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The "Imperfect Past": Vietnam According to the Movies

The United States of Amnesia?

Once upon a time, memories of a society were kept alive orally. Then came print and with it a growing professionalization in the writing and recording of history. This is still a cottage industry, but something else has been added to the equation in the meantime: The emergence and success of the mass media has created a situation in which increasing numbers of people get their information about the past through film and television. Historians have observed this development with ambivalence. On the one hand, visual forms of representation are potentially more effective than written forms, so that new possibilities have been opened up for creating an interest in history. On the other hand, the representation of history is taken out of the hands of experts and subordinated to the commercial priorities of an entertainment industry. This problem is intensified by the audience: Historians prefer documentary material, because it seems to come closest to the ideals of objectivity they hold; audiences on the other hand, including a majority of students, prefer feature films and fictionalized versions of history. In principle, this is nothing new. Already in the 19th century, historical novelists like Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper were more popular than their professional competitors (although these could be very popular, too, at times). At present, however, the gap is widening. The collective memory of a society like that of the U.S.A. is now largely in the hands of Hollywood, it seems. "For many Hollywood history is the only history," Mark Carnes can thus state in the introduction to the essay collection *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* in which exemplary case studies are provided of the innumerable "imperfect" versions of the past that can be found in Hollywood movies.

The fact that for a growing number of people, and, to make matters worse, especially for young people, Hollywood movies have become the major source of historical knowledge is seen as an alarming development by many historians. They are appalled by the shift away from educational institutions towards commercial entertainment. Because feature films about history, like any other type of commercial movies, are made primarily for

profit, filmmakers, they argue, do not feel any professional responsibility for historical accuracy and therefore see no problem in distorting history for romantic reasons or melodramatic effects. The result is a reduction and trivialization of history. In a book with the already telling title *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Robert Rosenstone argues that "in privileging visual and emotional data and simultaneously downplaying the analytic, the motion picture is subtly [...] altering our very sense of the past."¹ In his opinion, not for the better. For historians like Rosenstone and Carnes the distortions of historical truth in Hollywood movies amount to a gradual dissolution and disappearance of history, and, with it, a sense of collective history, so that an angry Carnes actually suggests a new reading of U.S.A., not as United States of America, but as United States of Amnesia.

Carnes's quip concludes an informative and helpful collection of essays on representations of (mainly American) history in American movies. In contrast to other books on the subject, which often focus on particularly spectacular or blatant cases of distortion, Carnes' volume aims at a systematic and comprehensive documentation of the various historical periods and events that have become topics of Hollywood movies. The best-known and most interesting examples are then discussed by professional historians and judged according to their historical accuracy and objectivity of documentation. Most of these reviews are devastating. The prevailing tone is one of anger, only occasionally softened by disbelief and sarcasm. In his analysis of the filmic version of James Fenimore Cooper's historical novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, Richard White provides an especially amusing example:

The relation of these Indians to historic Indian peoples of the region is, to put it generously, postmodern. For *The Last of the Mohicans*, history is a junkyard full of motifs and incidents that can be retrieved, combined, and paired with new inventions as Mann [the director] sees fit. It is not that all the details are wrong; it is that they never were combined in this fashion. It is like having George Washington, properly costumed, throwing out the first ball for a 1843 Washington Senators baseball season opener. Sure, there was a George Washington; sure, there once were Washington Senators; sure, the president throws out the first ball; sure, there was an 1843. So what's the problem?²

¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 32.

² Richard White, "The Last of the Mohicans," *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark Carnes (New York: Owl Books, 1996) 82–85; 82.

No single element is false in itself, but the sum total is completely misleading, because the movie has combined single facts in an arbitrary, free-wheeling fashion.

In the majority of cases, the contributors to *Past Imperfect* focus on a recurring complaint in discussions of the relation between history and film, that of the inaccuracy of historical facts in filmic representations. Mark E. Neely's analysis of two movies on Abraham Lincoln arrives at the conclusion: "Ford's version of the young Lincoln made little attempt to get the facts of his life straight, and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* confused the chronology of Lincoln's early life so much that it is a muddle."³ An analysis of the film *Spartacus* states: "There are innumerable misrepresentations and 'mistakes' in *Spartacus*, yet the responsibility for such errors belongs not to Hollywood alone but also to the entire nonacademic (or popular) culture which has its peculiar ways of thinking about the past."⁴ *Drums Along the Mohawk* is criticized for similar reasons: "The scholar's major complaint against the movie, however, must be its utter failure to convey the strategic importance of the Mohawk valley during the Revolution. [...] In the book, the impact of the larger war on local communities becomes plain. In the movie, with its narrow focus on the summer of 1777 and on the homey details of frontier life, that sense of history is lost."⁵ The analysis of the film *The Alamo* can be summarized in one sentence: "This is nearly all wrong."⁶ Almost the same goes for the Custer-movie *They Died With Their Boots On*: "The film tells not only a totally different, made-up story, but one that reflects how Hollywood, until only recently, played fast and loose with American Indian history, culture, and sensibilities."⁷ *Fort Apache* provides further confirmation: "Cochise is portrayed sympathetically, but with his appearance reality gradually falls away from the story."⁸ John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* is hardly any better: "None of this, of course, has anything to do with the messy historical facts, but that did not keep Ford from proclaiming the authenticity of his film."⁹ Later films about Wyatt Earp do not provide any meaningful corrective: "The historicity of *Tombstone*,

³ Mark E. Neely, Jr., "The Young Lincoln," *Past Imperfect* 124–27; 127.

⁴ W. V. Harris, "Spartacus," *Past Imperfect* 40–43; 42.

⁵ Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Drums Along the Mohawk," *Past Imperfect* 94–97; 96–97.

⁶ Marshall De Bruhl, "The Alamo," *Past Imperfect* 116–19; 119.

⁷ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., "They Died With Their Boots On" *Past Imperfect* 146–49; 148.

⁸ Dee Brown, "Fort Apache," *Past Imperfect* 150–53; 152.

⁹ John Mack Faragher, "The Tale of Wyatt Earp: Seven Films," *Past Imperfect* 154–61; 158.

however, is merely skin-deep. Its heart belongs to the pop culture of today."¹⁰

Similar criticisms have been levelled at filmic representations of the war in Vietnam, a charge that must be considered especially damaging in view of the fact that these movies are said to have shaped public perceptions of the Vietnam War decisively: "Hollywood films play a primary role in telling the story of war. These popular films have come to represent the 'authentic' story of the war. They have eclipsed the documentary images of war; indeed, many deliberately re-enact iconic documentary images."¹¹ What, then, is the relation of these movies to the challenge the Vietnam War presented to American self-images, as it has been described by Morris Dickstein: "In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily, but the 'idea' of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow."¹² One question is whether and in what way Vietnam films contributed to these changes in American self-perception and in what way they addressed the moral crisis created by the war. Before we approach this question, it appears necessary, however, to address a more fundamental problem of all critiques of fic-

¹⁰ Faragher, "The Tale of Wyatt Earp" 160.

¹¹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) 86. See also Amanda Howell: "Given the use to which representations of the Vietnam War have been put, it becomes crucial to understand its fictions—their structure, development, and present status." Amanda Howell, "Susan Jefford's *The Remasculinization of America*," *Camera Obscura* 27 (1991): 166–73; 166. Of the various fictionalized versions—novels, short stories, memoirs, and commercial feature films—the latter have been especially influential in shaping the public perception of the Vietnam War.

¹² Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 271. See also Bellhouse and Litchfield who argue that "American moral authority was squandered in Vietnam" and "that the Vietnam War, in connection with other related political embarrassments, led some Americans to partially abandon their belief in America's moral purity." Mary L. Bellhouse and Lawrence Litchfield, "Vietnam and the Loss of Innocence: An Analysis of the Political Implications of the Popular Literature of the Vietnam War," *Historical Memory and Representations of the Vietnam War*, ed. Walter L. Hixson (New York: Garland, 2000) 149–66; 149. In consequence, they argue, the war "put at least a crack in our orthodox national mythology of omnipotence and virtue" (151). Or, as Aufderheide puts it: "The Vietnam War took the easy confidence out of America's self-image as a good-neighbor world cop, the Lone Ranger of international policy, a cowboy tall in the saddle against a world teeming with sneaky Indians." Pat Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers," *Seeing Through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 81–111; 83.

tional material as historically inaccurate or politically misleading, namely that of the relationship between history and fiction.

History and Fiction

Most critical comments by historians about filmic (mis)representations of history are justified, and yet, they also pose a problem: What historians consider as Hollywood's unacceptable liberty with facts can, from another perspective, be regarded as the founding act of fiction. After all, it is fiction's freedom to ignore, violate or transcend established versions of reality that makes it a unique mode of communication and distinguishes it from other forms of cultural discourse. As I have put it in a different context:

But it is not surprising that fictional texts are often unreliable and, in effect, misleading as historical documents. After all, the freedom fictional texts have in redefining reality is the main rationale for their existence, and the reinterpretation, distortion, or even repression of historical facts is part of that freedom, at least within the limits given by the moral and legal consensus of a society. The—often infuriating—phenomenon that history is represented in inaccurate and misleading ways is part of the price one has to pay for institutionalizing a form of communication in which the imagination is given free reign.¹³

Although fictional modes of discourse such as the novel were initially regarded with suspicion, they subsequently gained widespread acceptance and great popularity in Western societies exactly because of that freedom. Categories like fiction and specific institutional contexts for reception such as the cinema were created to identify and legitimize the exposure to fictional material as a cultural activity in its own right. Among other things, these categories and institutional contexts of reception signal to us that fictional texts (including Hollywood feature films) are entitled to take liberties with the truth and may, in effect, provide highly subjective re-interpretations of reality. In buying a novel or going to the movies, we enter a contract, and the fact that historical facts may be misrepresented or misinterpreted in a movie can by no means be considered a violation of that contract.¹⁴ On the contrary, a mere replication or documentation of historical facts is not what we are looking for in exposing ourselves to fictional material. The freedom to transcend reality or to deviate from "the

¹³ Winfried Fluck, "Film and Memory," *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Udo J. Hebel, American Studies: A Monograph Series 101 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003) 213–29; 216.

