

Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 21: The Kurtz Temple



Forward

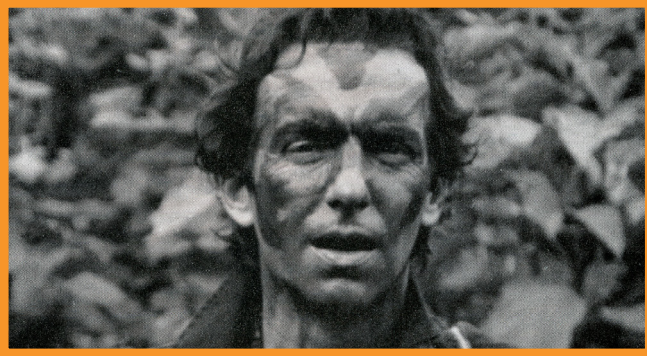
By **CINEMATYLER**

Thanks so much for your support! The construction of the Kurtz Temple wasn't something I had really thought about over years of watching *Apocalypse Now*. I had always just assumed that it was filmed at actual temple ruins and the interiors were done elsewhere—either a sound stage or a location with a more complete temple. That it was not only constructed on-location, but built for real and without the use of modern equipment just shows the dedication to Coppola's vision. That it was constructed by 700 laborers for a couple of dollars a day highlights the ethical concerns

(especially considering how much money was spent on just shipping creature comforts in from the states).

I was also very surprised and saddened to hear of the passing of Eleanor Coppola on April 12th. I guess I wasn't expecting her to go before Francis and so close to the release of *Megalopolis*. In this companion, you'll find a little write-up on Eleanor and Francis's marriage focusing primarily on *Apocalypse Now*.

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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?



Dean Tavoularis (Prod. Design):

The Designer. His creative eye will breathe life into the surreal world of *Apocalypse Now*. Working on multiple large locations at once (including the construction of a giant temple) could make a person lose their mind, but Tavoularis keeps cool under pressure.



Jerry Zeisler (Assistant Director):

The Left-Hand. Along with playing one of the most mysterious characters in the movie, Zeisler would assist Coppola in completing his vision. He would give everything to the project, including giving up his chance to rest by staying behind during the hiatus to make sure the production was getting back on its feet.



Eleanor Coppola:

The Eyes. It is through Eleanor Coppola's eyes that we will see most of the story of the making of *Apocalypse Now*. Her documentary *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* will have the honor of being a making-of documentary that many consider almost as good as the film itself.

Eleanor & Francis

THE COPPOLAS

Getting Together

Eleanor Neil met Francis Ford Coppola in 1962 while working as an assistant art director on his Roger Corman-produced directorial debut, *Dementia 13* in Ireland. After several months of dating, Eleanor became pregnant with their first son Gian-Carlo. After briefly considering putting him up for adoption, they decided to become a family and got married in Las Vegas.

They had their second son, Roman, in 1965. Francis and Eleanor held quite traditional views of marriage. She was ready to support Francis' artistic dream of carving a new kind of directing career outside of the Hollywood studio system. Their marriage brought about a stable family life, which saw the birth of their third child, Sofia, during the making of *The Godfather*. Sofia would make an appearance as Michael Corleone's baby during the baptism scene.

Eleanor shared insights into Francis's life both on and off the set during an interview with Mairi Mackay. Eleanor noted that Francis's instincts as a director creep into his everyday life, even dictating minor details like dinner arrangements at home, which she finds amusing now. His creative flair extends beyond filmmaking; Eleanor highlighted his sense of humor,

mentioning how he enjoys singing and can effortlessly create songs about virtually anything. Additionally, she reflected on how Francis's personal experiences deeply influence his movies, especially the stories he has written, saying,

[The] original pieces resonate with his life and aspects that reflect the way his life has evolved. He does address the issues -- both the positive and the darker side too. I think "The Godfather" was a raw example of his experience at weddings, with family, and he just took his experiences and viewed those characters with the familiar aspects that he had known.³

Apocalypse Now

After the great success of the first two *Godfather* movies, it was time for the family's biggest adventure (and biggest challenge) yet. Initially envisioned as a fun, expansive war film set in the lush landscapes of the Philippines, Francis quickly realized the gravity of the subject as he dove deeper into the research, confronting the difficult realities of war and its profound emotional toll. This thematic shift pushed him to explore significant life and death themes, leading to a deeply personal journey into the film's production.

