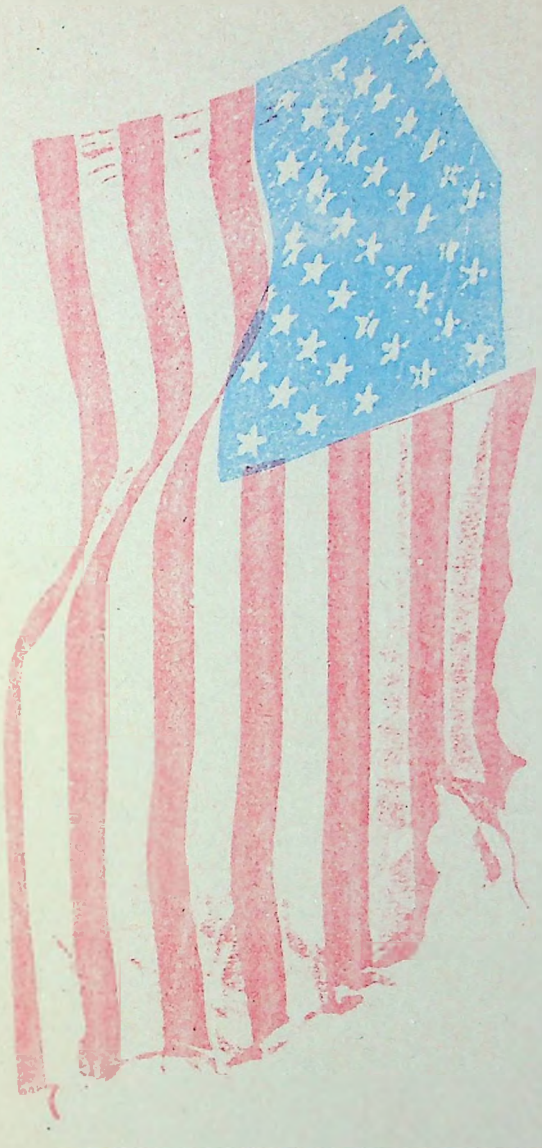
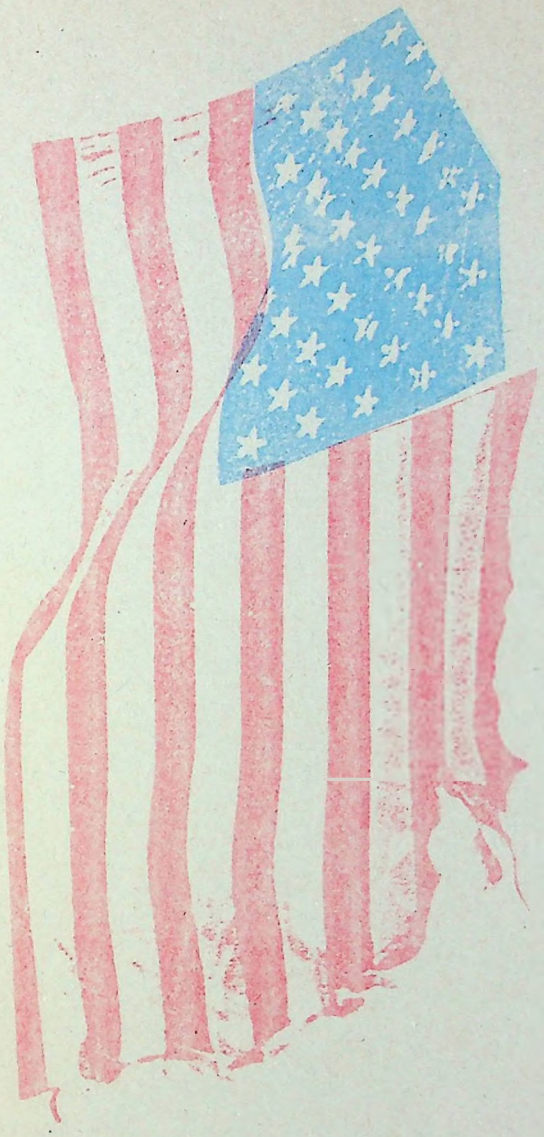


Vietnam the movie



Vietnam the movie

Vietnam The Movie

David Suttle
Fourth Year Visual Communication
National College of Art and Design

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Tutor: Tony Fitzmaurice.

Abstract

In this essay I shall trace the development of Hollywood films dealing with the Vietnam war. I shall follow the development of these films from those of the sixties, which, it can be said, have an implicit Vietnam subtext, through those of the seventies such as Apocalypse Now, up to the present.

The essay shows how these films have helped the American public 'define' the Vietnam 'experience'. By identifying two waves of Vietnam films I have examined how the early films helped the public forget the war and how the later films serve as a 'surrogate' victory. The Vietnam war offers a unique example of the role Hollywood plays in American society and a study of the films dealing with the war shows how Hollywood reflects and supports the dominant ideology of the time.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Tony Fitzmaurice for his assistance and guidance throughout the year and for all his film screenings throughout my time in N.C.A.D.

I would also like to thank Dad for his patience in proof reading my essay and for renting the video.

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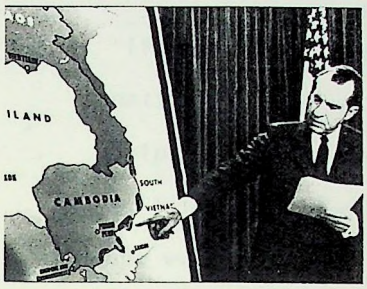


fig. 1 Nixon's television announcement that troops would make an 'incursion' into Cambodia. 1970.

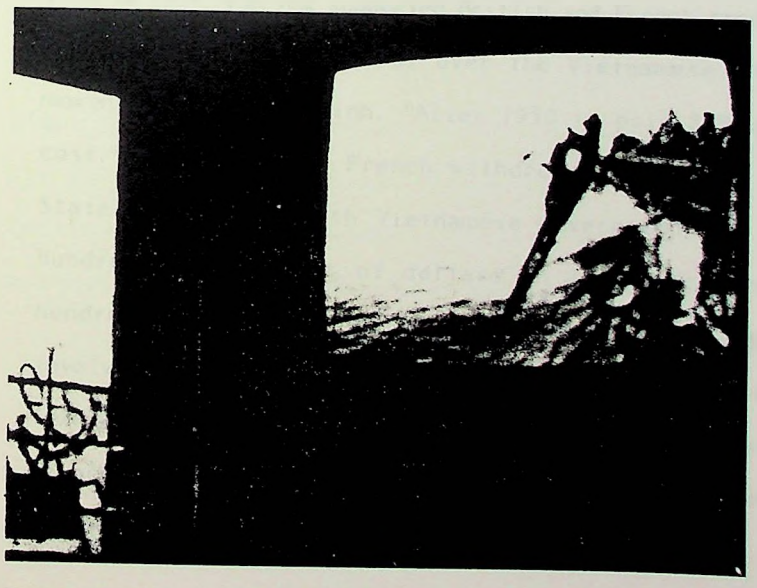


fig. 2 Television image in *The Deer Hunter* 1978

Background

"If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."

Richard Nixons television announcement on April 30 1970 that American and South Vietnamese troops would make an 'incursion' into Cambodia. (1 pg. 13). (fig. 1).

In 1945 Vietnam declared independence from French colonial domination and thus started American involvement in Vietnam. From 1946 to 1954 America supported British and French troops in their efforts to regain control over the Vietnamese independence movement, the Vietminh. "After 1950 it paid 80% of France's cost." (2 pg.10). The French withdrew in 1954 and the United States set up a South Vietnamese Government and pumped in hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance and "several hundred advisers and intelligence agents" (2 pg.10). U.S. involvement was escalated by each successive administration. By 1976 America's longest and most costly war was lost at the cost of around (no true figure exists) 58,000 American lives and over 2.5 million Vietnamese and Laotian.

I have begun with the briefest of outlines of a conflict which

never reached true closure and the dates I have given can be disputed. In Susan Moeller's Shooting War (3 pg. 325) the war is placed between February 8, 1962 and April 29, 1975. This book is an account of photo-journalism in the war and the 1962 date is the date the Associated Press transmitted its first radio photograph from Saigon. At the time the conflict had a profound effect on America and American culture. This essay is primarily about American cinema. In it I shall attempt to examine the role it plays in American society, the myths it portrays and endorses. I have chosen Vietnam as a basis for this examination for it has been, since its inception, a constant thread in contemporary American cinema. The Vietnam war has been the basis for films by virtually all of Hollywoods directors from the jingoistic Ted Post to the reclusive ex-patriate Stanley Kubrick.