¹⁴ See my argument on this point: "If a historical text is shown to distort history, then this is a serious matter which undermines the text's legitimacy as an interpretation of history. If I point out a lack of historical veracity in a fictional text, on the other

truth" is a crucial element in the institutionalization of a separate sphere of fictional discourse, because we consider this freedom a potential source of insights that no other form of discourse can provide. Fictional texts can articulate dimensions of meaning and experience that could otherwise not be expressed in our culture with equal daring, force, and justification.¹⁵

It can hardly be surprising, then, that a historical novel by Scott or Cooper or a Hollywood movie on Vietnam do not necessarily present historical facts accurately or "objectively." In effect, one may almost be tempted to respond: What else is new?¹⁶ As far as fictional texts are concerned, a "creative" use of historical facts, including distortions of the historical record or deviations from the truth, is thus not necessarily to be condemned, nor should its unmasking be the primary goal of an analysis. This does not mean that such distortions and deviations should not be identified and considered a significant piece of information about a movie or fictional text. The realization that the representation of the past is historically inaccurate becomes analytically meaningful, when we take it as a point of departure for reflections on why, for what reasons and in the interest of what goals these distortions have been made. Or, to put it differently: In approaching the question of how history is presented according to the mov-

hand, this may provide an interesting and valid point of analysis, but it is not a point that endangers the text's legitimacy." Fluck, "Film and Memory" 217.

¹⁵ On this point, see my argument in the essay "Film and Memory": "The freedom of fiction was institutionalized as cultural practice, because it adds an important dimension to social life: it is the source of fiction's ability to violate existing conventions (for example, by articulating wishes and desires that are still tabooed); it can defamiliarize conventions in order to make us see reality anew; it permits the articulation of utopian ideas that cannot yet be expressed in any other way. And, most important for this discussion: it can also be the source of an individual or collective counter-memory which is not yet accepted as valid description of the past by the dominant social consensus." Fluck, "Film and Memory" 217.

¹⁶ On this point, see Dittmar and Michaud: "Film, like any system of representation, cannot accurately reproduce historical events. Its simulation of the actual circumstances of the war is necessarily mediated by the cinematic apparatus as well as by the perspectives brought to bear on the depicted events by those engaged in a given film's production and reception." Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching Toward Denial," *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 1-15; 10. In this argument, the main reasons given for the fact that representations of historical facts will always be "distorted" in film lies in the fact 1) that representation needs a medium and can therefore never represent reality directly, only according to the logic of the "apparatus" employed; and 2) that the view of the producers of the film will inevitably be partial, or even partisan. These are valid reasons but there is a third one: the inevitability of narrativization, for without narrative structure any historical representation can only be a chronicle at best.

ies, it is not enough to identify inaccuracies or distortions. We also have to ask ourselves what the function of this "imperfect past" may be.

One answer one frequently encounters in response is: commercial interests. But here, too, there is need for further differentiation. Undoubtedly, Hollywood is profit-driven, but these profits can only be realized if movies find resonance among audiences. The result is a compromise form: On the one hand, something new or spectacular, not yet seen in this manner, has to be offered in order to attract audiences. This is one reason for the surprising fact that we frequently find transgressive or rebellious elements even in Hollywood movies and that popular culture can often function as an almost anarchic force. On the other hand, these transgressive elements have to be contained in order not to become too threatening or overpowering.¹⁷ As a rule, popular cultural forms therefore also function as an affirmation of commonly shared belief systems. Vietnam movies, with the exception of outright apologetic films such as *The Green Berets*, can thus be critical of the war but nevertheless present their criticism within the larger context of a strategy of national reconciliation.

In the case of war, the compromise nature of popular cultural representations often provokes angry condemnation. As Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud state in their introduction to the essay collection *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, our critical expectation is that the power to make war finds resistance or even a counter-balance in "the power of critical thinking to challenge dangerous myths and to confront prevailing ideologies."¹⁸ However, even anti-war films have a problem in this respect: "A classic problem for filmmakers wanting to make antiwar films has always been how to make war films without making warfare appear exciting. War films wonderfully."¹⁹ War's potential for spectacle, heroics, and grand drama can hardly be ignored—and hardly be suppressed.²⁰ There is an unmistakable

¹⁷ The primary reason for the often criticized fact that popular culture is hardly ever radical enough for critical minds does not lie primarily in commercial reasons but in the fact that viewers want to go that far and not further. They want challenges to authority, rebellion, and visions of change, but only within the limits of their own value system. As a rule, even politically "progressive" audiences do not really want to endanger their own convictions.

¹⁸ Dittmar and Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films" 1.

¹⁹ Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995) 129. As Marita Sturken reminds us: "Filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once noted that the trouble with antiwar films is that war is always exhilarating on the screen." Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 107.

²⁰ A remarkable insight into emotional and other attractions of the war experience even for "thoughtful, loving men" is provided by William Broyles, "Why Men Love War," *The Vietnam Reader*, ed. Walter Capps (London: Routledge, 1990) 68-81; 71. See also the section "On Loving War" in Bellhouse's and Litchfield's article

tendency, even in critical movies, to follow the narrative pattern of the romance or adventure story in which man-to-man combat and the defiance of danger become sources for individual distinction, so that these movies can function on two levels at once: Even in criticizing the war, they present it as a drama of triumphant self-assertion or noble redemption through painful loss.²¹ Such emotional, rhetorical, and aesthetic sources of gratification must undermine any ideal of truthful documentation, however, because they depend on specific narrative structures with dramaturgic requirements of their own. And yet, this does not mean that the film-as-compromise cannot be a significant and meaningful cultural expression, because it is exactly the aspect of mediation that provides fictional texts with a particular function in the formation of cultural memory.

Mediation here should not be misunderstood in the superficial sense of a political trade-off. It is, on the contrary, a main source of the gratification fictional texts can provide, because the freedom they have in rearranging and restructuring reality means that they can bring seemingly contradictory elements and impulses together in one text and make the ensuing struggle the dramatic point of interest. This is the reason why fictional texts are especially well suited to deal with situations of conflict and crisis; in effect, without conflict and crisis fiction would have nothing to tell. In that sense, one may agree with the claim of Loren Baritz that the Vietnam War "was a magnifying glass that enlarged aspects of some of the ways [...] Americans think and act."²²

"Vietnam and the Loss of Innocence," which presents examples taken from Vietnam literature that illustrate "what might be termed the addictive aspect of war, the discovery that part of oneself loves war" (159). In summarizing, the authors provide an explanation that may help to understand at least part of that amazing phenomenon: "The excitement of combat, of living on the edge, of being free to release without any constraint all of one's aggressive energy, all so different from the task of making one's way in the often pulverizingly boring, stultifying and bureaucratic world of industrial society constitutes part of the attraction of war" (160). In war films, the imaginary attractions of the adventure narrative can return not only in realistic disguise but also with heightened intensity: the recognition of a hitherto lowly individual as important member of the community, his "success story" of advancing through his heroics to a noble and distinguished warrior class, and, finally, his elevation to the role of a savior of the greater good.

²¹ This double-coding often makes it possible to reach liberal critics as well as patriotic conservatives, as Muse implies: "Hollywood is in the business of producing consensus narratives—stories that many audiences will find palatable." Muse, *The Land of Nam* 79.

²² Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: Morrow, 1985) 7.

III. Realism and the Search for Meanings

How can such reflections about the function of fiction be of use for an analysis of how the American war in Vietnam has been represented in American movies? Until 1973, only one Vietnam movie of note was made, the unwaveringly patriotic movie *The Green Berets* (John Wayne and Ray Kellogg, 1968), an often criticized and ridiculed case of "Waynism," that is, an old-fashioned representation of the war as a Western romance.²³ Then, in the late 1970s, Hollywood's reluctance to deal with the topic was finally overcome and a first batch of notable "futility-of-war" Vietnam movies was produced,²⁴ among them *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). The great success of Coppola's Godfather-movies paved the way for the emergence of these Vietnam movies. Coppola had established crime as a metaphor for understanding America, and then obviously wanted to extend this interpretation to include the Vietnam War. His plan for a Vietnam movie encouraged other producers and directors. In the early 1980s, during the Reagan administration, a third group of Vietnam movies such as *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (George Cosmatos, 1985) and *Rambo III* (Peter McDonald, 1988), focused on "the veteran's victimization and featured vengeful veterans refighting the war."²⁵ Finally, critics identify a fourth phase of films

²³ Muse, *The Land of Nam* 44. See also Auster and Quart who call the film "nothing less than a cowboy-and-Indians movie caught in a time warp." Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988) 34. However, contrary to the intentions of its makers, it was exactly this aspect that made the movie appear dated: "The formulas of a film like *The Green Berets* had to be at war themselves with the deluge of images Americans saw on television, in photographs, and in documentaries that provided the most contentious images to emerge then or since about the war." Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 101. See also Michael Klein who calls *The Green Berets* "an unqualified defense of American military involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, however, horrific images of the consequences of American military presence and reports of worldwide antiwar protests were seen by the American public on television news [...]." Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 19–40; 20.