Eleanor & Francis

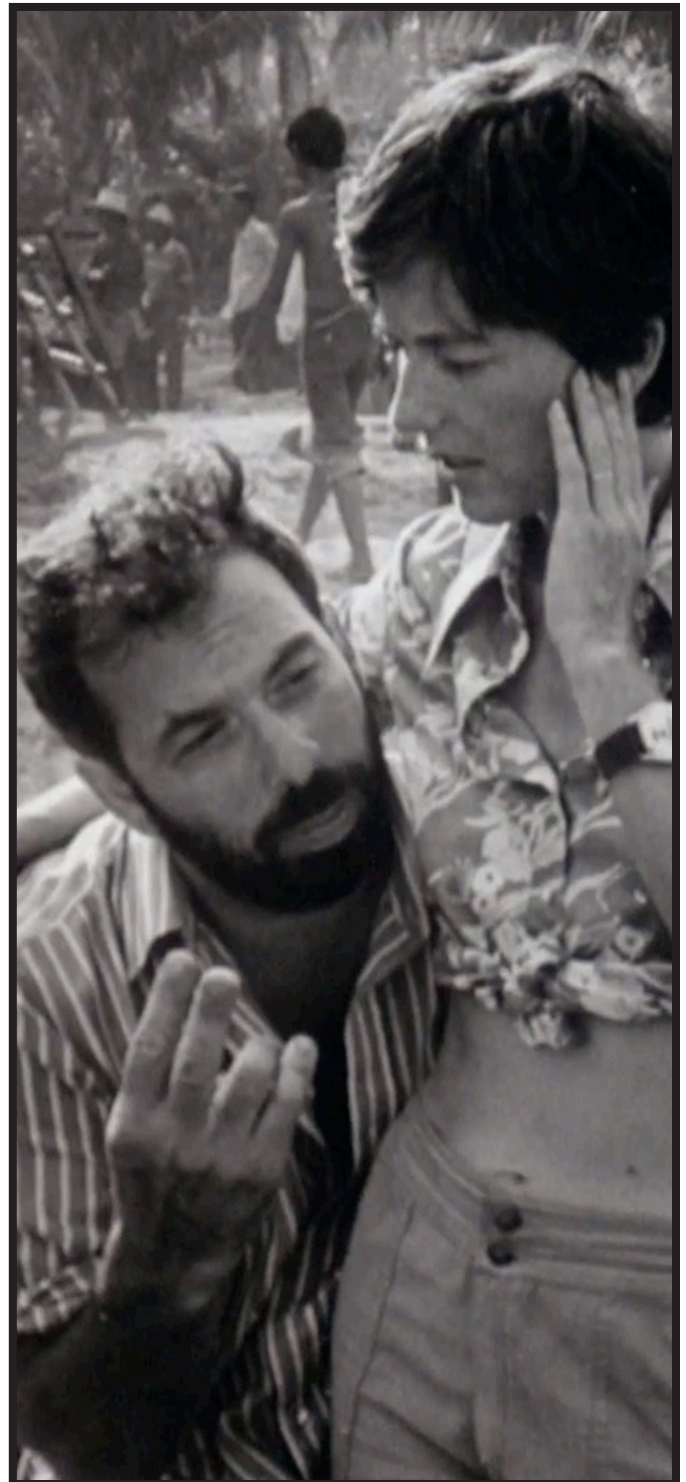
THE COPPOLAS

The filming was filled with external pressures, including the fear that rebels against Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos' regime may attempt to kidnap Francis. When asked about it, Eleanor said,

[They] had some idea that, if Francis would be kidnaped for some political reasons by the insurgents, that it would create an international incident and bring attention to the Philippines and, unwanted attention so that, they provided us right from the beginning with the personal bodyguards. And it was very strange to live in a context where these bodyguards were around all the time.⁴

Eleanor found herself perhaps even more concerned about the possibility of an accident involving the weapons that the bodyguards casually handled so close to the family in their daily lives. (4) One guard carried a pistol in the waistband of his jeans and would bring it out to show the kids how it worked.