The films under examination spread from The Green Berets (John Wayne, Ray Kellogg 1968) to Born on the Fourth of July (Oliver Stone 1989). The filmography contains the films I have seen that are relevent to this essay. They either deal explicitly or implicitly with the Vietnam war. Of all the films listed I shall examine some in detail while most shall serve as reference.

Why Defeat ?

There are many reasons given for America's defeat in Vietnam and in order to set the scene I would like to comment briefly on some of these in order to place this essay in its context.

Firstly the war was the first to be fought daily on the T.V. screens in every American household and it is often referred to as the 'living room war'. This constant exposure gave the war a sense of immediacy to the American public and the daily reports hosted by Walter Cronkite et al permeated every aspect of daily American life to a much higher degree than the Pathe news reports had during the Second World War. Indeed these Second World War reports, though openly morale-boosting, took second place to the main feature (the real morale booster). It is important to note that even though television is a choice, like going to the cinema, it has become less of a 'decision' than movie-going. It was the subliminal pervasive effect of popular media during the war, added to a predominantly liberal press that caused a shift in popular opinion of the war:

> "In a survey of journalists affiliated with major media outlets, 54 percent described themselves as 'liberal' or 'left of centre,' while only 19 percent called themselves conservative." (3 pg. 350).

The unlimited access afforded to the press and the realism of their coverage was central to the breakdown of the values which brought America through the second world war. **Shooting War** offers us a solid argument against the belief "that the print and

electronic media were responsible for the 'loss' of Vietnam by their facile and immature undermining of American policy" (3 pg. 349). In Nixon's scathing attack on the media we see an extension of his paranoia rather than a solid argument as regards 'their facile and immature undermining of American policy':

> "This was the first war in our history during which our media were more friendly to our enemies than to our allies... The dishonest, double standard coverage of the Vietnam War was not one of the American media's finer hours. It powerfully distorted public perceptions, and these were reflected in Congress." (3.1 pg. 350).

These sentiments are shared by Major-General Winant Sidle chief of information who felt "reporting of the war (could) have been more objective. And this might well have changed the entire outcome." (3.2 pg. 350).

Media subversion ?

In addressing the role the media played during the war it is interesting to note how it serves as a scapegoat to the Right while only providing material, rather than political discource, for the left. Its influence on films seems to have been more visual (if not visceral) than ideological. In The Deer Hunter (Michael Cimino 1978) actual news coverage of a helicopter being dumped into the ocean is used as a commentary of the uselessness of American technology (fig. 2). It is purly incidental that it is a 'television' image. The use of this media image does not suggest, as Nixon would have liked, a subversion by the media it

is merly representational. This device is part of Cimino's attempt to achieve a degree of realism. In chapter two I shall discuss this 'realism' in relation to its ideological standpoint and the post Second World War film The Best Years of Our Lives (William Wyler 1946), of which The Deer Hunter is a direct decendant. Other direct media references may be found in Francis Coppola's Apocalypse Now (1979) where he makes an 'in' joke by directing himself as a T.V director dictating to the soldiers not to look at the cameras but to fight on and in Full Metal Jacket (Stanley Kubrick 1987) the soldiers act up for T.V. saying 'this is Vietnam the movie'.

These examples serve mainly as filmic devices to create a sense of alienation. In Apocalypse Now the director's insistance that the soldiers 'dont look at the camera' underline his insistance that they become part of the spectacle he is creating. In Full Metal Jacket the approach is more 'cinema verite', where the soldiers stop and comment on the war underlining the director's wish to distance himself from the war.

These two scenes point to the main difference between the role Hollywood and the Networks played in the portrayal of the war. Television, in general (not taking into account the present war, see conclusion), is a reflector of images and fact. The moviemakers, while acknowledging the medias role in Vietnam, tend to attempt not merely toreflect rather to produce another level in which it can support their ideas and technique.

A film that comes closer to a media viewpoint (as opposed to standpoint) would be Platoon (Oliver Stone 1986). I have made the distinction in that it relates to television coverage in miming the bombardment of horrific images the American public encountered during the war (camera viewpoint), while the film is not intended as mere representation of fact (media standpoint).

What are the media influences in Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket ? It seems that they have been more visual than ideological. The so called 'New Journalism' that arose during the Vietnam War is identified by a new 'realist' feel. Images, both still and moving, of this era are influenced by the photojournalists use of new lightweight 35mm cameras and the roving action footage (Frank Capra and his Leica and other major Magnum photographers being the precursors). This is echoed in the increase in popularity of the steadicam in cinema. Admitedly steadicam images (take the sequence in Full Metal Jacket where the soldiers 'go over the top') are much smoother and aesthetic, the source is still the unsteady T.V. footage. Television also played a major role in the conditioning of audiences to the high level of violence which erupted onto the cinema screens during this period (this shall be dealt with in the first chapter on the early films).

The public divide.

From the outset few Americans doubted their involvement in

fig. 3 Student protest, Ohio State University, April 1970

fig. 4 Nixon Visits the troops, July 1969.

Vietnam. They were, as John Kennedy said, going "to make our power credible" (3 pg. 329). American fear of the domino principle meant that the:

> "United States invested its men and money so heavily because it believes South Viet Nam is the strategic key to Southeast Asia. A communist triumph could mean Red domination of the entire area". New York Herald Tribune 1963 (3 pg.329).

However these negative values aimed at the enemy, which are the propaganda basis of any conflict, rather than uniting the United States, generated conflict. For a conflict to reach true closure (as indeed a film) the sentiments held at the outset should be reaffirmed and strengthened by the end. This was not the case during the sixties. During the mid-sixties many trusted the rightness of the conflict but began to question the political and military strategies, and a turning point, the period after the Tet Offensive in 1968 (notably the year in which the majority of the films under discussion here are set), caused many to feel that the war was in fact wrong. (fig. 3).

The Grunt

The breakdown of public consensus was also paralleled by a breakdown in the 'proper' image of an army. I shall go into greater detail of the popular concept of 'the grunt' while discussing specific films such as Platoon. The split at home as certain films show (Coming Home Hal Ashby 1978, Born on the Fourth of July) isolated the soldier and can be seen, as represented by Hollywood, to be another contributing factor to

the American defeat. In Coming Home when Sally asks Bob what the war is like he replies, "I dont know what its like. I only know what it is. T.V. shows what its like. It sure as hell don't show what it is". This isolated dialogue from a film that puts itself forward as liberal, 'anti-war', (if not from its narrative then from the appearance of 'Hanoi Jane' as Sally) acknowledges the Right's resentment of T.V. reportage but also the stoicism of the soldier. It is now widely accepted that the average soldier's primary concern was to complete his or her tour of duty (Platoon is based entirely around one soldier, Chris Taylor, and his 13 month tour of duty). A poll in 1971 gave the majority as feeling "that men who went to Vietnam were 'suckers, having to risk their lives in the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time," (4 pg. 137).

The 'returning Vet' theme is a very common motif in Hollywood's Vietnam and the vet's rehabilitation (Born on the Fourth of July, the climatic film of this theme to date) is part of the entire rehabilitating role Hollywood has played. Many of these veterans were the most outspoken critics of the war. As Jean Bethke Elshtain in **Women and War** points out Michael Herr's **Dispatches** (of all the veterans writing the most significant re. Apocalypse Now) and protests during the Winter Soldier Investigation of 1971 meant that Vietnam has "become an 'experience,' unique to the annals of American war narratives." (5 pp. 219-20). This extension of sympathy for the horrors 'our boys' suffered (manifested in terms like 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder') has

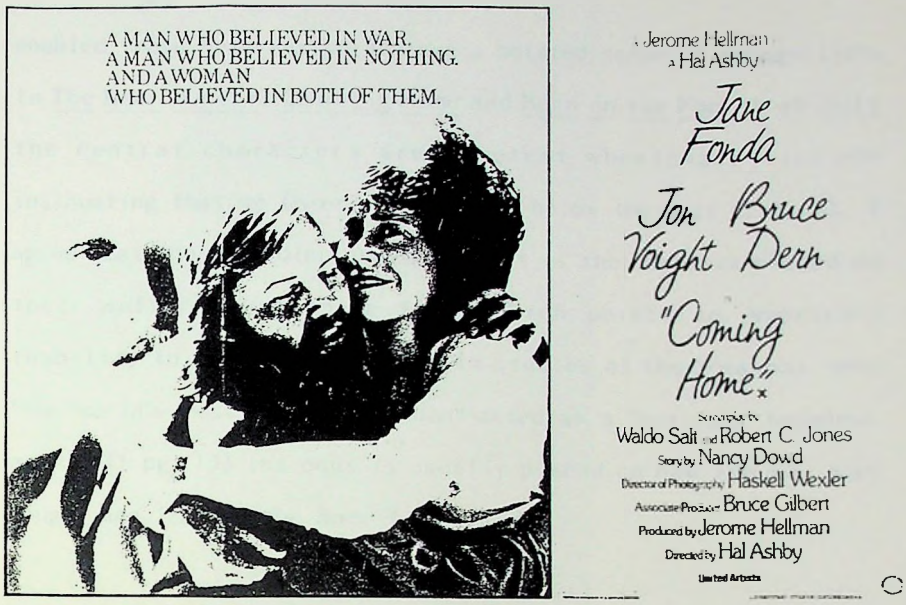


fig. 5 Jane Fonda and Jon Voight in *Coming Home* 1978

fig. 6 Tom Cruise in *Born on the Fourth of July* 1986

enabled these veterans to achieve a belated sense of recognition. In The Deer Hunter, Comming Home and Born on the Fourth of July the central characters are impotent wheelchair victims insinuating that we (America) were hit below the belt (fig. 6). I agree that these soldiers suffer but it is the emphasis placed on their suffering in these films which points to America's inability to see beyond itself. In studies of the 'reasons' why "the world's most powerful nation" acted as a "pitiful, helpless giant" (1 pg. 13) the onus is usually placed on how the war was fought and lost on the home front.

