"We did not fight the enemy. The enemy was in us":
Hollywood's representation of the Vietnam War

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The Vietnam War, or the American War as it is known in Vietnam, is one of the most complex conflicts of twentieth century. Not only was the United States unable to achieve its original political and military objectives, such as creating a viable pro-American South Vietnamese Republic and destroying the North Vietnamese resolve and their means of infiltrating the South, but also because the Vietnam War was the longest war the U.S. ever fought. When the collapse of Saigon became a terrible reality in 1975 American society was deeply divided and unable to come to terms with the destruction of their national myths of invincibility and of the United States as defender of freedom and democracy. Given the length and intricacies of America's involvement in Vietnam, it is essential that the term 'Vietnam as it really was' is more clearly defined. It should not be understood purely in terms of the conflict itself, but in a wider context. American soldiers' 'Vietnam' experience started before conscription and stayed with them after repatriation; American civilians' experience was quite different, and that of the Vietnamese different again.

The unpopular and heavily criticised *The Green Berets* (USA: 1968) whilst perfect by WWII film standards was blatantly outdated and propagandistic compared with real images from Vietnam showed daily on television. "What was different", journalist Paul Dean states in retrospect, "was that now America, over its TV dinners, was seeing it while it ate".[1] By 1985, Oliver Stone[2] was acutely aware that the war he had fought had become senseless for people who had not lived through it. In *Platoon* he aims to avoid any romanticism and to provide a precise representation of the fighting based on his own experiences; it is a depiction of life in a combat zone of the Bravo Company, 25th Infantry Division. However, whilst there are many accurate details in the film, Stone's memories do not and cannot explain "Vietnam as it really was".

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[1] Paul Dean, 'The Role of the Press', in Walter Capps, ed. (1991), *The Vietnam Reader* (London and NY: Routledge), p. 233

[2] Stone fought in Vietnam in 1967 with the 25th Infantry Division and the First Cavalry. For a brief biography see: http://www.filmmakers.com/artists/oliverstone/biography/

Nevertheless, the fact that the British Hemdale Film Corporation produced this film shows the extent to which Hollywood was reluctant to deal with this kind of 'realism'.[3]

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and Joel Schumacher's *Tigerland* (2000) portray conscription and boot camp training: the process through which recruits were indoctrinated, stripped of their identity and turned into brutally efficient killing machines. Both films chart individual loss of identity, a process that begins with head shaving and continues with physical and psychological violence from commanding officers, who verbally attack the recruit's race, geographical origin, religious beliefs, and possible sexual orientation. Loss of individuality is followed by the creation of a new identity based on the *esprit de corps*: The Company becomes the recruit's new family, with their superior as father, their comrades as brothers, and their rifle as a substitute mother-girlfriend who will protect them, and also give them pleasure.

This process, shown in detail in both films, allows the viewer to better understand how American soldiers were prepared for Vietnam; we are shown how the enemy was trivialised and dehumanised through the repetition of propagandistic marching chants and the type of physical and tactical training recruits were given. Yet both *Full Metal Jacket* and *Tigerland* highlight how badly prepared American soldiers were to face 'asymmetrical' warfare on inhospitable Vietnamese terrain against a highly motivated enemy, the former in its depiction of conventional boot camp training, the latter in its more appropriate though still inadequate approach to counter-guerrilla training. A sequence in *Full Metal Jacket* that focuses on the fight to retake the Vietnamese Imperial City of Hue in 1968 shows how deadly this training could be. Because Marines are trained to leave no-one behind, when a soldier is shot by a sniper the rest of the group break orders by attempting a rescue during which two more men are killed. If they had been trained to deal with snipers, a common part of guerrilla warfare, they would have handled the situation differently and avoided additional casualties.

