Blecher physically embodies Otelo and New Year's idolization of surfing, emphasizing its representation of freedom and salvation from the political and economic hardships that they face. This technique is consistently used every time someone is surfing in the film, allowing audiences to experience the same feelings of awe and reverie as the people of Lamontville. These emotions are especially heightened in the film's low-angle shots of surfboards from underwater. Through this unique angle, the dominant subject changes from the surfer to the surfboard, cultivating an admiration for the craft itself rather than for the surfer's talent and athleticism. By using low-angled, focused shots, Blecher immerses audiences in the film's portrayal of surfing, exemplifying the reverence and positivity with which it is regarded by the characters in the film.

Conversely, the photographic techniques used to portray surfing in *Apocalypse Now* evoke feelings of criticism instead of respect. Rather than being established as a dominant, the act of surfing is instead masked by the smoke of incendiary bombs and the rapid movement of soldiers and alarmed villagers. In the brief moments where surfing is visible, the surfers are depicted using wide, higher angled shots, displaying them as small and insignificant to the scene overall. By having audiences physically look down on Kilgore's men, Coppola encourages viewers to frown upon their actions and highlights

the absurdity of Kilgore's demands, as the leisurely pastime of surfing truly has no place in a turbulent warzone. When he does elect to have a more focused shot with the surfers as dominants, they are displayed falling off of their boards and being ridiculed by Kilgore from the beach. This shot serves to further demean their actions and encourage audiences not to harbor any feelings of admiration or respect towards them. By distancing viewers through the photographic portrayal of surfing in *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola highlights the absurdity of its presence and alienates viewers from the ideology of its proponents in the film.

Although both films exemplify its thematic value through their photographical methods, surfing simultaneously serves as a vehicle to highlight the disparities resulting from each film's unique political climate. In *Otelo Burning*, surfing exposes the significant divide between the racial communities in South Africa during Apartheid. For the people of Lamontville, Otelo's township, surfing is a privilege restricted solely to the white community, as native Africans lack accessibility to the beaches and the financial means to purchase and maintain their own surfboards. However, this "monopoly" over surfing is dramatically shifted once Kurt, a white man living near the beach, sees Mandla's potential and offers to train him and Otelo for a regional competition. Through consistent practice, both become excellent surfers and qualify for nationals, with Otelo winning the regional competition. While Otelo and Mandla's success somewhat serves to bridge the gap between the racial communities in the film, as the two gain the same opportunity provided to their white counterparts, they would not have been able to do so without the resources provided to them by the white community. If Mandla had not worked for a white family, he would not have had access to a surfboard to learn the craft. Similarly, if he had never been seen by Kurt, neither him

nor Otelo would have had the opportunity to train or compete in any competitions. This underlying reality undermines Otelo and Mandla's attempts to transcend the conditions of their township in hopes of experiencing the same opportunities that are inherently provided to their white counterparts, reminding readers of the political undertones that shape the events of the film. By portraying surfing as a unique privilege granted to Mandla and Otelo as a result of their connections in the white community, Blecher exposes the economic divisions between the racial communities that plagued South Africa during Apartheid.

On a similar note, *Apocalypse Now* uses surfing to emphasize the discrepancies between American interventionists and Viet Cong villagers. As the American soldiers approach with their helicopters in formation, they are engaged in casual conversations about preferred surfboards and even make jokes. This image is strikingly juxtaposed with a bird's eye of view shot of the Viet Cong village, displaying alarmed inhabitants in a frenzy to flee for safety or gathering weapons in hopes of rebuffing the attack. Before the act is even conducted, surfing serves as a conversation piece highlighting the sense of security that the American soldiers feel during their impending airstrike, emphasizing their superior militaristic resources and regard for the Vietnamese people as solely targets for shooting practice instead of a threat. This attitude is further highlighted when the incendiary bombs are dropped, as the complete destruction of the village is juxtaposed with shots of Kilgore casually removing his shirt and ordering his men to begin surfing on the waves. In doing so, Kilgore emphasizes the safety that the American soldiers feel in the wake of this chaos, as he can afford to send some of his men to leisurely surf instead of assisting in the battle. This also serves to portray the soldiers themselves as disposable

resources whose lives can be threatened due to the plethora of men and weaponry already present. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese are portrayed as hopelessly fighting for their lives, as their resources are completely demolished, establishing an antithetical ideology in regards to security. While the presence of surfing in this heavily militaristic scene may seem out of place, Coppola masterfully uses it to establish a stark contrast between the Americans and Viet Cong in terms of both resources and ideology.