It is the search for a scapegoat and ideas as to how the war should have been fought (in particular the latter films) which is a constant theme in all Vietnam movies. In the majority of films the main protagonists are seen to return in an attempt to reach the 'closure' referred to earlier. In The Deer Hunter Michael returns to search for Nick in Saigon, Captain Willard is returning after his first tour in Apocalypse Now and Rambo returns to release supposed P.O.W.s still held in captivity in First Blood (Ted Kotcheff 1982).

'Technowar.'

A true reflection of America's defeat actually lies in 'how' the war was fought. In **The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam** James William Gibson calls the strategy 'Technowar'(2 pg. 40), saying the concept of 'Technowar' was to:

"produce so many enemy deaths that the other side would be

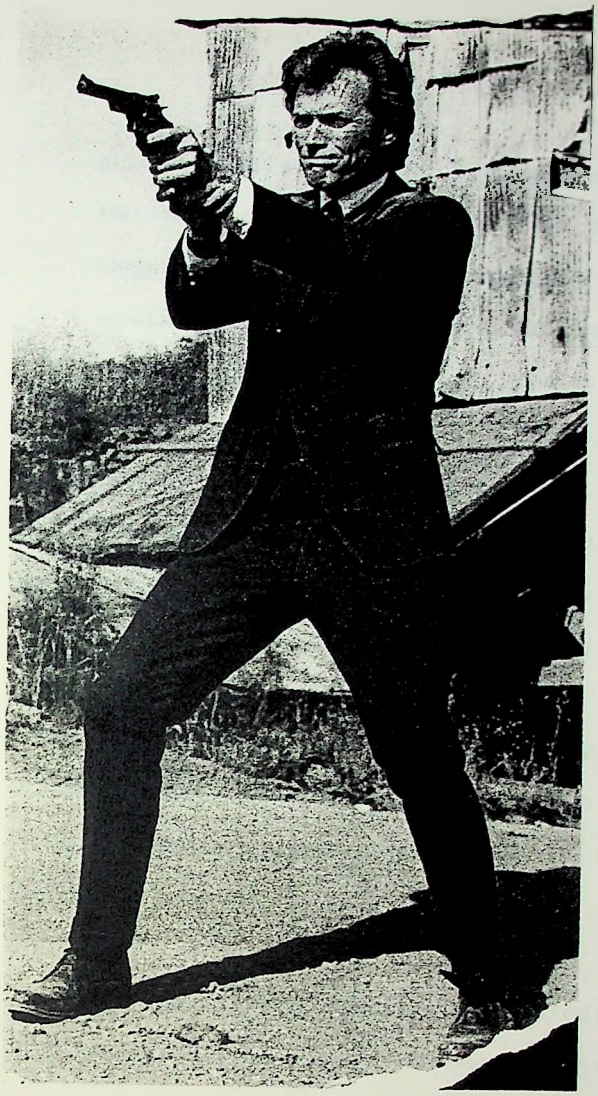


fig. 8 Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry

fig. 7 Slyvester Stallone as Rambo

driven 'bankrupt'. General William Westmoreland called this the 'cross over point', when the North Vietnamese would no longer be able to replace casualties fast enough to maintain a stable force."(2 pg. 12) (General Westmoreland was infamous for his inflated body counts).

Criticism of the war from either a liberal or conservative view, as Gibson points out, usually remains within the confines of this theory. Conservatives felt that the Administration had 'self imposed restraints' disenabling the army to function. liberals viewed the war 'as mistake' and a waste of resources. This shows that the 'liberals' of the Kennedy administration and the 'conservatives' of the Nixon administration are ignorant of the "traditional Vietnamese resistance to foreign invaders".(2 pg.12).

Coppola's Apocalypse Now and its exploding rainforest is a literal representation of 'Technowar' which comments on its banality, (take the scene where a massive strike is ordered by Lt. Col. Kilgore on a coastal village in order to get a good wave to surf). Rambo-First Blood, part II also comments on the ineptitude of 'Technowar', replacing the whole of the marines with a one man army. (fig. 7).

Perhaps the best insight into 'Technowar' strategy can be found in Ivan Illich's **Tools For Conviviality.** In his analysis of the constraints of capitalism and the growth of consumerism he

proposes the Vietnam war as an example of a "Self-defeating escalation of power... practiced in highly industrialized nations" (6 pp. 8-9). This argument is central to a society "infected by the growth mania" and shows its inability "to solve a conflict by escalation" (6 pg. 9).

The film which illustrates these beliefs is Apocalypse Now. On the visual level it depicts the banality of 'Technowar' and the folly of America's attempt to 'consumerize' Vietnam (the Playboy sequence for example). However on a higher level, the intended level of the director, the film is an indirect reflection of 'growth mania'. In order to solve the Vietnam 'experience' for himself Coppola elevates ('escalates') the film to a mythical level with its literary allusions. This 'escalation' is also reflected in the much publicised production angst and the film's huge budget. In order for Coppola to win the battle for the definitive 'Vietnam Experience' he has taken the film into the mystical realms of man's Heart of Darkness. The crisis in Hollywood at the time was to 'define' the Vietnam 'experience' and in Hollywood terms (it won a share in the Palme D'or and the Oscar for best film) Coppola has achieved this. In relation to Ivan Illich's theory the film suceeds where American policy in Vietnam failed: through "escalation". This is achieved by its literary elevation based on Conrad's Heart of Darkness and, closer to the capitalist's ideal, through the huge escalation of the budget (it rose to 30 million dollars). This depiction of the grossness of American policy is an honest critical observation on

Coppola's part but is tainted by the ambiguities of the films' literary allusions (see chapter 2).

As shall be made clear in the following chapters which chronicle the development of 'The Vietnam Movie' no film maker can view the war from any other angle than whence it came, America. Even those which are proposed as a critical commentary on the war are stained with a regressive portrayal of the Vietnamese. Mention 'Vietnam' to most people and America, rather than Asia, comes into mind. This goes to show how Hollywood has literally transported Vietnam back home. Full Metal Jacket was shot in London (and as I will attempt to show has very little to do with Vietnam) and another film, though not explictly about Vietnam a strong statement nonetheless, is set in Louisanna, (Southern Comfort Walter Hill 1981).

In addressing briefly the 'reasons' for Americas defeat we can now see how they have been defined, distilled and now redefined by Hollywood. In the following chapters I shall examine how all these films have contributed to the rebuilding of "The Pitiless Giant" of the sixties to what is now refered to as the 'New Militarism' of the eighties. Though these are rather broad and literal terms to apply to such diverse a culture as America's, they are none the less relevent when one considers the nature of Hollywood and mass entertainment as being broad and literal.

