

Great Scene: "Apocalypse Now"

[Scott Myers](#)

The introduction of Captain Willard alone in a Saigon hotel room.



The focus of the Great Scene series is to spotlight notable movie scenes, then analyze and discuss them: their structure, themes, character dynamics. Why do they work? What are their narrative elements which elevate them to greatness? In a fundamental way, screenwriting is *scene*-writing, so the more we learn about this aspect of the craft, the better.

Today: The 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*, written by John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola. IMDB plot summary:

During the Vietnam War, Captain Willard is sent on a

dangerous mission into Cambodia to assassinate a renegade colonel who has set himself up as a god among a local tribe.

We meet Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) in a most dramatic way: Drunk in a hotel room.

The scene at the beginning with Captain Willard alone in his hotel room was completely unscripted. Martin Sheen told the shooting crew to just let the cameras roll. Sheen was actually drunk in the scene and punched the mirror which was real glass, cutting his thumb. Sheen also began sobbing and tried to attack Francis Ford Coppola. The crew was so disturbed by his actions that they wanted to stop shooting, but Coppola wanted to keep the cameras going.

Here is Sheen talking about the scene:

Of the scene, Sheen says, "We had to establish a very, very dangerous character, trained to kill people up close and personal... with his hands."

The scene certainly conveys Willard as a "dangerous character." And the blood on his hands is a portent of things to come.

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