An aspect which film is particularly successful in depicting, and in some cases in reinforcing, is the blatant indoctrination of young, inexperienced recruits. The films can help us to understand how these young men actually came to believe in phrases like "to destroy Communism with the help of God and a few Marines" and "Marines are not allowed to be killed without permission" which were drummed into them all day, every

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[3] Christensen, Terry (1987), *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from 'Birth of a Nation' to*

day. Their youth and naivety is also stressed in many Vietnam films, Vietnam could be described as a Children's Crusade as the average age of combatants was nineteen, compared to twenty-seven in World War II and even older in Korea.[4] This is clear in *Full Metal Jacket* in the immature answers given by soldiers based in Hue to TV reporters, as Gabriel Kolko argued, "the US soldier lacks both motivation and a concept of the ideological and political nature of the war".[5] They were passionately anti-Communist without really understanding what Communism and deep-seated Nationalism meant for the Vietnamese.

Platoon (Oliver Stone: 1986) shows the viewer the features of jungle guerrilla warfare; the perfect use of camouflage by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), inability to distinguish between the enemy and unarmed civilians, booby traps and ambushes. Stone also exposes the physical and mental exhaustion experienced by American soldiers who, in the ensuing confusion, often became too nervous to shoot. "The guy next to me had no idea what to do […] as soon as fairly heavy shelling came in he instantly panicked and tried to jump off the bunker":[6] this American soldier's account is illustrated by *Platoon*, and other films portraying the combat experience. The American tactic of napalm bombing large areas of jungle to uncover and kill the hidden enemy is particularly evident in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *A Bright Shining Lie* (1998) where it is depicted as an arbitrary waste of military resources that did not achieve its objective.

Hamburger Hill (John Irvin: 1987) recounts how, from 11-20 May 1969, the 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon of the 101st Airborne Division over Dong Ap Bia (Hill 937) fought to take control of a fortified ridge defended by regular NVA troops in the A Shau Valley, a position recovered by the enemy only a month later. The brutality of war is shown even more explicitly than in *Platoon*: rather than just showing dead bodies, Irvin gives greater emphasis to how soldiers die in battle. Hand to hand combat with the enemy is shown in close up, and special effects are used to highlight the destructive power of mortar explosions as the viewer sees entire trees being instantly obliterated. Casualties caused by friendly fire come not in the form of shells, but from a helicopter gunner who

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'Platoon' (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), p. 208

[4] Shaffer, D. Michael, 'The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy', in D. Michael Shaffer, ed. (1990), *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press), pp. 87-88

[5] Kolko, Gabriel, 'War Crimes and the Nature of the Vietnam War', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.1, No.1 (1971), p. 12

confuses American soldiers with the NVA. This sequence in *Hamburger Hill* helps to explain why in Vietnam "one in five deaths were 'non-hostile'".[7]

The new, alien surroundings faced by soldiers, the jungle, mountains, humidity and insects made fighting and daily life gruelling. In *Platoon* the constant overtiredness caused by long patrols in the jungle makes the soldiers vulnerable, for example they fall asleep whilst attempting an ambush resulting in the death of a member of the squad. This was a common feature of the Vietnam War. In his book *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*, D. Michael Shaffer explains that, "*each* Marine combat rotation of the Vietnam War was nearly twice as long as the *total* amount of time a World War II Marine was exposed to combat".[8] The American troops were harassed by the NLF (National Liberation Front or *Viet Cong*) and the NVA almost constantly. A rifleman who belonged to the 1st Infantry Division operating in the Iron Triangle between 1965 and 1967 remembered: "That year [1966] seemed to get worse and worse. Never a rest, never a moment's break, never anything but insanity"[9]. These factors all contributed to a loss of morale which was compounded by the psychological warfare used by the North Vietnamese who broadcast the protests back in the US. The American soldiers were aware of their decreasing national support, an example of which can be seen in *Hamburger Hill*.

Acts of heroism, saving the dying, wounded and weak, are also a recurrent feature in Vietnam films. However, whilst there is no question that many American soldiers did commit acts of great bravery one suspects that this is sometimes exaggerated on screen to increase the entertainment value. An example of this can be seen in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) in which the protagonist Michael risks his life for a friend by coming back to Saigon when the city has nearly fallen. He has already saved another friend in a previous sequence by jumping from a helicopter into a river. In this aspect films tend to pander to and reinforce the 'we-do-not-leave-anyone-behind' myth of the US Army.