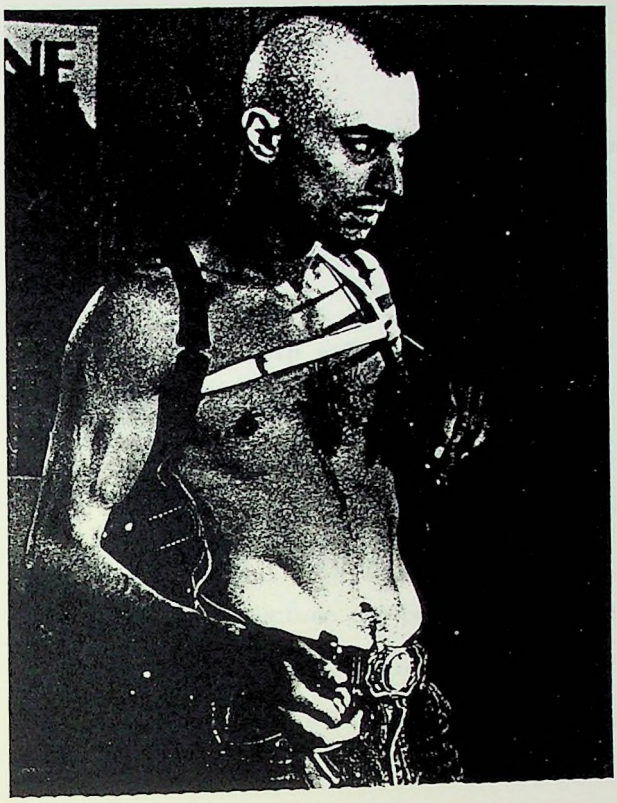


fig. 9 Travis in *Taxi Driver* 1976

TAXI DRIVER Voted 'Best Picture' Cannes Film Festival 1976

COLUMBIA PICTURES presents
ROBERT DE NIRO
TAXI DRIVER.
A BILL/PHILLIPS Production of a MARTIN SCORSESE Film
JODIE FOSTER ALBERT BROOKS as Tom
HARVEY KEITEL LEONARD HARRIS
PETER BOYLE as Wizard
and CYBILL SHEPHERD as Betsy
Written by PAUL SCHRADER Music BERNARD HERRMANN
Produced by MICHAEL PHILLIPS and JULIA PHILLIPS
Directed by MARTIN SCORSESE

Heroes

Throughout the text reference shall be made to heroes and Hollywood's notions of this myth. At this stage I would like to outline briefly this notion for subsequent reference.

In **The Hero With a Thousand Faces** the Anthropologist Joseph Campbell describes a hero as one who:

> "Must set out on a quest, must overcome many obstacles, triumph over his own failings and finally must complete the circle by returning home." (7)

While this structure can be applied to a film like Platoon a more explicitly Hollywood notion of a hero is one of an outsider who acts on the edge of society for the good of that society. This individual supports the collective cause without selfish regard for his (or rarely hers) own safety. This hero as outsider is a continuum from John Wayne in The Searchers (John Ford 1956) through to Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry (fig. 8). This outsider, by the violent nature of his acts, cannot be accepted into the society he protects.

The Vietnam war offered a brief examination of this traditional myth. Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver (Michael Scorsese 1975, fig. 9) portrays the realities of the myth. However with characters such as Rambo and Dirty Harry the myth has been reaffirmed.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary describes a hero as:

> "a man of superhuman qualities favoured by the gods.... one who has fought for his country." (Fourth edition).

The Sixties

The New Wave

During the late fifties and early sixties the studio system that was Hollywood began to crumble. To counter this they introduced gimmicks such as Drive ins, Cinemascope and 3D, to catch the youth market. However they could not compete with the rise in popularity of Television (originally their relationship had been symbiotic but following CBS setting up its film studio it turned into competition) and the move of traditional movie-going city audiences to the suburbs. It must be pointed out that the studios did not literally fold, they were just redefined. As they weakened they were taken over by the rising corporate conglomerates, Gulf and Western and Transamerica absorbed Paramount and United Artists. In **Hollywood Renaissance** Diane Jacobs by quoting Paul Mazursky defines the decline of the Movie Mogul's power:

> "I think what's changed, ...is that the great monolithic figures- the Harry Cohens, Jack Warners; those great mastodons that were strong and powerful, angry and primitive, are not there anymore. They left a stamp on so many movies that my childhood is probably a vision of those men. Somewhere along the line Jack Warner must have been an auteur." (8 pg. 13).

It was this transition period that enabled a younger group of independant Directors to take advantage and make their mark. The collapse of the old system meant that for a period there was a genuine sense of freshness and the old rules, as manifested in genres, began to be questioned. Directors were not affiliated to

fig. 10 *A Bout du Souffle* 1961

a single studio.

> "In 1970,..independants represented 43%, while Hollywood companies constituted 57% of film output. The number of independantly produced films expanded from 19 in 1968 to 107 in 1972." (8 pg. 15).

It was these Director's revisionist approach which earned them their 'New Wave' status. Their revisionism reflected the counterculture we now associate with the sixties. The backgrounds of most of these Directors and Screenwriters was more intellectual than the craft orientated background of classical Hollywood. Many studied film at University (Lucas, Coppola, Scorsese, Milius) while others began as film critics (Bogdanovich, Schrader). The screenwriters of Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn 1967), Robert Benton and David Newman, were journalists.

In France at the same time two other journalists, Jean Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, were also examining traditional genres. The writers of the film journal, Cahiers du Cinema, took a great interest in American film, particulary those of the late thirties and forties. In the period after the war they digested films unavailable during the war and their observations were manifested in Films like Godards A Bout de Souffle (1961, fig. 10) and Truffauts Tirez sur le Pianiste (1961). Mentioning the French influence shows how their reworking of old genres and academic analysis of films is a main reason for the greater self awareness we now associate with the American New Wave, (American directors

have acknowledged this influence with direct quotes from Godard and Truffaut in some of their films).

The New Wave saw the emergence of an auteur approach to both film criticism and making. Due to the fact that the French saw a large body of American films in a short space of time after the war, it enabled them to identify certain directors styles as opposed to a strict generic structure. Initially Godard toyed with the traditional genres but later moved to redefine his approaches to cinema in what he called his 'return to zero'. What is most interesting about American films of that time was the constant dialetic which existed between the auteur and his response to genre rather than a redefinition of cinema. In working within the confines of genre the director could call upon a set of themes, values and audience response not available in a 'return to zero'. The films which avoided total originality could carry a much more radical criticism of the past as opposed to those which avoided that past.

In a study of Vietnam films it is necessary to examine those of the new wave considering the fact that the majority of these films were made during the period of the war, and the only explicit film about the war made during the war was the jingoistic John Wayne vehicle The Green Berets.

The Green Berets

The Green Berets was unashamedly pro war and was made to the

fig. 11 John Wayne in *The Green Berets* 1968

conventions of a Second World War movie, starring John Wayne to underline this. (fig. 11). It also points again to the Right's view of the media outlined in the introduction. It deals with the conversion of a liberal anti war reporter, George Beckworth. In the beginning Beckworth is not convinced "that we should be in South-East-Asia," but as Lt. Kirby (John Wayne) asks if he was ever there and then proceeds to escort him through its horrors so he is converted.

As Gilbert Adair in Hollywood's Vietnam correctly points out even though this films discourse is pro war it remains "the only Hollywood movie to have tackled the issues of the war head-on" (9 pg. 33). The films that deal with the war from an anti-war standpoint fail to address the situation as singlemindedly as The Green Berets. The Green Berets deals directly with the problems of the war. It resolves its conflicts through the traditional heroic acts of John Wayne and a traditional representation of an evil enemy. It is set explictly in Vietnam and relates to no other source. This singleminded approach is rarely seen in films like Apocalypse Now or The Deer Hunter, where their criticism of the war is not as explicit as The Green Beret's praise of traditional American Values. To underline the John Wayne-ness of this film it was called John Wayne et les cowboys when released in France.

Counter Culture

Americans saw their own president assassinated on T.V. The pill

fig. 12 Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider* 1969

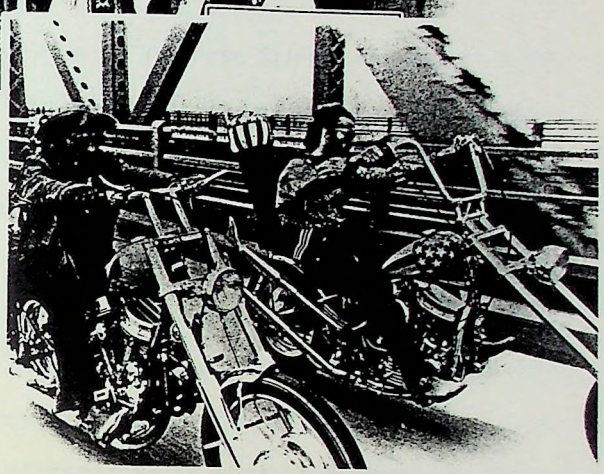


fig. 13 Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider* 1969

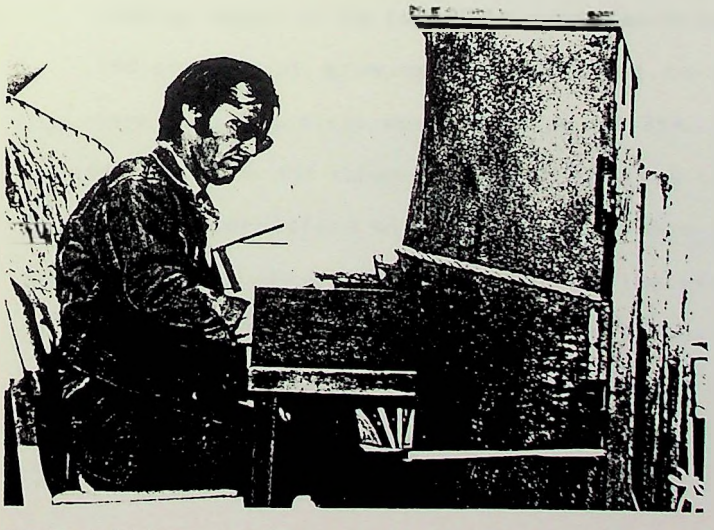


fig. 14 Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces* 1971

brought heightened sexual awareness. There was increased racial tension, greater experiment with drugs, in short everything we now take for granted in the Sixties. Two films which this counterculture strongly identified with were Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn 1967) and Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper 1967, figs. 12/13).