As the movie became more and more complex, Eleanor felt the need to send a telex to Francis (as well as some important crew members) that he was becoming like Kurtz and creating his own Vietnam in the filming locations spread throughout the Philippines with "wines and steaks



Eleanor & Francis

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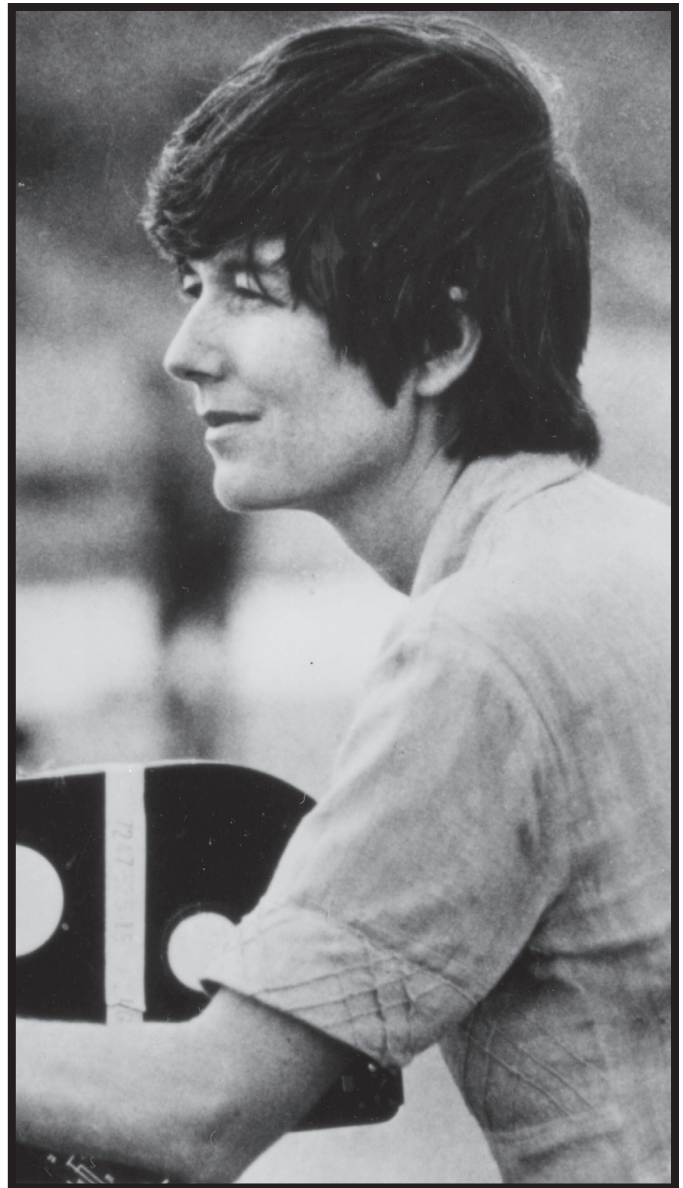
and air conditioners.”⁴ She feared that the production was spiraling out of control and Francis would collapse under the pressure.

Despite these challenges, Francis managed to regain his composure and finish the film, but not without going through moments that Eleanor described as frighteningly intense. This period not only tested their individual psyches, but the strength of their marriage as well.

Hearts of Darkness

During *Apocalypse Now*'s production, Eleanor found herself capturing endless amounts of footage of the filmmaking process that would eventually be turned into one of the greatest documentaries ever made—*Hearts of Darkness*. Initially, her involvement began merely as a way to keep herself busy during the lengthy film production in the Philippines. She had no prior experience in documentary filmmaking and started with the modest goal of producing just a few minutes of footage for promotional purposes. However, as she continued filming, the project evolved significantly, ultimately transforming both the documentary and herself in profound ways. Eleanor described the experience as life-changing, not only because of the extreme challenges

it presented but also due to the serious risks involved, including the tragic loss of two lives during the construction of the Kurtz temple. This intense experience pushed her limits and marked a significant turning point in her life and career.