²⁴ In between, the touchy subject was addressed, if at all, in quasi-allegorical fashion: "One place they [Hollywood] turned to was the 'Vietnam allegory' film that appeared in the late sixties and early seventies. Although set in other wars and other lands, contemporary reviewers and later critics saw them as commenting directly on the war in Viet Nam. Films that critics have identified as allegorical studies of the War include *Ice*, *Catch-22*, *M*A*S*H*, *Soldier Blue*, *Little Big Man*, *Johnny Got His Gun*, *Ulzana's Raid*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and even *Night of the Living Dead*." Muse, *The Land of Nam* 46.

²⁵ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 88.

made in the late 1980s and early 1990s such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Casualties of War* (Brian de Palma, 1989), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) and *Heaven and Earth* (Oliver Stone, 1993). These more recent films are distinguished by their realism and “were in many ways a reaction against the inaccuracy of the earlier films.”²⁶

As in other discussions of the representation of history in film, these “inaccuracies” have been a major target of film criticism as well as cultural criticism. In the collection of essays edited by Carnes, one finds a chapter on *Apocalypse Now*, in which the author points out that, among other things, the geography of the film is confused in a fashion that is typical of the film as a whole: “The best scenes in the film are those in which Coppola has meticulously re-created Vietnam. When he starts to make up the geography, it’s a sign of his more general retreat into abstraction and solipsism.”²⁷ This leads to an extended critique of other Vietnam movies that merits a longer quotation, because it can serve as something like a summary of a mode of criticism that recurs throughout the literature on Vietnam movies:

Of course, anyone who has spent any time in Vietnam would feel uneasy about Willard’s journey from the start and become more uncomfortable as time goes by. Kurtz is said to have gone into Cambodia with a Montagnard army, yet there are no Montagnards in Cambodia for the simple reason that there are no mountains to speak of there. Willard’s journey, we are told, begins in Nha Trang, and Kilgore’s battalion surfs a beach that is surely in Central Vietnam. But you can’t get to Cambodia from Central Vietnam by river because there are mountains in between (rivers don’t flow uphill). While you *can* get to Cambodia via the Mekong, that river passes through densely populated rice land, not jungle—and it doesn’t get you anywhere near any Montagnard settlements or Angkor Wat.

Because *Apocalypse Now* is fiction (and in no way naturalistic), Coppola has the perfect right to invent geography and depict imaginary tribesmen who, it appears, make ritual sacrifices before breakfast. However, the film loses interest as it strays from the realities of Vietnam—and the more it strays, the worse it gets as fiction. This may be coincidence, but I think not, for fiction must have a credible landscape, even if that landscape is imaginary. The best scenes in the film are those in which Coppola has meticulously re-created Vietnam. When he starts to make up the geography, it’s a sign of his more general retreat into abstraction and solipsism. The film gradually empties out and Kurtz, when we finally meet him, has nothing to say. He is merely a symbol: Colonel Thanatos, Mr. Death Wish. There is nobody home. So all we have is Marlon Brando’s famous face, melodramatically lit, and mumbled quotations pointing back to Coppola’s literary sources.

²⁶ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 89.

²⁷ Frances FitzGerald, “Apocalypse Now,” *Past Imperfect* 288–91; 291.

Curiously enough, the other ambitious Hollywood films about Vietnam suffer from this same solipsism. *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Casualties of War* are all morality plays or parables decked out in special effects and extravagant Technicolor gore. There are no idiosyncratic characters. Life is missing, and so is an attention to landscape, to detail. Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* begins with an extraordinary, hyper-real evocation of jungle warfare, but then the film descends into facile mythmaking—and at the same time departs from its particular landscape. In *Full Metal Jacket*, Hue during the Tet offensive looks like a bombed-out Miami suburb. *Casualties of War* features huge railway bridges and trains, though the one railroad in Vietnam was built early in the century and had no trains running on it during the war. In *The Deer Hunter*—which, to my mind, is the most pretentious and awful of the lot—the Vietnamese speak Thai and play Russian roulette, and even the deer is clearly a prop.

Because these ambitious films all fail to take the reality of Vietnam into account, they remind us of the war itself. To most Americans, including those in positions of authority, Vietnam was an abstraction—a symbol, not a place—and the American troops who went there suffered as a result. Just like those who made the war, the filmmakers put extravagant resources to work and got almost nothing right. Although none of these is a gung-ho prowar movie, all of them treat Vietnam (and the Vietnamese) in such a clichéd way that they will soon seem as dated as World War II propaganda films.²⁸

FitzGerald is unrelenting. All individual inaccuracies are symptoms of a larger problem for her. She cannot understand why Francis Ford Coppola, the director of *Apocalypse Now*, tries to do two things at once that do not seem to go together and undermine each other: “From this moment on, however, *Apocalypse Now* seems to be two different films spliced together with an editing machine. One of them, unfortunately the shorter of the two, is a daring and stylish satire on the American army in Vietnam; the other is Coppola’s misguided attempt to translate Conrad’s novel into film.”²⁹ In contrast, Marita Sturken offers a more sympathetic explanation of the inner contradictions of many Vietnam films: “As narrative films depicting a highly charged event in U.S. history, Vietnam War docudramas often have two conflicting intentions—to represent the war realistically and to examine its larger meanings through metaphoric interpretation.”³⁰

This raises the interesting question what the primary mode should be in representations of the Vietnam War: critical realism or metaphoric interpretation? Most critics discuss the issue in terms of purity vs. pollution, because war seems to be too serious a matter to tamper with it symbolically or metaphorically. War movies can therefore be approached on the basis of the assumption that they are the realistic genre par excellence. The

²⁸ FitzGerald, “Apocalypse Now” 290–91.

²⁹ FitzGerald, “Apocalypse Now” 288.

³⁰ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 88.

double-codedness of Vietnam movies—the fact that they function on two levels of signification at once, a realistic and a “symbolic” one³¹—is seen as an unfortunate compromise. By criticizing the result as an unresolved conundrum or deplorable sell-out, critics imply that the only adequate form would be an “uncompromisingly” realistic depiction of the hard facts of war, because it seems that as long as they are realistic they are also historically true. However, as a mode of representation realism cannot create meaning by and in itself. Like other modes of representation (in effect, like the writing of history itself), it, too, needs an interpretative context in order to give meaning to the facts it depicts.³² From a pacifist perspective, for example, the cruel realities of war will serve as an indictment, but the same realities can also be used in support of an anti-fascist argument in favor of war. In one case, realist representation is to impose on us the idea of the senselessness of war, in the other, to underline its necessity. Realism can indict war but it can also enhance the status of the soldier as someone who is willing to sacrifice his life for the greater good.³³ The double-codedness of fictional texts should thus not be misunderstood as a sell-out or failure of nerve, or, for that matter, as another sad case of indecision or half-heartedness. Rather, this doubleness is an inevitable (in fact, indispensable) element of the fictional sense-making process, although the relation between the two levels will vary and will not always be in convincing balance. Fictional texts, including Vietnam movies, must at some point “compromise” the “purity” of the realistic level, because a second, symbolic level is needed to give meaning to what is presented as the facts of war.

This search for meaning turned out to be a particularly difficult challenge in the case of an unpopular war like Vietnam which was considered—especially at the relatively late date at which most Vietnam movies came out—a defeat and therefore a “meaningless” sacrifice.³⁴ In this situa-

³¹ I use “symbolic” here as an umbrella term for all indirect, non-mimetic modes of signification, including metaphoric or metonymic modes.

³² As Hellmann argues, this interpretative context, provided in the form of a coherent narrative, is actually what we often call myth: “Vietnam will either be turned into myth or it will be forgotten, because myth is the only form in which history can be retained in collective memory. The complicated historical facts must be distilled into a coherent narrative and vivid imagery to provide a truth-telling interpretation of the war.” John Hellmann, “Rambo’s Vietnam and Kennedy’s Frontier,” *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) 140–52; 150.

³³ In this sense, a “documentary” or “realistic” mode of representation must be seen as a strategy to produce a “reality effect” designed to provide certain narratives about the war with authority.

³⁴ See Walsh and Aulich who provide the following characterization of the contributions to their essay collection *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*: “A major and

tion, the search for meanings that might help to make sense of a morally and politically deeply suspect war possessed a special urgency.³⁵ The challenge was complicated by the fact that in the beginning, “Hollywood could neither fit the Vietnam War into any of its old formulas nor create new ones for it.”³⁶ In its moral ambiguity, the Vietnam War undermined narrative formulas of heroism. Sturken speaks of “the Vietnam War’s resistance to standard narratives of technology, masculinity, and U.S. nationalism.”³⁷ Hollywood films of World War II still told powerful narratives of “patriotism, good versus evil, and masculine prowess.”³⁸ Now, new narratives and metaphors had to be found for the war experience: “American Culture did not have any mythical narratives and visual symbols to explain why US forces had not achieved victory. There was no popular cultural archetype to account for successful Vietnamese resistance to foreign invaders—the Indians had always lost.”³⁹ A search set in for narratives and metaphors that might make the unpopular Vietnam war “intelligible to Americans”⁴⁰ and give meaning to a war that “brought into question the most funda-

recurrent theme in these essays is how America through images is forced to come to terms with defeat for the first time in history.” *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*, ed. Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989) 6.

³⁵ This is also the starting point of Andrew Martin’s excellent study *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). “*Receptions of War*, then, is concerned with illuminating the process through which an unpopular war has come to be received in popular culture” (xxi).

³⁶ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 34.

³⁷ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 87.

³⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 94. Many writers have emphasized the extent to which narratives and images of World War II movies influenced and motivated soldiers in entering the Vietnam War. See, for example, Anderegg who provides some telling examples: “In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo reflects on the illusion that he, a young marine second lieutenant hoping for glory and fame, carried into battle: ‘Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest.’ Ron Kovic, too, in his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*, remembers the impact the film made on him as a boy: ‘Like Mickey Mantle and the fabulous New York Yankees, John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes.’ Michael Herr writes of the grunts whose motives or justifications for being in Vietnam range ‘from the lowest John Wayne wet dream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy.’ Gustav Hasford’s *Short-Timers* is imbued with Wayne allusions, from ‘John Wayne cookies’ to Private Joker’s vocal impressions. A soldier who goes berserk and performs a suicidally ‘heroic’ act is characterized as having done ‘a John Wayne.’” Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam* 19.

³⁹ James William Gibson, “American Paramilitary Culture and the Reconstitution of the Vietnam War,” *Vietnam Images* 10–42; 20.

⁴⁰ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 34.

mental assumptions through which Americans engaged with the world."⁴¹ Or, as Peter Rollins puts it: "These movies, who had great influence in shaping public perceptions of the war in America, are thus not realistic representations, but experiments 'with a variety of metaphors' to comprehend the war [...]."⁴² The fictional mode offered a chance of retelling, reimagining, and reworking the story of the Vietnam War in order to come to terms with experiences of moral doubt, guilt, and loss.

Vietnam and the Quest for Meaning

In the following discussion I will restrict myself to a small selection of Vietnam movies, in effect those which have found the greatest attention and cultural resonance.⁴³ My goal is not another survey. Instead, I want to focus on some key patterns that have been used to make sense of the Vietnam War and to deal with the emotional and cultural conflicts they are articulating. This, I think, is the reason why we expose ourselves to fictional versions in the first place: In contrast to documentary material, they offer us a "second chance" to come to terms with the meaning of the war, both mentally and emotionally. In this sense, they are also culturally instructive (and of potential interest for historians). A discussion of Vietnam War movies can provide a significant contribution not only to our understanding of American culture but also to the way in which popular culture functions in that culture.

When Hollywood began to approach the topic of Vietnam openly, the first wave of films made in the late 1970s, among them most prominently *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, did this in a combination of a stark, sometimes almost surreal realism in the representation of war and

an equally powerful level of symbolic interpretation. Both films were "lavishly praised as realistic and roundly condemned as reactionary."⁴⁴ However, this focus on the films' political shortcomings prevented critics from having a closer look at the interpretative frames that both films used to make sense of the war, although the film's intertextual references—Cimino's title and plot-reference to James Fenimore Cooper's *Natty Bumppo* and Coppola's reference to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*—were easily identified. Instead of dismissing such references as escape into a non-political literary or mythic sphere, one should try to understand what possibilities of commentary and interpretation were opened up by them. After all, there is a rationale in the choices made: Both draw on narrative genres in which the boundary between civilization and savagery is at issue. The basic narrative pattern of *Apocalypse Now* is that of a journey into an unknown, "primitive" world beyond American control in which elements of the quest and the hard-boiled detective formula are combined to understand the motivation of the elusive, mysterious American outlaw officer Kurtz whose life the American government wants to "terminate." In *The Deer Hunter*, on the other hand, the main narrative pattern is that of Cooper's frontier romance that was later transformed into the Western. In both cases, a solitary hero advances into an unknown territory beyond the boundaries of Western civilization American-style, is severely challenged in his identity (because the encounter with Vietnam is also a quest into the unknown dimensions of the psyche or the self), and is eventually transformed by the experiences he has made.⁴⁵

In a situation of uncertainty about what narrative patterns and metaphors would be suitable to make sense of the Vietnam War, such a reliance on familiar narrative patterns seems to be sensible, because they provide "culturally resonant means for interpreting the national experience."⁴⁶ However, for the interpretation of a political and military conflict they also raise an obvious problem, namely the definition of the Vietnam War in terms of certain literary conventions created in other contexts and for other purposes. The familiar genre patterns provide structures of meaning but

⁴¹ Martin, *Receptions of War* 18. Howell speaks of an "ideological exhaustion:" "Toward the end of the war, films expressed this 'ideological exhaustion' by portraying veterans returning to the U.S. as threats to society: Vigilantes, psychos, and social misfits. The veterans in films like *Billy Jack* (1971), *Chrome and Hot Leather* (1971), *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1972), *Black Sunday* (1977), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and the *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) are men whose insanity, violence, and/or military-trained prowess make them unassimilable to American society. In such films, masculinity goes awry." Howell, "Susan Jefford's *The Remasculinization of America*" 167.

⁴² Peter C. Rollins, "The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984): 419–32; 425.

⁴³ In my selection I follow Michael Anderegg with one addition: "The most compelling statements about the war, for many people, have been *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)" (1). The addition is *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, because of its unusual popularity and cultural influence.

⁴⁴ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan—And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 241.

⁴⁵ In American literary criticism, this narrative structure of a quest into an unknown territory is called the American romance: "The major criticisms levelled at the two films, their implausibility and ambiguity, are essential aspects of the romance mode by which the major American narrative tradition has dealt with extreme experience revealing basic cultural contradictions and conflicts." John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*," *Inventing Vietnam* 56–80; 78.

⁴⁶ Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 57.

only at the cost of forcing Vietnam into the interpretative model of civilization vs. savagery. In applying this interpretative frame, we already "know" what Vietnam is: lawless and savage in the case of the Western, "primitive" and pre-civilizational in the case of the Conradian journey into the heart of darkness. At the same time, the model also suggests what the challenge is, namely to bring order and civilization to Vietnam. Such genre-based interpretative frames seem to betray a lack of willingness (or even ability) to focus on the specificity of the Vietnam conflict; what we witness instead is a retreat from history and politics into popular culture, so that the political criticism of the two movies seems to be entirely justified. However, the crucial question in dealing with the two films is whether they use genre patterns to explain Vietnam or whether they take their point of departure from narrative formulas that are culturally resonant in order to show with what expectations and mindsets Americans approached the war. In this case, the genre formula can help to dramatize how formula and reality can collide. In employing narrative formulas, fictional texts do not necessarily have to succumb to a formulaic interpretation of reality. On the contrary, as John Cawelti and others have pointed out, rather than reducing history to a formula, the use of genre fiction can be a productive way of commenting on reality.

The Deer Hunter is a case in point. Starting with its title, its references to the genre conventions of the frontier romance are explicit and hardly subtle, beginning with the hero of the film: "Like Cooper's Natty Bumppo in *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, Michael is an outsider—chaste, honourable, forbearing, revering the mountains and nature, and given to a purity of purpose embodied in his deer-hunting gospel of the one-shot kill."⁴⁷ "Cimino's heroic superman," Quart continues, "is one in a long tradition of literary and cinematic heroes—from Bumppo to Dirty Harry—who live according to an individualistic code that has its roots in a mythicized past."⁴⁸ Michael lives on the edge between civilization and nature in an almost symbolic landscape and the long-drawn hunting scene, often criticized as painfully unrealistic and stylized, foregrounds this convention: "The mode within which the sequence operates is, it seems to me, the mode of the archaic: the stylistic archaism at once embodies and places a concept of nobility and heroism that belongs to a past (perhaps a purely mythic one)."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Leonard Quart, "The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam," *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 159–68; 160.

⁴⁸ Quart, "Superman in Vietnam" 167.

⁴⁹ Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 255.

Ultimately, however, Cimino does not affirm the frontier romance as an interpretative frame for understanding Vietnam but dramatizes its breakdown. In this process, the genre conventions are turned upside down. The Vietcong and the jungle are inversions of America's pastoral myth of a "virgin land." The jungle is hostile and cannot be "mastered." The hero who advances into the frontier terrain and is thereby tested in his potential for becoming a hero of adventure, experiences the limits of his own fantasy of omnipotence. In the gripping roulette scene, the one-shot code of the frontier hero becomes cruelly perverted.⁵⁰ Cimino, one realizes, is concerned with the myth at the moment of its disintegration: "The film is centrally concerned with the way in which the invasion of Vietnam (a country) by America is answered by the invasion of America by Vietnam (an experience, a symbol, a state of mind)."⁵¹ The innocence and boundless self-confidence of the American hero is no longer sustainable and the "traditional male heroic action has lost its power of ultimate transcendence."⁵² Even when the survivors join in singing *God Bless America* at the end, it is a return to a belief in America on new grounds, because the hero, initially the epitome of confident individualism, in accepting loss and trauma is now acknowledging the need for community. The problem of the film, however, most clearly indicated by its lengthy and loving portrayal of a mythic pre-Vietnam America, lies in "the emotional commitment to values simultaneously perceived as obsolete"—an ambivalence that undermines its hopeful vision of an America that has become chastened and mature enough to overcome its imaginary fixations.⁵³

The narrative structure of *Apocalypse Now* is that of a quest that draws on two sources: one is Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, the other is established at the very beginning when iconographic elements and the voice-over narration of the film's hero Willard suggest affinities to Chandler's detective Marlowe. In both cases, the function of the figure is to open our eyes to how far society is pervaded by moral corruption. Thus Hellman can say:

In *Apocalypse Now* Coppola uses the hard-boiled detective formula as a means for transforming the river journey of *Heart of Darkness* into an investigation of

⁵⁰ See Hellmann: "In *The Deer Hunter* Michael survives the threat of 'one shot' in the forced Russian roulette game and kills his Vietcong captors, but on his return to the American wilderness realizes that the lesson of his experience in Vietnam is that he must give up his previous frontier code of seeking to control nature by killing a deer with 'one shot.'" Hellmann, "Rambo's Vietnam" 146.

⁵¹ Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 247.