What the audience identified with in these films, and others like Five Easy Pieces (Bob Rafelson 1971, fig. 14), was their anti-establishment tone. They are films made in isolation and often about isolation. The anti-heros of Easy Rider and Bonnie and Clyde are on the outside of society and the films are tied by their fatalistic endings, underlining their failure to offer any other discourse than criticism. What they do point to is the individual's helplessness and the failure of the counterculture to provide a realistic alternative to what it condemned. Their success stems from the belief

> "that it was better to live fast, die young and leave good-looking images in the collective mind than to conform to the indignities of growing old and being co-opted by the straight, practical world." (10 pp. 28-29).

Adolescents were not taken in anymore by films like The Green Berets. They identified with the spirit of Bonnie and Clyde. Gangsters have always been the "'no' to the great American 'yes'", (7 pg. 23). It is these films that articulate the images of a nation acting "like a pitiless giant". But the most enduring images of these films is their extreme violence.

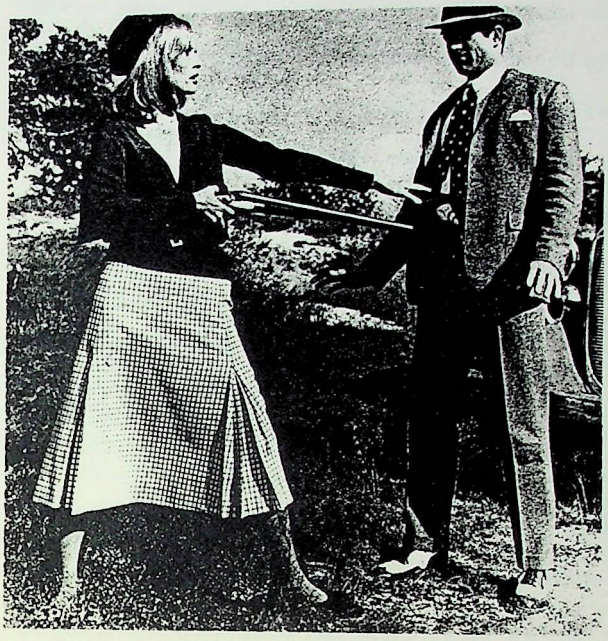


fig. 15 *Bonnie and Clyde* 1967

fig. 16 *Bonnie and Clyde* 1967

Bonnie and Clyde

Bonnie and Clyde, (figs. 15-18), exploded onto American screens in a wave of controversy and with a degree of violence new to American cinemas, not new however to their living rooms. Violence is now something one takes for granted in American cinema. It has always been there, it only gets more explicit over time.

It is an interesting sidepoint that levels of violence increase in leaps and bounds whereas the progress of the representation of sex is much more inhibited. A major reason being that the legislation for American filmakers is much tighter as regards nudity and sex rather than blood and death. The 1930 Hays Production Code (now obsolete but a major inheritance nonetheless) stated that:

> "excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embracing suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown. Scenes of passion should not be introduced when not essential to the plot... In general passion should be treated in such a manner as not to stimulate the lower and baser emotions. Rape should only be suggested when essential to the plot". On the other hand, "actual hangings or electrocutions... brutality and possible gruesomeness must be treated within the careful limits of good taste." (11 pp. 206-208).

So in order to define the true spirit at home Directors never dealt explicitly with the war. The only exception I came across is a six minute short by Martin Scorsese made in 1967 called The

fig. 17 Faye Dunnaway and Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde* 1967

fig. 18 Opening shot for *Bonnie and Clyde* 1967

Big Shave. This 16mm film is of a man shaving in the mirror and gradually cutting himself more and more till there is blood everywhere. Viet '68 appears in the credits. Though I have not seen this it seems to sum up the literal view held by liberals of America cutting its own throat. This is the same theme in Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider. They are films of desperation and no hope, their shared endings of violent death for our anti-heroes. Of these two films I feel Bonnie and Clyde to have the most substance. Obviously not a direct relation to the war it nonetheless comments more on the mood at home vis-a-vis the war; more so than a film like Full Metal Jacket.

The Esquire journalists, Robert Benton and David Newman chose to write the screenplay Bonnie and Clyde because they felt their story would capture the mood in America outlined in their article, 'The New Sentimentality,' (Esquire June 1964). They were also greatly influenced by the recent publication of John Tolland's The Dillinger Days. In all, the belief was that the thirties depression could be transposed onto the sixties. These sentiments were shared by Warren Beatty and Arthur Penn who took over production of the film. It was Penn's intention "to make a modern film whose action takes place in the past," in which he felt he could "appeal to the sensibilities of a youthful audience caught in the throes of rebelliousness and challenge". (12.1 pg.241). It has also been noted that the making of a gangster film is a reply to "the stronghold that French directors...had on the genre." (12.2 pg. 239).

Their intent of audience recognition and empathy is the films success. What starts off in Keystone Kop slapstick from their initial robbery suddenly shifts to revulsion at the shooting of the teller who threatened to enter the sanctuary of the car. Indeed it is the metaphor of the 'vehicle as home' which is paralleled in Easy Rider. The group is presented to us as an alternative family and their actions stem not from the western's tradition of an individual but rather a collective spirit. It is this alternative family which audiences identified with. But did they recognise its ultimate failure ? We know that their failure to be a part of the traditional structure (the meeting with Bonnie's family) can lead only one way. The final scene brings to a close the previous contradicting emotions. The sheer brutality of their death serves to mythologize a pair of petty thieves but it was also Penn's intent to portray the "impotence of revolution". (10 pg. 23). The spirit of Bonnie and Clydes actions, populist Robin Hood-esque violence, is echoed in the draft dodging and flag burning of the anti-war movement.

The success of Bonnie and Clyde owes a great deal also to its greatest critic. In scathing reviews in The New York Times, Bosley Crowther condemned the movie as "another indulgence of a restless and reckless taste and an embarrassing addition to the excess of violence on the screen." (12 pg.245). The ensuing debate hinged on Crowther's claims of historical inaccuracy enabled a new wave of critics to make their mark also in defence

of the film.

If it was Penn's intention to describe the "impotence of revolution," (10 pg. 23) and Benton and Newmans belief that:

> "If Bonnie and Clyde were here today, they would be hip. Their values have been assimilated in much of our culture- not robbing banks and killing people of course, but their style, their sexuality, their bravado, their delicacy, their cultivated arrogance, their narcissistic insecurity, their curious ambition have relevance to the way we live now." (12 pg. 249).

the result seems to have a been neat metaphor of recognition rather than revolution. Thus portraying the "impotence of revolution" through cinema. Benton and Newman's beliefs point out the basic failure of the film to reintegrate the viewer into any other framework other than one of helplessness. They point to their sexuality. As we see Clyde's sexual ability increase in line with their success, which is their 'hipness', so are we to draw the conclusion that the more radical and 'on the fringe' you are the more sexually potent you become ? This only perpetuates the counterculture belief of alienation equating conformity with impotence.

What Bonnie and Clyde's sexuality also points to is a constant thread in virtually all Hollywood, the analogy between sex and death. The obvious symbolism of gun and penis in Bonnie and Clyde is explicit also in Full Metal Jacket. Their post-coital

relaxation can only lead to their death. In Rambo the only woman to briefly relax this man-as-gun must, as all of James Bond's women, die. There is obviously much more to these claims than can be dealt with in these pages but in a study of war films this analogy is most explicit and as we shall see goes a long way in defining the myth-making process that is Hollywood. In general it points to the necessity in film for hero recognition and a hero can only be defined as a loner or outsider.
(See Heroes, Introduction).

In outlining the role Bonnie and Clyde played as part of the whole sixties ethos I hope that it in some ways points out the sentiments felt by the anti war movement which, though echoed in explicit Vietnam films, is not as explicit as those of Bonnie and Clyde.