Aside from exposing the financial disparities underlying both films, surfing also serves as a tool for criticizing male hubris. In *Otelo Burning*, Otelo and Mandla's motivations for surfing are strikingly different. To Otelo, surfing serves as a means of transcending the stresses of his family life and the confining lifestyle of Lamontville. While Mandla initially has a similar perspective, it changes when his talent becomes overshadowed by Otelo's rising success as a surfer. Additionally, he is unable to garner the attraction of Dezi, New Year's sister, who is instead infatuated by Otelo. As a result, he becomes motivated by jealousy and surfs to prove himself as a superior athlete and man. His jealousy and insecurity ultimately motivate him to commit heinous acts, such as raping Dezi and causing Ntwe, Otelo's younger brother, to be burned alive, as he frames him as an informant, exposing the detrimental effects of Mandla's hubris. After finding out about the horrible acts Mandla has created, Otelo reluctantly decides to kill Mandla in order to avenge his brother, sacrificing his chances to improve his financial and social status and to compete in the sport that he loves. While his actions may not be the most morally favorable to audiences, as he commits an act of murder himself, Otelo is motivated by his love for his brother and a desire for justice, rather than jealousy or spite. In doing so, Blecher establishes a stark contrast between Otelo and

Mandla as foil characters, causing audiences to condemn Mandla's hubris and feel sympathy for Otelo. By using surfing as a precipitant for Mandla's horrible actions, *Otelo Burning* exposes the detrimental effects of Mandla's pride on his community and, ultimately, himself, cautioning readers to reject the conventions of male hubris.

In a similar fashion, *Apocalypse Now* uses surfing to criticize male hubris by systematically undermining Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore. Kilgore's integrity as an authority figure in the American military is first questioned when his motivation for helping Willard achieve safe passage through Viet Cong territory is solely based on his accompaniment by a famous surfer, displaying his prioritization of self-interest over his duty as a soldier. Aside from his motivation, Kilgore is further criticized once he is shown putting his men in danger in the war zone by making them surf on the waves even when incendiary bombs are falling from the sky. Rather than prioritizing the lives of his men, Kilgore instead uses surfing as a means of marking his territory and asserting his dominance over the villagers whose home he has just destroyed. Kilgore's hubris is additionally exposed through his complete and utter disregard for the Vietnamese people. He relishes in the smell of napalm, the gasoline used in the bombs that his soldiers have dropped, and repeatedly mentions that "Charlie Don't Surf," with "Charlie" referring to the Viet Cong people. By highlighting the absurdity of Kilgore's perspectives and hubris, Coppola additionally achieves a greater underlying criticism of American imperialistic spirit during their intervention in the Vietnam War, painting Kilgore as a figurehead for this movement. In addition, the use of surfing itself serves as an expression of imperial power, as the American soldiers take ownership of an originally Polynesian sport and utilize it to impose their dominance over the Viet Cong forces that they are

fighting. By using surfing to paint Kilgore as a controversial authority figure whose pride endangers the lives of his soldiers, Coppola provides an intricate criticism of both the perils of male hubris and the imperialistic spirit underlying American intervention efforts during the Vietnam War.

Although *Otelo Burning* and *Apocalypse Now* cultivate different attitudes towards the presence of surfing through its photographic depiction, both of them effectively use it as a vehicle to perpetuate their criticisms of the underlying disparities and male hubris in the historical events they discuss. In *Otelo Burning*, surfing is revered and represents an optimistic ideal of transcending the conflicts of a confining society in the pursuit of happiness and a better life. Meanwhile, *Apocalypse Now* uses surfing as a subject of criticism, using it to highlight the inhumanity of the imperial spirit that guided American intervention efforts during the Vietnam War. Through their diverse portrayals and uses of surfing as a thematic device, Sara Blecher and Francis Ford Coppola beautifully exemplify the capabilities of athletic events to elicit sophisticated and profound criticisms of history through film.

WORKS CITED

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