⁵² Robert J. McKee, "American Myths and the Impact of the Vietnam War: Revisionism in Foreign Policy and Popular Cinema in the 1980s," *Vietnam Images* 43–56; 48.

⁵³ Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 256.

both American society (represented by the army) and American idealism (represented by Colonel Kurtz) in Vietnam. The river journey in *Apocalypse Now* is full of allusions to southern California, the usual setting of the hard-boiled genre, with the major episodes of this trip through Vietnam centering around the surfing, rock music, go-go dancing, and drug taking associated with the west coast culture of the time. As a result, the river journey drawn from *Heart of Darkness* takes the detective and viewer, not through Vietnam as a separate culture, but through Vietnam as the resisting object of a hallucinatory self-projection of the American culture.⁵⁴

Willard's journey is ideally suited to explore the American experience in Vietnam which, in Coppola's vision, adds up to sheer madness. The film has been praised for capturing, "as no other film has done the unprecedented *obscurity* of the Vietnam War [...]."⁵⁵ As even the sternly critical FitzGerald concedes, the film has its strongest moments in the unrelenting presentation of the war "as a surreal horror show."⁵⁶ That these scenes often have an almost seductive dimension (most obviously in the helicopter attack accompanied by a Wagner soundtrack), should not be misunderstood as an aestheticization of violence, however, because it is put into critical perspective by the narrative context.

Once Willard gets beyond the last outpost of America's power, Chandler's Marlowe is replaced by Conrad's Marlow. In following the inspiration of *Heart of Darkness*, the quest widens from an inspection of American society to one of the foundations of Western civilization in general: "Captain Willard's river journey is both external investigation of that culture and internal pursuit of his idealism. Willard is a hard-boiled detective hero who in the Vietnam setting becomes traumatized by the apparent decadence of his society and so searches for the grail of its lost purposeful idealism. Kurtz represents that idealism and finally the horrific self-awareness of its hollowness."⁵⁷ With explicit allusions to T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Coppola emphasizes the modernist idea that underneath modern civilization lies a primitive core that hollows out the claims of Western civilization to be morally superior. This "corruption," deeply ingrained in modern civilization, affects even the figure of the quester himself. While Chandler's Marlowe is still able to protect his integrity, Willard comes to identify with Kurtz and follows the model established by him. His development dramatizes the deep moral dilemma at the heart of Western

⁵⁴ Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 70.

⁵⁵ Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood's Vietnam: From The Green Berets to Full Metal Jacket* (London: Heinemann, 1989) 119.

⁵⁶ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 67.

⁵⁷ Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 70.

civilization—which, in turn, provides a metaphor for the interpretation of the Vietnam War. The "idealist" Kurtz who wanted to escape the moral corruption of American society (represented by the military) has made things only worse and descended into even cruder forms of barbarism. Willard's encounter with Kurtz is thus also an encounter with what his own self might be capable of doing and only the murder of Kurtz can prevent him from succumbing to the temptation. In this sense, the film can be read as a comment also on American idealism: "Willard's discovery of the moral chaos that has resulted from Kurtz's pursuit of a moral ideal has led him to see the darkness that pervades not only the hypocrisy of the army, but also the darkness at the heart of his own pursuit of an honest war [...] not just the corrupted American reality, but the American self-concept of a unique national idealism is itself a fraud, a cover for the brute drives for power that dominate Americans as much as any people."⁵⁸ What *Apocalypse Now* finally reveals is the hollowness and the emptiness of the American ideal which is just a mask for power.

Coppola's interpretation of the Vietnam War remained an exception that failed to capture the American imagination. As Newsinger puts it: "The notion that the logic of the Vietnam War involved 'a descent into madness and barbarism' was a very powerful one but it was not to inform the work of other directors."⁵⁹ The film was severely criticized for its depoliticization of the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ But in a way, the fact that "[...] *Apocalypse Now* [...] universalizes and abstracts the war by making its terror part of the human condition rather than a result of specific social and political forces"⁶¹ can also be seen as an attempt to avoid discussing the Vietnam War "in strictly American terms,"⁶² that is, as a failure or weakness of American ideology. Both *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*

⁵⁸ Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 76.

⁵⁹ John Newsinger, "Do You Walk the Walk? Aspects of Masculinity in Some Vietnam War Films," *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 126–36; 128.

⁶⁰ See for example, Tomasula's representative critique: "The film's ahistorical tact can be exemplified by this Coppola quote: 'I started moving back in time, because I wanted to imply that the issues and themes were timeless. As you went further up river, you went deeper into the origins of human nature.' By seeking timeless and universal truths about the Human Condition, the film elided the specificity of its historical moment. In addition, that human condition is defined by means of a false contradiction that used the Vietnamese and Cambodians to represent the primitive 'origins of human nature' and the Americans to represent humankind's more 'civilized' side." Frank P. Tomasula, "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar Film," *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 145–58; 154.

⁶¹ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 70.

⁶² Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 77.

"seek to purge the culture of a central compulsion figured in its ideal hero," but whereas in *The Deer Hunter* Cimino transforms Vietnam into a regenerative myth that makes the traumatic experience a conceivably fortunate fall for the American Adam" who has to grow up, in *Apocalypse Now* Coppola presents this vision as another self-delusion: Coppola views Vietnam as the projection of southern California into an alien landscape where even American idealism stands at last exposed.⁶³ Unfortunately, Coppola's attempt to move beyond American exceptionalism also has its price: Contrary to FitzGerald's view, it is not the metaphor per se which poses the problem but the fact that Coppola, in conceptualizing the Vietnam War in terms of a literary image taken from Joseph Conrad, drew on a metaphor from fin-de-siècle cultural criticism that has no explanatory power in the case of Vietnam. As critics almost unanimously agree, by reconceptualizing the Vietnam War in the philosophical and literary terms of literary modernism, Coppola overreached and failed to provide an explanation for Vietnam that would resonate.⁶⁴

Winning This Time: The Vietnam Veteran as Guerilla-Fighter

Other forms of narrative organization and metaphorical interpretation were more successful and found more resonance than Coppola's heart of darkness: the common soldier, the so-called "grunt," as super-man warrior, the veteran, and the story of initiation. All attempt to give meaning and dignity to the lowly "grunt" soldier who had to bear the brunt of the fighting in Vietnam. For this project, the figure of a super-man-like warrior proved especially useful, because it is ideally suited to take advantage of a basic promise of the adventure formula: By elevating the common soldier, usually from the working-class, to the level of a fighter who stands tall and stands out from the rest, he gains a degree of recognition that he could not hope to find at home. Aufderheide therefore speaks of "noble-grunt" films and emphasizes the special gratification they can provide: "Watching the noble-grunt films, viewers can identify with characters who are misunder-

⁶³ See Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film" 77–78. In this critique, Coppola even goes beyond the hard-boiled formula: "As a result, while the hard-boiled formula posts an individual integrity as an alternative to a corrupt society, Joseph Conrad's novella implies a universal darkness in man" (70). The motif also allows for a critique of the American myth.

⁶⁴ See Kinney: "Though a grand and beautiful film, *Apocalypse Now* failed to capture the popular imagination or to instigate the kind of communal remembrance that *Platoon* did almost ten years later." Judy Lee Kinney, "Gardens of Stone, *Platoon*, and *Hamburger Hill*," *Inventing Vietnam* 153–65; 157.

stood, confused, idealistic, well-intentioned, and betrayed from above."⁶⁵ Thus, at one point Rambo compares his status as a warrior with his situation at home: "Back here I can't even hold down a job parking cars [...]." At home, the grunt soldier is nothing, in the war he can be a hero. The supreme example again is Rambo, a pure fighting machine of an almost omnipotent dimension. But the hero of *The Deer Hunter*, too, can be seen as "a super-man-warrior committed to a code built on loyalty and grace under pressure."⁶⁶

At first sight, the figure of the super-man-warrior thus seems designed to restore the old formula in which war separates the boys from the men and provides a chance for "real" men to prove their worth by distinguishing themselves as heroes.⁶⁷ Nothing has changed in the interpretation of war, it seems; no "Vietnam-effect" can be registered. But a problem remains, for after all, in spite of the amazing fighting skills of the noble grunt super-man warrior, the Vietnam War ended in defeat. It took Hollywood some time to find a solution to the problem of how the basic attraction of the adventure formula could be preserved in the light of this defeat.

One solution was to make the super-man-warrior a disillusioned veteran. Again, it was the second Rambo-movie that created the most ingenious version by reversing the customary sequence of events: While a movie like *The Deer Hunter* still follows the conventional narrative trajectory from heroics on the battlefield to the disillusionment of the veteran, the second Rambo-movie begins with the disillusioned veteran and gives him a second chance to return to Vietnam in order to prove his courage in an individual rescue mission behind enemy lines—a mission that carries national significance, because it is designed to rescue soldiers who have been missing in action.

Rambo's own private Vietnam War after the fact can provide a belated justification of the American soldier, because, unfettered by Army rules, he triumphantly succeeds in his mission. It was, in other words, not the common soldier who lost the Vietnam War, but a hopelessly bureaucratized and politicized military machine that put shackles on its soldiers and prevented them from realizing their fighting potential. Even a mythic hero would not have been able to slay dragons, if he would have had to follow bureaucratic rules and regulations.⁶⁸ By linking the figure of the heroic

⁶⁵ Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 84.

⁶⁶ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 60.

⁶⁷ In that sense, the war genre can be seen as a democratized version of the adventure tale of the past, in which nobility is no longer a precondition for distinction. Rather, the war genre becomes the poor man's success story.