The Seventies

The Boys in Company C

It was not until after American withdrawl from Vietnam that production started on films dealing explicitly with the war. Much pre-production hype had been generated around Coppola's Apocalypse Now meaning the ice had finally been broken, and Vietnam could be tackled head on. A number of films were rushed into release. The Boys in Company C (Sydney Furie 1977) was one of the first films to set down the conventions of the training of soldiers from misfits to Marines. Though the film is poor as regards its production values it nevertheless went a long way in defining the conventions now taken for granted in films like Biloxi Blues (Mike Nichols 1987) and the Police Academy films (Jerry Paris). The boot camp scenes of these films illustrate the growth of an individual an team spirit and mistrust in superiors. The best example of this being Private Benjamin (Howard Zeiff 1980) which portrayed how Goldie Hawn was transformed from Widow to Soldier.

The Boys in Company C is indeed critical of the war and introduced audiences to the now familiar themes of Vietnam movies,

such as body bags, drugs (one recruit intended to traffic heroin in body bags marked 'remains not viewable'), and false body counts. Indeed these can really be the only benefits of a film, which, like others to come (Platoon), which criticize the Vietnam war while celebrating military values and functions.

fig. 19 Christopher Walken as Nick in *The Deer Hunter* 1978

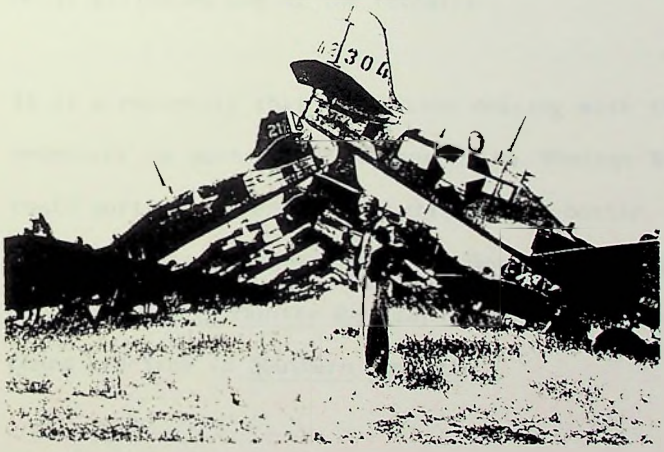


fig. 20 *The Best Years of our Lives* 1946

In Camera Politica Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner claim this film to be among "one of the few overt statements against the war to come out of Hollywood yet.... avoids criticing the military as such." (13 pg. 199). While I agree the latter to be true I could not see it as an overt statement against the war as it supports the contemporay conservative opinion at the time, it criticizes the way in which the war was fought rather than the war itself.

Through the guise of a football match, which the soldiers are told to lose, it shows how the spirit of the soldiers overcomes their command and they win, suggesting how this spirit could have won the war. The portrayal of the allied South Vietnamese General is so regressive it suggests also that they did not deserve American support. He is your stereotypical, evil, greedy General who, at one stage, protects himself from enemy fire with a child. He is killed by one of the recruits.

It is a curiosity that most films dealing with the war found it necessary to portray it allegorically. Whereas World War films could portray allied victory through one battle, Vietnam defeat needed differant treatment. The Boys in Company C a football match, The Deer Hunter Russian roulette (fig. 19), and a Home Guard practice in Southern Comfort.

The Deer Hunter and The Best Years of our Lives

The Oscar winner of that year, 1978, The Deer Hunter, though a much more complex and finished film than The Boys in Company C,

is nonetheless also concerned with rites of manhood and male bonding that the training of the recruits brings in The Boys in Company C. However a comparison of these two films would not be as fruitful as one with The Best Years of our Lives (William Wyler 1946, fig. 20).

Narratively the two films are similiar in that they deal with the readjustment of three veterans, one of whom is crippled, after their war experiences. Both films have also been praised for their realism, The Best Years of our Lives in a essay by Andre Bazin, (14.1 pp. 36-52).

Bazin claims that in The Best Years of our Lives the minimal editing and depth of focus give the viewer freedom to edit the film in their head and make their own directorial choices. He claims: "The director of The Best Years of our lives is amongst those who have made the least use of technological tricks," (14 pg. 37) adding "William Wyler's deep focus endeavours to be liberal and democratic like the consciousness of the American spectator and the heroes of the film." (14 pg. 44). He does this with references to the stylistic opposite, the expressionist classic, Citizen Kane (Orsen Welles 1941). However I feel this 'absence' of style is as limiting, constraining and manipulative as a profusion of directorial effects. His claims, equating American consciousness with depth of focus, can be seen to be quite limiting when the film is examined. The scene Bazin quotes as the best example of Gregg Toland's depth of focus (the

cinematographer for Wyler as well as Welles) is a scene in Butch's bar where Dana Andrews is breaking up with the soldier she will eventually marry. She is talking on the 'phone and in the shot is just a speck with two pieces of action in the fore and middlegrounds. At this point, as Bazin would argue, the viewer can choose which piece of action is important, however it is the fact that Dana is obscured by Butch and Homer which directs us down the bar to concentrate on the call. Bazin would like to feel that viewer is able to make their own choice as to on which character emphasis should be placed in this scene, this is, he feels, part of the whole 'democracy' of the film. I would argue that this is not in fact a very 'democratic' scene. The tableau we are presented with here is so structured as to focus the viewers attention on Dana and is as successful in doing so as a shot, reverse shot, would have been. It is important to clarify this point, when a Hollywood film is proposed as 'democratic' contradictions arise. The themes of reintegration offered in The Best Years of our Lives are in the structure of the film and not, as Bazin would argue, in the 'American consciousness'.

I feel the film important to this essay in that it dealt with a period of unease similiar to The Deer Hunter and Cimino's film, being a conscious reference to it, is also an attempt to solve the problems of reintegration for returning soldiers. In fact I feel it deals with the issues in a much more sensitive and satisfactory way than The Deer Hunter.

If we compare the readjustment of the disabled veterans in the two films we see, in The Best Years of our Lives, that it is Homer's girlfriend Wilma who initiates his readjustment. In the scene where she takes off his harness we (and Homer) are assured that their marital and sexual future will be satisfactory. However in The Deer Hunter, Stephan's wife, (pregnant by another man when married) upon hearing of his disability, turns catatonic and stays in bed mumbling and listening to the radio. In this film it takes the Hero Mike to bring the two together and the audience is still unsure of their future. Overall the roles given to the female characters in The Best Years of our Lives, though still stereotypical Mother-Housewife figures, are much more progressive than the regressive portraits of Linda and Angela.

The males in The Best Years of our Lives are on the whole quite weak and there is not much emphasis on one leading dominant male as there is with Mike in The Deer Hunter. I am not proposing The Best Years of our Lives to be positively feminist; female strength in the film is only present as long as it supports the men, but I feel the presentation of their roles less exploitative than in The Deer Hunter. In **Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan** Robin Wood, in outlining the homosexual subtext, proposes that Nick and Mike make love to Linda "because they are barred from making love to each other," (15 pg. 291), even further demeaning the female role in the film.

A common theme to both films is the male bonding (fig. 21). The

fig. 21 *The Deer Hunter* 1978

fig. 23 *The Deer Hunter* 1978

fig. 22 *The Deer Hunter* 1978

epicentre of this male world is Butch's Bar in The Best Years of our Lives and the hunting lodge in The Deer Hunter. places where both disabled characters are not allowed, Homer by age and Stephan because it was his wedding night. In The Best Years of our Lives we see a male bond which they are reluctant to break by prolonging their journey home and later returning to Butch's bar, the only safe haven from the changed America. However this bond must be broken to allow reintegration into the family and community. In The Deer Hunter, on the other hand, the male bond exists before the war and is weakened by America's loss and their participation in the war.

As Cimino has taken a film which addressed the problems of soldiers returning, as victors, to a changed America where women had achieved a great deal of independance and there were all the other socio-economic problems America faced directly after the war, in The Deer Hunter we can see how the failure of this structure outlines the difference between the two conflicts. In his response to defeat a hero is added to Wyler's structure. The Second World War had one tangible evil which, though horrific, was binding. The evil invented by Cimino is bond breaking.

While The Deer Hunter seems to be critical of the war, this critique is outweighed by the emphasis upon the rite of passage of Michael as the leading and dominant force in the film (fig. 22). Like so many films dealing with the war Cimino deemed it necessary for Michael to return to Vietnam . The two themes of

early Vietnam films involve the returning vet and a return to Vietnam, portraying the restless search for closure. On Michael's return we see Nick who has literally been taken over by the 'red peril' that is Vietnam as represented by the heroin tracks in his veins. Cimino did not see America as the agressor and has shifted the evil, through the allegory of Russian roulette, (a game which has no factual basis as regards its use by the Vietcong), onto the Vietnamese in an extremely racist 'yellow peril' depiction. This shift, and the emphasis on the loss of the Angelic Nick negate any true criticism of the war. What is most disturbing in his portrayal of the Vietnamese is that in a survey carried out by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner of Camera Politica " 74% felt that the representation of the Vietcong in the film was accurate." (13 pp. 205-6). This survey also attempts to clarify the ambiguities surrounding the singing of God Bless America in the films close, "the ending made 27% feel patriotic, while it made 51% feel disheartened (sic.)." (13 pg. 105 my emphasis).

