

Apocalypse Now Redux (Who Knew?)

by

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On Monday, September 10, 2001 I decided to go see “Apocalypse Now Redux.” The movie had opened in August, while I was away on vacation in New Hampshire with my wife, Lisa, and our son, Matthew. I had read all the reviews and it was on the top of my list of must see movies, now that we were back in New York. Mondays and Wednesdays were my nights out. Lisa and I alternated the nightly duty of shepherding ten year old Matthew through homework, bath time, before bed toast, teeth brushing, story time and the current favorite nightly rendition of “Hello Dolly,” all done in an unalterable sequence before he would reluctantly succumb to sleep.

This new version of “Apocalypse Now” is three hours long, so after a hasty dinner, I said my good-byes and set off for the subway. The movie was playing in two theatres that night, one on 14th Street that I usually allow time to walk to and the other at the IMAX theatre uptown at Broadway and 68th Street. I had been for years the sort of movie-goer that sits right up front in the second or third row to get totally immersed in the show, but now that I was about to turn fifty, I was starting to settle into the middle front section or even in the stadium sections of the big multiplexes. I first saw “Apocalypse Now” when I was twenty-eight years old, nine years after I had handed in my draft card at a rally in which Joan Baez sang on the campus of Stanford University, just days after the Kent State shootings. The movie had a big affect on me back then, so I again felt the old urge to totally immerse myself in the world of the film. I had seen the Rolling Stones concert movie of their Steel Wheels Tour on the IMAX screen complete with giant inflatable phallus and in-the-crowd catwalk and was suitably impressed, so the IMAX theatre seemed the right choice that night.

Down I went into the subway at Broadway and Houston for the somewhat arduous trek up to 68th Street. I changed trains at West 4th Street and ran up the stairs from the F train just missing the C train as it pulled out of the station. Then I waited. No C train came. An announcement on those PA speakers, so aptly parodied on an early Saturday Night Live, squawked some information. I had to move directly under one to interpret the sounds.

There was no northbound C train service at this time it said. I regrouped and decided to take the A train to 59th Street and Columbus Circle and walked the nine blocks up Broadway to the theatre getting there in time to buy my ticket and start the ascent up to the mammoth screen via two long silver escalators, past murals dedicated to the great cinema of the past and the posters of soon to be released shows.

By the time I reached the top of the second escalator, I had just about caught my breath. As I handed the attendant my ticket and walked into the theatre, I congratulated myself on conquering adversity to get there on time and settled into my seat in anticipation of being overwhelmed by sounds and images from the past. I had decided to rebel against the excessive size of a small Coke and popcorn in a subconscious attempt at solidarity with the idealism of my younger days, so I sat quietly waiting for the show to begin.

The previews started and immediately there was something wrong. The sound was muffled and the dialogue was unintelligible. Being Monday the theatre was maybe one third full, and we all shifted in our seats. After another minute of this the first restive cries of “sound” started to erupt from the audience. The previews ended, and I think we all thought, “Well, maybe now the feature will be OK.” No such luck. The helicopter sounds traced the room in surround sound, but Jim Morrison sounded like he was running hell bent away from the exploding jungle of the opening sequence. We hung in there for Martin Sheen to make it through his drunken, blood soaked hotel room scene and the next in the general’s quarters receiving his assignment over a roast beef and prawn dinner before the projectionist finally pulled the plug. An usher emerged to tell us that the sound system was broken. There would be no movie that night.

In the immediate lobby on the upper floor we the audience gathered to hear an employee tell us that someone would be coming upstairs to give us vouchers to see the movie another time. “No way,” yelled a large man with an equally large umbrella. “I came all the way from Queens to see this damn movie, and you’re gonna to show it.” Other people offered that they wanted their money back, while still others wanted their money back and a voucher for the inconvenience. The large man lit into the anxious attendant yelling

all manner of abuse, and then demanding money right then and there. Someone offered to give the large man the price of admission from their own pocket to quiet him down. He would have none of it. The vouchers arrived and people started taking handfuls. They soon ran out. I went down to the lobby, where a manager was returning our money and giving vouchers along with it while suffering much abuse from another disgruntled and disappointed customer. There was a lot of grumbling in agreement with the outspoken customer.