Most films, but especially *Platoon*, depict the disintegration of the group and the individual under these conditions. All of the following were common: lack of cohesion

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[6] Santoli, Al (1986), *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnamese War and Its Aftermath* (London: Abacus), p. 170

[7] DeGroot, Gerard J. (2000), *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Singapore: Longman), p. 286

[8] Shaffer, D. Michael, ed. (1990), *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*, p. 86

[9] Santoli, Al (1986), *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnamese War and Its Aftermath* , p. 108

and leadership, break of command, consumption of drugs, racism in the ranks and war crimes such as torture and killing of non-combatants. The massacre at My Lai village on 16 March 1968, where Task Force Barker murdered some 350 unarmed civilians under the command of Lt. William Calley, is just one example of the atrocities committed by US troops. In *Platoon* we see the destruction of a village during which unarmed inhabitants are tortured, murdered in cold blood, young girls are raped and the village itself is razed to the ground.

The media coverage of atrocities such as the My Lai massacre understandably provoked disgust and outrage in the US. It is also possible that this type of reporting triggered the imagination of scriptwriters, explaining to some degree why, "after the war, in Hollywood productions and dime store novels", as Prof. DeGroot reasons, "service in Vietnam became a metaphor for degeneracy and madness".[10] By 1978 Hollywood's stereotype of the Vietnam veteran was a well-defined figure in film, usually characterised as deeply disturbed, violent, submersed in a world of drug and alcohol abuse, suffering from vivid flashbacks, and generally unable to reintegrate into civil society. This complex yet simplified character appears repeatedly in films that touch on Vietnam, and has come to embody the War and its effects in the public imagination.

Many films have dealt with the returning veterans' difficulties after what they had seen and done in Vietnam. In *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby: 1978) Vietnam is only present indirectly; the viewer is made to empathise with a wife (Sally) coping with the absence and return of her husband (Bob). Combat experience and the soldier's life in Vietnam is only communicated through dialogue, such as Bob's outburst about how some of his men were cutting off the heads of Vietnamese people and putting them on poles, or the few slides that Luke shows Sally. Consequently the viewer is placed in the position of the majority of Americans at that time, who experienced the horrors of Vietnam 'second-hand'. "Vietnam is viewed as the self-projected historical nightmare through which America can awaken from its dream of innocence into mature consciousness".[11]

In *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone: 1989) we see how Kovic's combat and patrolling experiences in Vietnam, such as seeing the unarmed people his unit have

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[10] DeGroot, Gerard J. (2000), *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, p. 276

[11] Hellmann, John (1982), *America Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 429

just killed, failing to save a crying baby from its dead mother's arms, and killing an American soldier by mistake, take away his youth, innocence and make him angry and hostile. For him coming home means a continuation of the war, only this time he has to fight the enemy within. As Chris Taylor remarks in *Platoon*: "We did not fight the enemy. The enemy was in us." The result of this type of mental struggle manifests itself in behavioural problems. In *Born on the Fourth* Kovic drinks and takes drugs; in *Coming Home* Bob withdraws into himself and drinks, Luke is excessively violent, and Vi's brother becomes mentally ill and suicidal after only two weeks in Vietnam; in Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990),[12] Jacob becomes violent as a result of vivid flashbacks and haunting nightmares. Whilst films naturally tend to choose to portray extreme situations in order to maintain their audience's interest, they also give explanations for the stereotypical veterans' behaviour.

Another common theme is the veterans' attempt to reintegrate into the society that sent them to war and then ignored them on their return, or welcomed them with questions such as "How do you feel about killing all those innocent people?"[13] For Stone, Vietnam started in America's cultural overconfidence in the 1950s and his portrayal of Kovic's childhood criticises a society that shields itself from the realities of the violence it encourages.[14] He is shown playing in the woods imitating war films, listening to President Kennedy's inaugural speech and to a Marine Sergeant speaking of the US Army's invincibility; his mother encourages him to go and fight Communism. Hence to a large extent *Born on the Forth* does not aim to explain how Vietnam really was, but rather how America really was before and after Vietnam. *The Deer Hunter* on the other hand shows a veteran who comes back to a perfect example of Nixon's "silent majority"[15] as people gladly welcome him home rather than accusing him of being an assassin.