Both filmaker's intentions were to reaffirm the viewers belief in America. Both do this through reintegration through the family. Wedding scenes are central points of both movies (fig. 23). However because The Deer Hunter deals with loss, a sense of victory needs to be implied through the emergence of Mike as entrepreneur, warrior. Cimino has employed the metaphor of 'one shot' for Michael. This is seen in the Roulette and the one shot he allows to kill a deer. Gilbert Adair identifies in this metaphor a latent Fascism claiming it to be "unquestionably

linked to the historical ideology of Fascism: killing as an elitist, almost Godlike rite." (9 pg. 93). This allusion is also played out in the romantic hunting scenes, a picture of pure Aryan naturalness. The notion of "killing as an elitist, almost Godlike rite," is also carried out in Apocalypse Now, a film originally scripted by John Milius, himself a proclaimed Fascist.

Apocalypse Now

Whereas The Deer Hunter tentatively, in its Vietnam sequences, outlined the now common visual motifs of Vietnam, (the jump cut from ceiling fan to helicopter blades is a motif borrowed by Coppola), Apocalypse Now laid down the rules. Apocalypse Now is a spectacle on all levels. The production was a spectacle, the budget spectacular, cinematically the war has been lifted from the "mud of reality."

> "You (read: Vietnam) broke through the humour of my little theatre (read: Hollywood cinema) and tried to make a mess of it, stabbing with knives and spattering our pretty pictures world with the mud of reality."
>
> Herman Hesse **Steppenwolf** 1927.

There are rare moments in this film where its "pretty pictures world 'is stabbed' by the mud of reality". One moment is when the Vietnamese boat is sprayed by the nervous soldiers who mistake a move by a young woman to protect a puppy. I have included this quote as Hollywood too tries to avoid the "mud of reality" and in its attempts to address Vietnam found it necessary to elevate it beyond reality. This may be the result of Apocalypse Now which is

undoubtebly a great achievement as regards mood and 'cinematic experience' but it was the intention of the director to achieve reality. "What I most hoped for was to take the audience through an unprecedented experience of war and have them react as much as those who had gone through the war." (16 pg. 118). If that was his intention why are we in such awe of his pyrotecnics and return for more, do the soldiers wish to return ?

> "It's more of an experience than a movie, at the begining there's a story. Along the river the story becomes less important and the experience becomes more important.) (Coppola, 17)

In another claim Coppola also hits on the intentions of all Vietnam cinema,

> "It was my thought, that if the American audience could look at the heart of what Vietnam was really like - what it looked looked and felt like - then they would be only one small step away from putting it behind them." (16 pg. 121).

Here he has outlined for us what can now be considered to be the first wave of Vietnam films. These films (The Deer Hunter and Coming Home) were intended to help America forget. Indeed on a factual level we do learn a lot of what we now take for granted as 'the Vietnam experience.' It was the first film to do so with authority, the narration was written by the veteran writer of Dispatches, Michael Herr. We learn the role drugs played in the war, the film is a trip. We see young, often black, soldiers at the front. In one of the most pioneering scenes of helicopters

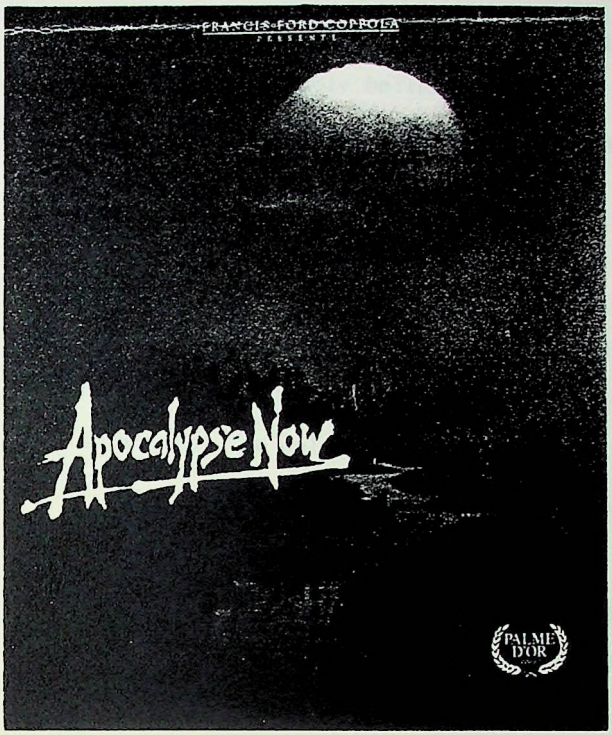


fig. 24 Poster for *Apocalypse Now* 1979

flying over the sunrise to 'The Ride of the Valkyries' he shows us the heavenly role helicopters played in the War (fig. 24). One soldier writes : "I looked up at aircraft, wishing I could be in them, flying above the mud, mosquitoes, and leeches: flying free above the confines of the trees, the green prison." (18 pg. 99). He outlines the language that is used to illustrate the breakdown of moral and military code. "the shit was piling up so fast you needed wings to stay above it," (Captain Willard). Above all he shows that the only ones to truly thrive in Vietnam were insane. "I love the smell of napalm in the morning...." (Lt-col Kilgore).

Coppola has fictionalised Vietnam, indeed it is based on a work of fiction, Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**. Naturally there are pros and cons as regards fictionalising fact but overall I feel this is the only honest means by which cinema can, and should, approach such topics. However in doing so Coppola has avoided any true criticism of the expansionist American ideology. Yes he shows the ineptness of American values imposed on Vietnam, take the Playboy scene for example, but the emphasis is always from the standpoint of American failure rather than America as the initiator. Like Cimino, Coppola has unwittingly imposed the actual 'evil' onto the Vietnamese. Firstly in the attack on the village Coppola acknowledges the success of Vietnamese resistance in that a young woman with an innocent looking hat destroys a helicopter, but this Helicopter is not attacking but rather rescuing wounded. Secondly Kurtzs' heart of darkness is explained as an attempt to be as evil as the Vietnamese, this is shown by

his praise of their ability to chop off the arms of babies which his men innoculated.

Throughout the film our expectations of Kurtz increase as we are sucked upstream and we hope we will discover the true Vietnam in him and the conclusion of Willard's actions. Though Coppola did not know how to end the film, he had three endings and claimed to critics that it was a 'work in progress'. In Conrad's story he also writes: "that we knew we were fated.... to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences." (19 pg. 32). To some extent he put the end at the begining with no titles and Jim Morrison singing **The End.** So when we finally get there Kurtz has gained the status of a mythical giant and to direct us as to how we are to interpret the final scenes we see copies of Sir James Frazer's **The Golden Bough** and **From Ritual to Romance,** by Jessie Weston. In **The Golden Bough** "a candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger." (20 pg. 17). Thus we are to assume that Willard takes on the spirit of Kurtz and as we have seen the film through his eyes we see the true nature of the war as being one of a state of mind.

Coppola's aspirations to explaining the war to the audience are manifested in a film that identifies Vietnam as a mental state It was his intentions to create "a film experience that would give it's audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War." (20 pg.

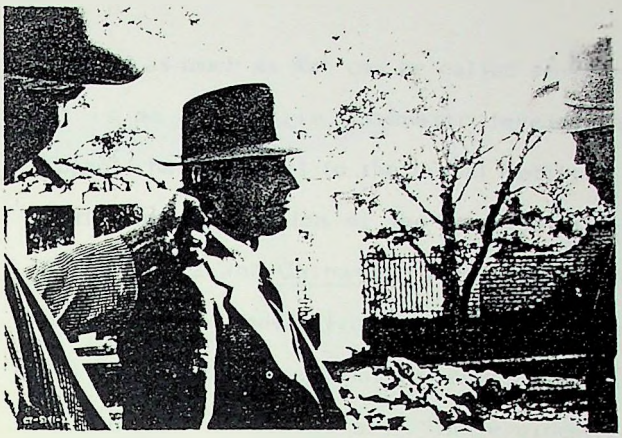


fig. 25 Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown* 1974

fig. 26 Eliot Gould in *The Long Goodbye* 1972

17). In as much as War can be called sensuous he has suceeded and it is on a visually cinematic level that the film suceeds. Coppola has returned to the visual motifs of Forties Film Noir as with many other films of the seventies (The Long Goodbye Robert Altman 1972 and Chinatown Roman Polanski 1974). Willard is Marlowe in a seedy office with cheap whiskey and is taken off to his client who, though not the dark mysterious Femme Fatale, uses Willard as 'an errand boy'. These cinematic allusions are an important key to Willard. Unlike the other Seventies detectives (Jack Gittes in Polanski's Chinatown or Marlowe in Altman's The Long Goodbye, figs.25/26) who were portrayed as modern passive. helpless individuals, Willard does have those wings and is sucessful in his quest. Willard is the angel who enters the cave of the Gods (the Generals mobile home) is tested ('are you man enough for the prawns') and is sent on a mission to destroy a fallen angel, Kurtz. (One might speculate whether a connection is being made between when the General asks 'whats on the menu' and Nixons bombing campaign in Cambodia, which was called 'Operation Menu').