On my way downtown on the subway I felt disappointed that my nostalgic movie experience had been thwarted, a little embarrassed for the people who had made such fools of themselves in public and a bit relieved that I hadn't acted that way myself. I have been known to stray into that territory on a few occasions. When I walked in the door, Lisa and Matthew were surprised but happy to see me. I tucked Matthew in that night and did some reading before calling it a night. The disquieting experience of the angry movie mob abated when I retold it to Lisa as we lay in bed before falling asleep. There was no way of knowing that in the morning our lives were going to be terribly shaken, and that the world we had come to take for granted would be seriously, unredeemably altered.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001 we woke up at 7:00AM and went about our morning routine. By 7:45AM we had finished breakfast and were being herded out the door by our dog, Nadine, who was making full use of her border collie instincts. Matthew and I were off in a cab to his school, and we waved out the back window to Lisa and Nadine as they turned around the block on "the morning walk." By 8:00AM I had dropped Matthew off and started walking back home. I walked down Sixth Avenue, turned left at 11th Street and then right on Fifth Avenue, through Washington Square Park and N.Y.U. At Bleecker Street I ran into the same city council candidate that had shook my hand as I came out of the grocery store two days before. I didn't shake his hand again. I had decided not to vote for him. I did wish him luck, and it reminded me that I planned to vote early that day.

While sitting at a table by the window in our loft reading an election flyer from Downtown Democrats, I heard a plane go by loudly and obviously very low. Seconds later I heard an explosion, which I immediately mistook for a dumpster being dropped back down on the street from a garbage truck. The sound of an airplane going overhead has always been unnerving for me. Sometimes, especially at night, I will think, "Maybe this is it." I finalized my voting choice, then Lisa and I set out for our polling place in the Old St. Patrick's recreation center a block away. That day instead of going out the front of our building and around the block, we took the elevator up to the sixth floor which has a walk through to the back of the building, then down and out across the street to the recreation center. The same older Italian lady who always volunteers to sign us in was going on about how her nephew worked in the World Trade Towers but was still on vacation. She was very agitated, but she continued to do her job. Lisa and I both voted. When I came out of the booth, a man was explaining to Lisa that the World Trade Center buildings were on fire. He said that if we went down the ally to the next corner we could see it. As we walked up a crowd had gathered looking down Lafayette Street. We looked up and there it was. We ran into our building and up to the roof. Quite a few of our neighbors were already there. No one talked much. We watched. Someone had brought up a pair of binoculars, which we passed around. You could see the florescent lights inside the building, lots of black smoke and a red glow. Someone said that people were jumping. Lisa and I decided that it was safest for Matthew to be at school. It was hard to reconcile that deep black smoke with the azure blue sky. Then the north tower fell crumbling before our eyes. Lisa began to cry. I put my arm around her and held on for dear life. I thought. "How many people have I just watched die?"

We didn't stay to watch the second tower come down. We went downstairs and called the school to tell them that we were coming to pick up Matthew. We had an overwhelming feeling that we all needed to be together. We set off through the Village and everyone was walking. There was very little traffic. People seemed calm, but solemn. When we got to the school, I went up to Matthew's classroom, while Lisa talked to other parents in the lobby. When we were all together on the street again, Matthew told us that one of his classmates, Vladimir, and his mother Flip and friend, Greg, could not go home, because

they had to run from work and had left their keys behind. We went back upstairs and invited them to come home with us.

As our group headed back down Sixth Avenue, we saw only smoke where the towers had once stood. I don't think I noticed them when I had walked that way earlier that morning. I tend to look at people's faces and in store windows when I walk down the street. Flip told Lisa that she was a little worried about Greg. They had met while fleeing up the West Side Highway. He had seen the people jumping from the towers close up. He had knocked the camera out of the hands of a person photographing people jumping. He looked shocked and upset.

We stopped at a deli to get drinks and chips for everyone and then went home. We shut all the windows and turned on the air-conditioning. Our friend Stuart, who was visiting from Oregon, called and came over. Our neighbor across the hall, Kay, came over with her son Blake and the three boys went into Matt's room to play with his Legos. We turned on the TV and the phone started ringing non-stop. We watched the images of the plane hitting the second tower cycle over and over. I couldn't stop watching. Someone would call. I would talk on the phone and then go back to watching the plane hit the tower again. We couldn't call out long distance. New footage was added from a different angle. The first plane hitting, that double take as the plane unexpectedly flew through the frame. The camera hesitated and then followed the plane into the first tower.

After awhile another neighbor, Ali, came over to tell us that the hospitals were asking for blood donations. Stuart, Ali and I set off to give blood. We walked up to St. Vincent's and then over to Beth Israel. There were long lines winding around the block at both hospitals, but we were turned away each time. It was very reaffirming to see so many people doing what they could to help. Finally, we walked back home. Stuart had just bought a new pair of shoes and his feet were sore.

We cooked dinner for everyone that night, ate ice cream and continued to watch TV to stay connected to what felt like an inconceivable event, something that should not have

happened and if turned away from would become all to permanent. Watching those
horribly tranfixing images over and over kept the whole thing alive, current, still up in the
air, not over, not finished, not completed, still impossible.