⁶⁸ In these stories officers are the embodiment of bureaucrats: "However, in films these

warrior with that of the disillusioned veteran, Vietnam movies can acknowledge defeat, and yet redeem the soldiers who fought the war. In dissociating the common soldier from the military as an institution, individual heroism and national shame can be effectively separated. The super-man-warrior-as-veteran can become a representative of the "true" and genuine American, so that American values can be reaffirmed even in the light of defeat and the nation can hope for redemption through the will and sacrifices of its common people.

It is interesting to have a closer look at the main metaphor through which this transformation is achieved, the transformation of the common soldier into a guerrilla-fighter who fights behind enemy lines or at the front line in the jungle where he must make his own decisions. This dissociation of the soldier from the military links liberal and conservative films of the Vietnam War; we encounter it in the figure of Elias in *Platoon* as well as in *Rambo: Part II*. The latter, however, gives us a clearer sense of what the reasons are for this disassociation. One of the main imaginary attractions of war, as of violent conflicts in general, is that it promises to provide a chance for the successful assertion of masculinity. In war, qualities are needed that only "real men" have: courage, skill, endurance, "the stoical bearing of suffering as well as the ability to inflict violence and death."⁶⁹ What all of these attributes have in common is that they contribute to a fantasy of control—which is the greatest promise of successful masculinity because it is, in turn, a source of strength. But it is exactly the possibility of control that is constantly undermined in Vietnam movies: Willard and Kurtz cannot control themselves, the heroes of *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* face developments they cannot control, the Marines in *Full Metal Jacket* illustrate the difference between self-control and mere drill. Only Rambo can successfully assert his masculinity by controlling his enemies, albeit at the price of a cartoonish, "glistening hypermasculinity" that risks ridicule in its fairy-tale omnipotence.⁷⁰ But even Rambo, although he longs for recog-

nition by "America," is bitterly disappointed in his search for recognition. He has proven himself a "real man," in fact, almost the caricature of one, and yet he gets no acknowledgment of his worth from "America."

The war has been a big disappointment for Rambo (as it has been for the other heroes of the movies discussed here); *Rambo: Part II* is driven by working-class rage and "righteous vengeance among those who felt themselves powerless."⁷¹ The only way out the film leaves is that of a guerrilla-fighter who sets his own agenda. Only in this way can Rambo exert enough control not to lose again. In their independence and self-determination, these warriors are reminiscent of Indians and, indeed, they have "gone Indian" in their outer appearance as well as in their guerrilla tactics.⁷² Fittingly, Auster calls Rambo "a statuesque noble savage."⁷³ This is an ingenious act of resemanticization of the Vietnam veteran, a shift "from one meaning (psychopathic misfit, murderer of women and children) to another (the noble savage)."⁷⁴ In the context of the film, this image is highly effective, because it combines three powerful associations: To start with, the film's appropriation of the iconography of the noble savage adds to the romance of the warrior hero while at the same time transforming him into a heroic victim of "government deceitfulness [...]."⁷⁵ Secondly, because the victim is "noble," it is marked as morally superior. And yet, thirdly, as a "savage" he is also permitted to act as a ferocious and "uncivilized" fighter who can be unforgiving and follows only his own rules—which, in turn, is justified by the fact that the rules the government has set have been compromised by the defeat in Vietnam and by the ensuing victimization of soldiers like Rambo.⁷⁶ Rambo's—at first sight somewhat surprising—anti-government stance thus articulates the anti-authoritarianism of a paramilitary culture emerging in the 1980s in the United States in which moral restraint is seen as self-defeating. America has to use whatever it takes to win. In anticipation of more recent government policies that the end justi-

officers operate as emblems of the mismanagement of the war in general, as stand-ins for a military establishment that did not understand the horror of daily existence in the war and whose perception of the war as a business cost many lives." Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 106.

⁶⁹ Newsinger, "Do You Walk the Walk?" 131.

⁷⁰ Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War," *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 101–112; 111. Besides the narcissism of the fetishized male's body, there is a mechanic, automaton-like quality in Rambo's omnipotence: "By emphasizing the efficiency of Rambo as a 'killing machine' created by Trautman, Stallone's protagonist becomes an American version of Frankenstein's monster. In his sheer implacability and indestructibility, he begins to evoke figures from genre films such as *The Terminator*, or Jason in *Friday the 13th*" (109).

⁷¹ Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 105.

⁷² In the second *Rambo* movie, Rambo "is described as a half-breed, half German and half American Indian, a 'hell of a combination,' says Murdock [...]. The Indianness of costume signifiers—long hair, bare chest, headband, and necklace/pendant" (Studlar and Desser, "*Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" 108) signal his radical break with the military as an institution: "His long hair, head-band and naked torso defy the image of the modern military man." McKeever, "American Myths" 54.

⁷³ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 109.

⁷⁴ Studlar and Desser, "*Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" 109.

⁷⁵ Studlar and Desser, "*Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" 108.

⁷⁶ The discourse of savage, "unrestrained ferocity" also explains an often criticized feature of the movie: the subhuman nature of the Vietnamese who have to fill out the role of the savage in the manner of the captivity narrative where the role of the savage consists solely in cruelly torturing the white victim.

fies the means, the shift to the figure of the Indian guerrilla-fighter makes it possible to formulate a new doctrine of unrestrained ferocity.⁷⁷ "In films on the World War II era, the brutal Germans and Japanese were contrasted with the personally decent Americans [...]. But there was no implication then that Americans could not beat them anyway without imitating them. American audiences are now being told that they have been disadvantaged by their past decency, whether real or imagined. But they no longer have to suffer this disadvantage if they are prepared to get mean themselves."⁷⁸

The Initiation of the Noble Grunt ... Into What?

The reaffirmation of national pride in the super-man warrior movies comes at the price of indulging in a fantasy of omnipotence that seems to disregard the lessons Vietnam taught. These films have therefore been heavily criticized in film and cultural criticism. Auster calls *The Deer Hunter* a work of political amnesia, and the figure of Rambo has become a symbol of the return of a boisterously-ignorant Americanism in the Reagan years. A critically more successful film was Oliver Stone's film *Platoon*, which has been praised by many viewers and critics as the most realistic and the most substantial representation of the Vietnam War.⁷⁹ In contrast to the increasingly allegorical *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, an example of the combat film

⁷⁷ The term is inspired by Cawley who speaks of a right-wing theory of the defeat in Vietnam which "could be called 'the doctrine of restrained ferocity.' The doctrine, most explicit in *Rambo*, holds that the United States fights according to rules, while its opponents don't. Vietnam movies suggest that refraining from brutality is an important disadvantage in war. Rambo explains, in one of his rare utterances, that he was made to lose by having to observe rules." Leo Cawley, "The War about the War: Vietnam Films and American Myth," *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 69–80; 70. For an enlightening description of the connection between the movie and a new paramilitary culture in the U.S. see Gibson, "American Paramilitary Culture" 10–42.

⁷⁸ Cawley, "The War about the War" 70. The ultimate historical irony of the fact that it is the figure of the Indian who has to redeem the American soldier as fighter provokes Sturken to say: "The heritage of the Native American is shamelessly appropriated to shore up the (white) American soldier's reputation as a skilled and courageous fighter. Moreover, the invocation of the Native American as guerrilla fighter usurps the role played by the Vietnamese, whose guerrilla war tactics ultimately demoralized and defeated the United States." Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 110.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Katrina Porteous: "All this is so well done that the film offers a far more 'realistic' account of the American experience of Vietnam than the sweeping metaphors of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, or the idiocies of *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*." Katrina Porteous, "History Lessons: *Platoon*," *Vietnam Images* 153–59; 153.

genre, profits from its director's first-hand experiences as a soldier in Vietnam and appears as authentic, while, in contrast to "*Rambo*'s one-dimensional cartoonish quality," it does not take refuge in the figure of an omnipotent savior.⁸⁰ Instead, *Platoon* uses a different metaphor for the Vietnam experience, that of a story of initiation in which an initially innocent and idealistic young American is transformed by the ugly realities of the war. This is another conventional narrative, to be sure, but it allows Stone to capture the contradictory nature and moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War experience, without, on the other hand, disregarding or devaluing the experiences of the common soldier.

One of the reasons why Hollywood stayed away from the topic of Vietnam for so long was the problem of finding ways of criticizing the Vietnam War without dismissing American ideals and appearing as Un-American. For this reason, the war was long considered to be "unrepresentable," not necessarily because of the brutality and overpowering effects of the combat experience, but because the war seemed to undermine values that were traditionally a staple of the adventure and war genre, namely the reaffirmation of masculinity and its link with patriotism and national identity.

By drawing on the metaphor of the war as initiation, *Platoon* found a solution to the problem that worked well: The story of initiation can articulate bitter disillusionment about the war and submit traditional ideals of heroism to critical scrutiny, because it presents a shock of recognition in which an innocent young person is awakening to the fact that the view of the world which he has held so far has been naïve and possibly childish.⁸¹ Such an awakening can include a critical look at one's own society and all

⁸⁰ Adi Wimmer, "Recyclings of the Frontier Myth in Vietnam War Films of the 1980s," *Constructing the Eighties: Versions of an American Decade*, ed. Walter Grünzweig, Roberta Maierhofer, and Adi Wimmer (Tübingen: Narr, 1992) 109–40; 118. Sturken states that "when it was first released, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* was lauded as 'the first real Vietnam film.'" Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 96. She then provides a selection of reviews that confirm her claim, for example in statements like the following: "More than any other film, *Platoon* gives the sense—all five senses—of fighting in Viet Nam" (Richard Corliss); "Indeed, the film's greatest strength lies in its social realism—its feeling of verisimilitude for the discomfort, ants, heat, and mud—of the jungle and the brush: the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release of base camp, the terror of ambushes, and the chaos and cacophony of night fire-fights" (Albert Auster and Leonard Quart); "The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But *Platoon* is historically and politically accurate" (David Halberstam). Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 97.