Born on the Fourth, *Coming Home* and *Jacob's Ladder* also all clearly criticise the lack of good medical attention on the battlefield and of hospital care for returned veterans. For example when Kovic is shot he is left unattended in a field hospital as the

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[12]*Jacob's Ladder* is full of striking symbolism and deals with controversial issues; accusing the US government of using chemical warfare in Vietnam and the need for more aggressive soldiers to win a war of Vietnam's type. Hence it is rather surprising that I have been unable to find any mention of it in the documents I have worked with.

[13] McMahon, Robert J., ed. (1995), *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays* (Lexington MA and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company), p. 480

[14] Bourke, Joanna (2000), *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books), p. 368

doctors cannot cope with the number of casualties. The almost total absence of field hospitals images in the majority of Vietnam War films is particularly interesting, as it constitutes a denial of the less glamorous side of war. However, both *Jacob's Ladder* and *Coming Home* show the inadequacies and in some cases the horrific quality of medical attention received by veterans. As D. Michael Shaffer (1990, p. 96) explains: "Far less well known, but no less painful, has been the [...] poor handling of the lingering trauma of Vietnam veterans' battlefield wounds".[16]

Vietnam was not just a war, it *is* a region, a country, a people, a history. It is Chinese, French, Japanese, Soviet, and North American involvement. All human beings are influenced by the history that surrounds them and it is a key factor to explaining ourselves. A close-up of a Vietnamese woman showing no emotion on being expelled from her village would probably make the viewer think that she does not care. If her history, together with the history of her relatives, is not explained, how will the spectator ever know that the woman's grandparents fought the Japanese, that her parents fought the French, and that her character has been shaped by the Vietnamese myth of perpetual resistance to the invaders, which started 1,000 years earlier against the Chinese dynasties.

However, the Hollywood Vietnam War film, a genre in its own right defined by "the choppers, the unseen Vietnamese enemy in the foliage, the 'psychedelic rock soundtrack'"[17], fails to explain the historical context of the American war in Vietnam. The US soldier, the Vietnam Veteran, the protestors, the Viet Cong, and the North Vietnamese all become meaningless when divorced from this context, often making the films nothing more than a 2-hour show of superficial plots and special effects. In *Born on the Forth* Oliver Stone attempts to give the viewer context by portraying Kovic during his youth and including Kennedy's famous inaugural address in 1960, but there is still no real explanation. The viewer is reminded that Kovic goes to Vietnam to fight Communism, but why were the Americans fighting Communism? How did the "Domino Theory" come to exist? When and why did the US become so interested in

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[15] For an explanation of this term see Karnow, Stanley (1994), *Vietnam: A History* (London: Pimlico), p. 615

[16] For a contrasting opinion see Dean, Eric T. (1992), 'The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 59-74

[17] Blandford, S., Keith Grant, B. & Hillier, J. (2001), *The Film Studies Dictionary* (London and New York: Arnold), p. 253

Vietnam? What happened between 1955 and 1965 that convinced the US to intervene? No film ever attempts to discuss these issues.

Most films dealt with in this essay cover important details of the American-Vietnam War, such as the fear and madness of combat, loss of human life, destruction, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, the loss of purpose, the media in Vietnam and so on. However, even if all these films were put together they would still be unable to represent the complete American experience in Vietnam "as it really was". Vietnam War films portray details,[18] nothing more, and in doing so the detail becomes an end in itself rather than a means to explain the whole. The films could be accused of creating distorted images of Vietnam Veterans and of inaccuracy as regards people and chronology, e.g. Kovic's unit using M-14 rifles in 1968 instead of the M-16 standard assault rifle. However, Hollywood films cannot be held responsible for explaining Vietnam as they represent an industry of entertainment not historical research. Ultimately, comprehension of Vietnam depends on the individual's curiosity and desire to uncover the "truth". The rather simplistic approach of showing war primarily from the combatant's point of view, especially after *Platoon*, will always mislead the viewer as it appeals to their "heart" instead of their "head".

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[18] It seems quite clear that this is not only a limitation of US films, but rather of film as a genre and an industry.