Eleanor & Francis

THE COPPOLAS

After Apocalypse

Tragedy struck in the spring of 1986 when her first born son Gio died in a boating accident at the age of twenty-two. Eleanor and Francis's granddaughter would within a few months of the event. Eleanor writes at length about coping with this immeasurable loss in thirty years worth of diary entries that were made into a book titled *Notes on a Life*. The book reveals Eleanor as being pulled in two different directions—one in which she deeply loves her family and the regret of not chasing her own artistic dreams as much as she wished she had.

This isn't to say that she neglected her own artistic pursuits entirely. In 2016, Eleanor released her own movie titled *Paris Can Wait* starring Diane Lane as a movie producer's wife who takes a road trip from Cannes to Paris with one of her husband's colleagues, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. Her second and final movie titled *Love is Love is Love*, released in 2020, features the weaving together of three love stories.

Eleanor Coppola passed away in her Napa Valley home on April 12th, 2024.



Selected Comments

SHEEN'S HEART ATTACK



@JMD501

Imagine calling in John Milius to be your voice of reason.



@OuterGalaxyLounge

I saw this when it opened in 1979 when there were like 10 people in the theater, then saw it two years later in 1981 when I was in college at the packed student theater, as the movie had already become a cult classic, then saw it on cable and home video in all the years since. Thank you Francis and the crew for sticking it out and making this life-long classic, and for Cinema Tyler for your tenacious grindset for giving us the definitive encyclopedic analysis.



@davidssummer8631

In Wall Street there is a scene where Bud (Charlie Sheen) rushes to the hospital due to his dad (Martin Sheen) having a heart attack and Charlie has said that brought back memories of him rushing to the Philippines after his father had his heart attack



@Ruylopez778

"Finally you say fuck it!"

A great quote I looked up again recently when I saw a comment online about being pretentious, deep wisdom about creating art, and very revealing about the production. But if you're ever going to make art this bold and iconic, you're going to have to face these fears and smash through the vulnerability as a creator. There are so many lessons from this movie and the production and documentation of it. Lessons on how to live life also even for people without an artistic career.



@Firebrand1967

Apocalypse Now is a masterfully epic film and one of my favorites, along with A Clockwork Orange and Blade Runner.

I had the brief pleasure of meeting Martin Sheen while working Security on The Departed film set in Boston some years ago. He was very candid and gracious with me as I praised his Capt. Willard performance by saying that he deserved an Oscar for Apocalypse Now and that I loved the movie. He thanked me and clasped his right hand over his heart and smiled as I courtesy escorted him to his trailer.

Selected Comments

SHEEN'S HEART ATTACK



@labla8940

you can see the confusion and uncomfortable feeling in the movie perfectly mirroring the drama behind the camera, in a good way



@jimmerhardy

What you're describing in immense detail is the monumental stress that no human being could survive. It's amazing Coppola did. That and that film are miracles.



@D-Fens_1632

And I only recently learned of an amusing thing to come from his heart attack. During filming for *The Breakfast Club* actor John Kapelos told the young actors not to work so hard on set and how it almost killed Martin Sheen. An apologetic Kapelos did not realize the rather upset Emilio was Martin's son and felt terrible. Many years later Kapelos worked with Martin and told him this story, which Sheen found hilarious. Maybe that's common knowledge but I found it amusing.

SOURCES

Endnotes

1. *Eleanor Coppola (Wiki)*
2. *Eleanor and Francis by Sarah Kerr (New York Times)*
3. *Coppola's wife: 'Apocalypse Now' was 'out of control' By Mairi Mackay (CNN)*
4. *Eleanor Coppola, Locating the 'Hearts of Darkness' (NPR Fresh Air)*

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