⁸¹ See Kevin Bowen: "What we see in *Platoon*, what Stone shows us and what the hero Taylor discovers, is that Vietnam is not a noble mission. It is a place, physically and spiritually, where no one wants to be, a place where everyone knows something drastically wrong is happening but from which there is no escape." Kevin Bowen,

those authorities that nourished these adolescent illusions. And yet, the film can nevertheless also demonstrate the bravery and moral integrity of individual soldiers—as the figure of Elias illustrates, the compassionate and idealistic, Indian-like warrior, “who is losing his faith in the war yet retains a moral standard about what kinds of behaviour are unacceptable even in combat.”⁸² As in the super-man-warrior movies, disillusionment about the Vietnam War can enhance our perception of the heroism of the individual soldier, but in *Platoon* this heroism is grounded not in a re-kindled fantasy of omnipotence, but in the fact that a code of moral standards is preserved even in the face of national disillusionment.

One way, then, to deal with the moral ambivalence of the Vietnam War is to separate individual and national mission.⁸³ In this way, defeat can be acknowledged, because it can be explained as a failure of the government and its bureaucrats, while, at the same time, the courage, skill, and honor of the individual soldier can still be affirmed, even celebrated as heroic endurance in the face of adversity and corruption. This does not mean to reject America, however. As a rule, it is exactly the other way round: By disassociating the individual from “official America,” a notion of a true American identity, defined as independent individualism, can be maintained. This, in effect, has been the working-principle of the “American romance” for a long time: As Leslie Fiedler and others have pointed out, in this search for independence, the white American has often been helped by a “dark shadow,” a racialized companion whose “primitivism” paves the way for rebirth. In *Platoon*, too, the separation of individual and national mission

“‘Strange Hells’: Hollywood in Search of America’s Lost War,” *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 226–35; 234.

⁸² Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 100.

⁸³ See Cawley: “In the Vietnam films, the rise of ‘lesser’ loyalties supplants such older causes as anticommunism or the loyalties of the World War II film to nation and democratic principle. [...] On the right and on the left, the war is seen to have tainted the nation-state in people’s minds, and they reject it. [...] we see loyalties devolving down to small groups like the work unit, the family, the circle of friends or buddies, or the ethnic group. This parallels what was actually happening to the United States Army in the field during the war.” Cawley, “The War about the War” 73. However, I think, that contrary to a considerable number of critics, male bonding, often considered the basis for a “remasculinization of America” (Jeffords) and, by implication, for a regeneration of society as a whole, does not provide the alternative in these films: “In Vietnam films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Missing in Action 2*, working together is not offered as a realistic proposition. That internal conflicts among American soldiers now lead to violence and death suggests the depths of societal division and the lack of a clear sense of purpose about the war.” Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood 5. Apocalypse Now*, the second Rambo movie, and even, in the final analysis, *The Deer Hunter* also do not rest their hopes for society on male bonding.

manifests itself in the use of Indian iconography that individualizes the common soldier, disassociates him from the military machine, and provides him with the romantic aura of a guerrilla fighter. The “initiation” in *Platoon*, is thus also one into how the soldier can prevent himself from becoming a mere cog in the military machine.

In *Platoon*, the murder of Elias by the evil, Ahab-like Sergeant Barnes provides the final stage in the initiation of the young soldier Chris Taylor who has entered the war naively and without realization of its morally corrupting nature. Again, the metaphor of initiation is of use here, because it can help to redefine America’s role in the war: Like Taylor, America entered the war innocently and did not realize what it was getting into; like Barnes, it was corrupted by the war; like Elias, its better elements resisted this corruption, although only at the price of self-sacrifice; like Taylor, it came out wiser and thus morally redeemed:⁸⁴ “The United States is scripted through these characters as losing its innocence [...]. If the grunt soldier is innocent at the war’s outset, then the American public can identify through him with a sense of betrayal [...] we didn’t know, we believed.”⁸⁵ In this, the metaphor of initiation is also ideally suited to articulate the gradual, often reluctant awakening of the American population about the true nature of a war started in its name. The metaphor can help to acknowledge defeat by linking it with a promise of growth, a trajectory from (innocent) adolescence to a “grown-up” maturity that promises to be wise enough not to make the same mistake twice.

What many viewers and critics regard as an impressively realistic film about Vietnam, is thus, at a closer look, highly overdetermined by symbolic meanings. In effect, one may assume that it is exactly this skilful combination of reality effect and national reconciliation that explains the success of *Platoon*. In comparison, Stanley Kubrick’s film *Full Metal Jacket* is much more radical in his rejection of generic conventions,⁸⁶ although the film is all about “the making of the American man and war hero.”⁸⁷ The

⁸⁴ In the end, Taylor is the new Elias: “The War has served as his *rite de passage* from boy to man, and the man who has emerged has retained his humanity, his integrity; he has not surrendered to the madness, against all the odds.” Newsinger, “Do You Walk the Walk?” 131.

⁸⁵ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 104.

⁸⁶ See Pat Aufderheide: “Stanley Kubrick’s chilling *Full Metal Jacket* both fits within and breaks the noble-grunt convention, since it uses the elements of this subgenre to shape a critique of it” (85). “With its black humor, savage irony, and pervasive scepticism (particularly in its central character, Joker), *Full Metal Jacket* undercut the pieties of the noble-grunt film. It did not heroicize its militant innocents nor render sentimental the confusion of the powerless” (99).

⁸⁷ Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, “Full-Metal-Jacketing, or Masculinity in the Making,” *Cinema Journal* 33.2 (1994): 5–21; 5.

soldiers the film presents are supposed to be "fighting machines," but, in contrast to Rambo, not because they are especially strong or skilled, but because they have been relentlessly drilled in boot camp, until they have lost all of their individuality. In the case of Rambo, to be a fighting machine means to stand out and deserve special recognition; in the case of *Full Metal Jacket* it means to have completely succumbed to "the military as an institution that breeds killers."⁸⁸ From this point of view, the film also categorically rejects the story of initiation as a possible explanatory model for the Vietnam experience, for the "initiation" in this case is produced by an unforgiving military drill that aims at "the deconstruction of social identities and the reconstruction of depersonalized military subjects."⁸⁹

In Kubrick's version, this "masculinisation process" is not designed to turn boys into men, but to reduce men to boys, not a process to gain individual distinction through courage and heroism, but to make the soldier internalize his own worthlessness, so that he is willing to follow orders blindly.⁹⁰ All metaphors that other Vietnam films have introduced are undermined or reversed: the super-man-warrior is unmasked as an image the military uses for drilling and disciplining purposes (and which, consequently, collapses in an encounter with a female sniper); to sell war as a story of initiation is a clever public relations coup by the military; the image of the Indian guerrilla-fighter is nothing but a costume; the heart of darkness at which we finally arrive is not that of a primitive core at the heart of modern civilization but on the contrary, a quasi fascist institution within the state; and, finally, the look back of the veteran has no redeeming features, because, in the end, the soldiers have not become "real men" but regress to their childhood memories of the Mickey Mouse-Club.⁹¹ Many critics have

⁸⁸ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 142.

⁸⁹ Martin, *Receptions of War* 136.

⁹⁰ From its beginning, the film contains numerous references to the film figure of John Wayne which are used as ironic allusions to "stupid heroics guaranteed to get either one's self or a buddy killed." Ralph R. Donald, "The Ugly American Syndrome in Films of the Vietnam War," *Beyond the Stars: Themes and Ideologies in American Popular Film*, ed. Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller, 5 vols. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1990–1996) 5: 87–101; 96.

⁹¹ Referring to David Gilmore's argument in *Manhood in the Making*, Willoquet-Maricondi puts this aspect of the movie in the wider context of the process of masculinization: "Masculinization is a continuous 'battle' against these regressive wishes but for Kubrick the process produces an 'empty' self which can then be governed by these regressive wishes and fantasies [...]." The Mickey Mouse episode can therefore also show "that boot-camp and war are continuous with the rest of American popular culture. The 'Vietnam generation' was the first generation to grow up with television, and the 'Mickey Mouse Club' was a popular program during the time the members of that generation were growing up. War is thus shown to be the logical conclusion of a process which begins with the Mickey Mouse Club,

(mis)understood this last scene as a reaffirmation of American culture, but as Willoquet-Maricondi argues convincingly, there can be no doubt in the context of Kubrick's interpretation of the Vietnam War that it marks the marines' final return to infantilism. All of the other metaphors imply an experience of growing up and growing knowledge about the world that is unthinkable in Kubrick's universe. In Kubrick's indictment of the American military machine, "growth" means "being a working cog in a well-oiled machine, of enveloping the private self in a full metal jacket."⁹² Kubrick's title and key metaphor summarizes the two major points of his radically revisionist view: The initiation which the war provides is that into becoming a killer; and to become a "real man" in the military sense means to fall prey to an adolescent identification with an imaginary construct.

From History to Cultural Memory

In the final analysis, the figure of the veteran became the major metaphor in Vietnam movies. Involved in the war and therefore not a "coward," but disillusioned, with feelings of guilt and nevertheless redeemed by his own awakening, the veteran, as a "symbol of an America scrambling for its moral and psychic footing," offers us an almost religious drama of guilt and redemption.⁹³ In this process, history is transformed into cultural memory, and this cultural memory is distinguished from "accurate" history by its therapeutic and cathartic function, because "it gives meaning to the present."⁹⁴ For Aufderheide, the "noble-grunt films" therefore "speak more eloquently to the psychological plight of the average moviegoer today than to any reality of the war years. Just as the Vietnam Memorial enabled a public acknowledgement of personal mourning, films and TV shows of the later eighties evinced a sense of loss and a recognition of the need for grief."⁹⁵ In reinterpreting the war through the figure of the noble grunt who is initiated into the war and becomes a veteran struggling with

the Boy Scouts, the high school football team." Willoquet-Maricondi, "Masculinity in the Making" 18.

⁹² Thomas Doherty, "Full Metal Genre: Kubrick's Vietnam Combat Movie," *Film Quarterly* 42 (1988): 24–30; 27.

⁹³ Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 109.

⁹⁴ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 1. Sturken therefore concludes: "We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present" (2). For Sturken, events like the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic "confront loss and transform it into healing" (16). Popular films "not only significantly shape historical narratives but also provide a catharsis for viewers and, ultimately, for the nation" (96).

⁹⁵ Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 82.

his guilt, Hollywood Vietnam War movies found a narrative version that has become part of American collective memory and, in doing so, has eclipsed documentary footage and images of the war.⁹⁶ This is not surprising. As in many other cases, documentation is not sufficient to give meaning to a historical event. Cultural memory, however, is, by definition, the realm where an identity is created on the basis of a meaningful narrative. These Vietnam films are therefore not films that try to tell Americans "how it really was," but how a process can be started that might heal the scarred American psyche. In this, they are also films of a successful recuperation. They make it possible to face the fact of defeat, and possibly even of guilt. By the shift to a common soldier who is alienated and feels deceived, the former symbol of superiority has become the victim.⁹⁷ Americans have been deceived by their government and the military establishment—not by "America," however, whose ideals are preserved by the noble-grunt-turned-veteran, while the power elite and the institution of the military have betrayed them.

This "healing" comes at a price, however. It is amazing indeed to what extent even progressive movies have been "self-centered" and completely disregard the Vietnamese. The major victim of the Vietnam War seems to be the American psyche, not the Vietnamese victims of the war.⁹⁸ (The pattern now repeats itself in Iraq.) Even the "My Lai"-episode in *Platoon* may be "tremendously powerful and shocking but it is shown from the point of view of American anguish rather than from the point of view of Vietnamese suffering."⁹⁹ The point has been made in discussions of Stone's and other Vietnam movies: "Above all, by dwelling, like many veterans' accounts, on America's lost innocence, the film, like them, pays strikingly little attention to the far greater suffering of the Vietnamese, including those for whose freedom the United States ostensibly fought. It says nothing,

either, about the political dimensions of their struggle. By these silences it perpetuates the kind of thinking, or lack of it, that made the war possible in the first place."¹⁰⁰ There is hardly any representation of the Vietnamese as human beings in American Vietnam War movies: "There are no male Vietnamese protagonists in these films. The majority of the Vietnamese depicted in Vietnam War films are suspicious and incomprehensible, their words untranslated."¹⁰¹ These films are thus "limited by the nationalism of American cinema. They effectively efface the Vietnamese, even reshape a Vietnamese's woman story [in Oliver Stone's later film *Heaven and Earth*] as one of an American veteran's struggle with guilt."¹⁰² In sum, one can say with David Desser: "And even the retrospective dramatic analyses of the Vietnam War focuses on us, on what the war did to us, on how we entered Vietnam with either good or bad intentions, but never on Vietnam as a historical site, never on the Vietnamese as genuine subjects, as people with a culture, a heritage, a political agenda, even a cultural and political confusion all their own."¹⁰³

The self-centeredness of American Vietnam movies also undermines any political interpretation: "What none of these films addressed, even the most intellectually and aesthetically sophisticated of the lot, were the political or historical bases for the war or the Vietnamese perspective of the conflict. None touched on North Vietnamese nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, or the character of that culture. In fact, the Vietnamese were depicted primarily as cannon fodder (although a few films evoked their military skill) and

⁹⁶ See David Halberstam: "Thirty years from now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*." Qtd. in Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2003) 10.

⁹⁷ The question of the admission of guilt is thus solved by a displacement: "One of the key strategies in this displacement of the crucial question of America's Vietnam involvement is that of victimization. [...] The appeal to victimization via the will to myth is a powerful rhetorical tool to apply to the problem of guilt. To be a victim means never having to say you're sorry." Studlar and Desser, "*Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" 104.

⁹⁸ See Leo Cawley: "Our memorial wall in Washington has fifty-eight-thousand or so dead on it. The Vietnamese suffered more than 2 million dead. Because their country is smaller than our country, one fifth the size, their wall, if they had one and we allowed for these differences, would be two hundred times larger than ours." Cawley, "The War about the War" 79.

⁹⁹ Newsinger, "Do You Walk the Walk?" 130.

¹⁰⁰ Porteous, "History Lessons" 158.

¹⁰¹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 115. See also Newsinger on the representation of the enemy. American Vietnam War movies, he argues, "at best leave the Vietcong unseen and at worst portray them as sub-human." Newsinger, "Do You Walk the Walk?" 132. On the other end of the spectrum of films like *Platoon*, there is *Rambo*: "In *Rambo*, there are humans and then there are gooks who populate a jungle that is not a wilderness to be transformed into a garden, but an unredeemable hell that automatically refutes any accusation of America's imperialistic designs." Studlar and Desser, "*Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" 108. See also Gibson's characterization of *Rambo's* representation of the Vietnamese: "First, the Vietnamese are not shown as real people from a different culture with different political values. Instead the Vietnamese are portrayed as *criminals*. They retain American prisoners as slave labourers and savagely abuse them. One prisoner is crucified on a bamboo cross. Vietnamese guards sadistically enjoy such abuse; the Communists are *sexually perverted*. As criminal sexual perverts, the Vietnamese do not represent an alternative kind of society, different from American capitalism, but rather they are *outside the boundary of moral conduct of any sort*. Communism is thus shown as a kind of *organised criminal hierarchy*." Gibson, "American Paramilitary Culture" 23–4.

¹⁰² Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 121.

¹⁰³ David Desser, "Charlie Don't Surf: Race and Culture in the Vietnam War Films," *Inventing Vietnam* 81–102; 97.

their country as nothing more than a landscape for American moral commitments and personal fantasies."¹⁰⁴ Audiences "are offered neither insight as to why the United States took on this war in the first place nor an understanding of its long-term consequences or possible alternatives."¹⁰⁵ In *Apocalypse Now*, "Coppola's penchant for [literary] allusionism ultimately contributes to a depoliticization of the Vietnam War (a process present in almost all the Hollywood Vietnam films)."¹⁰⁶ Leonard Quart, like many other critics, criticizes *The Deer Hunter* in similar terms: "Although it is doubtful that Cimino made the film to affirm American policy in Vietnam, its total identification with Michael and his friends' point of view on the war denies the audience any sort of critical take on Vietnam."¹⁰⁷ *Platoon*, although often praised for its realism, fares hardly better in this respect: "The relevant historical and political details of American involvement in Vietnam are no more addressed in *Platoon* than in previous cinematic attempts to reimagine war."¹⁰⁸ Martin sees the film as an example of "the 'classic realist film text'—a narrative form that hinges on private, personal dramas, while suppressing wider social and political dimensions. While *Platoon* revealed something new about the everyday of the Vietnam War [...], it never attempted to go beyond the immediate experience to demonstrate how the war was the effect of specific political and economic motivations that were deeply embedded in the domestic power structures of the United States."¹⁰⁹ In a discussion of *The Deer Hunter*, Robin Wood has summarized the political objections that have been formulated in the criticism even of liberal-minded Vietnam movies: "As in almost every other Hollywood film about Vietnam [...] political analysis is totally repressed and the possibility that it might be regarded as a war of American aggression / imperialism never permitted to surface."¹¹⁰

What conclusion can we draw, then? For Martin, Vietnam films have a critical potential despite their shortcomings: "The Vietnam War lingers on in American culture as a reminder of the vulnerability of hegemonic forma-

tions, and how quickly the seemingly legitimate perspectives of the powerful can be exposed as violently corrupt and self-interested."¹¹¹ For Sturken, on the other hand, events like the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic "confront loss and transform it into healing."¹¹² History becomes cultural memory. But the therapy has a limited range. It functions as absolution of traumatic experiences, not as a source of genuine insight: "The guilt absolved here is thus a guilt for the treatment of the veterans, not for the effects of the war on the Vietnamese. Closure is offered here in the re-enactment of the war to redeem the Vietnam veteran, to provide forgiveness—and to make way for the next war."¹¹³

¹⁰⁴Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* xiv–xv.

¹⁰⁵Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood* 6.

¹⁰⁶Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence" 156.

¹⁰⁷Quart, "The Superman in Vietnam" 166.

¹⁰⁸Martin, *Receptions of War* 129. See, for example, Michael Klein: "Yet, despite its critical stance, *Platoon* does not problematize or clarify the experience of the Vietnam era. It fails to situate the American military presence in Vietnam in political or historical perspective. [...] At a deeper level, however, the film substitutes a psychological and metaphysical interpretation for a historical understanding of the genocidal aspects of the war." Klein, "Historical Memory" 25.

¹⁰⁹Martin, *Receptions of War* 129.

¹¹⁰Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 242.

¹¹¹Martin, *Receptions of War* xxiii.

¹¹²Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 16.

¹¹³Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 121. See the cynical conclusion Aufderheide draws: "We are on our way, in the movies, to forgiving ourselves not for anything the U.S. government and forces did in Vietnam but simply for having felt so bad for so long [...]. The Vietnam movies of the later eighties expressed and helped to shape a consensus that the event was not a war but a tragedy [...]. We have been abandoned, these films told us, and must heal ourselves." Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers" 111.