If it was Coppola's intention also to portray 'the moral dilemma' then he has suceeded in shrouding its true specific 'moral dilemma' in all the literary allusions. Indeed the best insight into this film can be found in **Heart of Darkness.** To Conrad's narrator:

> "The yarns of seamen (filmakers) have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a

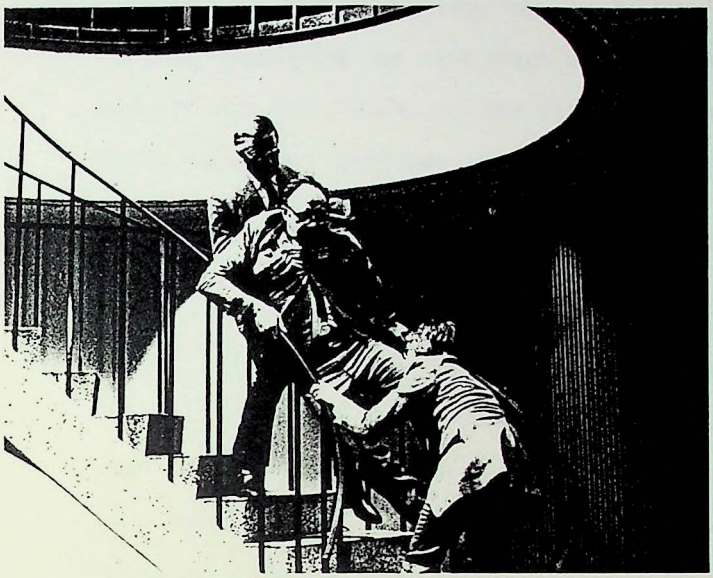


fig. 27 Gene Hackman as Harry Caul in *The Conversation* 1974

cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (Coppola) ....

the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (16 pg. 30).

This echoes the director's wish to rise above 'the yarns of seamen' and the film is indeed surrounded by 'these misty halos'. In the novel Conrad offers us the conclusion Coppola avoids:

"Better his cry - much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory, paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (16 pg. 113).

The Eighties

Platoon

> "We fought ourselves and the enemy was in us.... I felt like the child borne of those two fathers - fighting for the posession of my soul - those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know.. to find goodness and meaning to this life."
> Chris parting words as he leaves Vietnam in Platoon.

Much was made of the fact that the director of Platoon, Oliver Stone, actually fought there. In a lenghtly article in Time, 26 January 1986, this point was emphasised to underline the films authenticity. It is true that it was the first successful combat film based on Vietnam. There is none of the inflated metaphor of films like Apocalypse Now or The Deer Hunter here, rather inflated heroics. The film tells its story through the jungle, its noise, foliage, insects. It shows the inept soldiers weighed down by their gear. We see, but dont see, the success of the guerilla tactics of the Vietnamese: "Under the ground was his, above it was ours.... we had the days and (Charlie) had the nights." (21 pg. 14). The only truly sucessful soldier is Elias, who dumps all his gear and runs alone through the jungle. He is killed by Barnes. These two characters fight to guide Chris; the struggle central to this short morality tale.

This conflict, the search for patriarchal guidance, is a

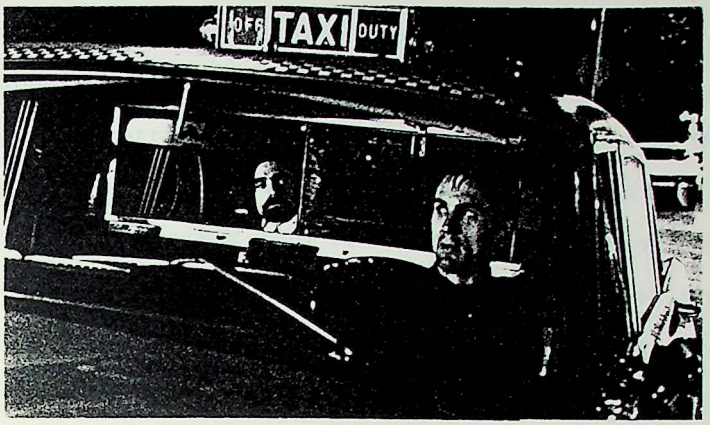


fig. 28 Scorsese and de Niro in *Taxi Driver* 1976

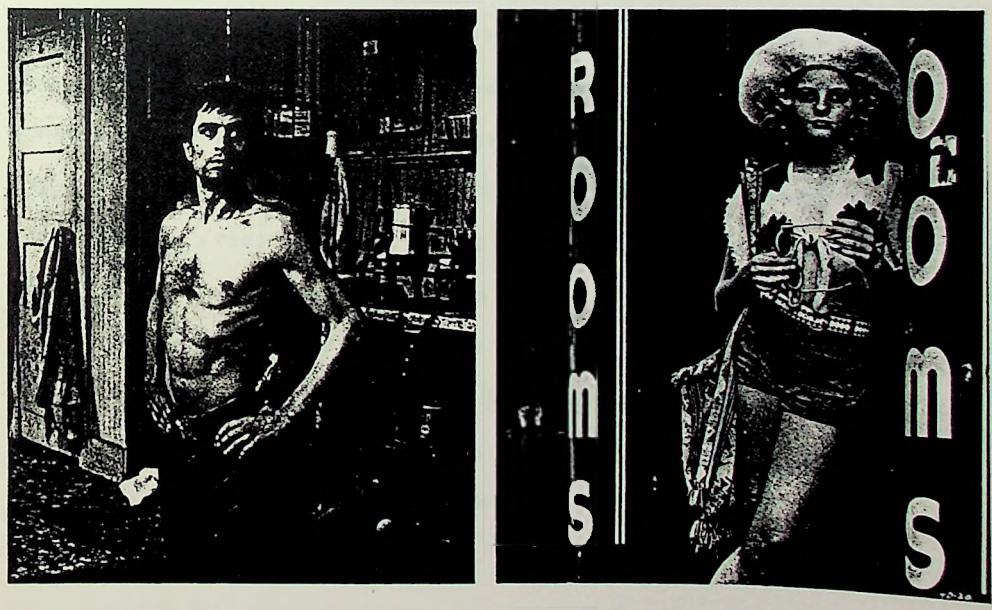


fig. 29 Jodi Foster and Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* 1976

recurring theme in American cinema. During the seventies the dominant themes were of isolation and impotence. Consider the picture of Harry Caul at the end of The Conversation, (Francis Coppola 1974, fig. 27), huddled in the corner sucking on his saxaphone, the embodiment of all these fears. In A Cimema of Lonliness R.P. Kolker identifies how the films of this period, starting with Kennedy's assassination and ending with defeat in Vietnam, articulate "a mixture of anger, guilt, and frustrated aggressiveness." (22 pg. 240). In these films there is a lack of patriarchal guidence. Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver ,(Martin Scorsese 1976, figs. 28/29), asks Wizard for advice and when he recieves a babble of incoherent platitudes like 'you live.. you are your job' all Travis can say is: "Thats just about the dumbest thing I've ever heard, Wizard." (23 pg. 56). As with Bonnie and Clyde, identification in these film is with adolescence. The American New Wave was one of adolescence. Unhappy with Scorsese's adaptation of his screenplay Paul Schrader claimed: "it is an adolescent, immature mind struggling to identify itself. It has no maturity except at the talent level." (24 pg. 158). So to a major extent the whole counterculture movement is seen to have been one of adolescence. Easy Rider, Bonnie and Clyde, Taxi Driver, the identification of the peace movement with popular music, image and drugs negate any true political discource, their ideology one of defiance rather than reintegration.

Adolescence as we know is only transient, therefore reintegration

into an ideology the counterculture opposed is inevitable. So we return to the necessity of patriarchal guidence, in films like the Star Wars trilogy, (George Lucas) and The Karate Kid (John G. Avildsen 1984). In Platoon Chris is the comfortable middle class kid who chose to go to the war, "I saw myself as a product - an East Coast socio-economic product - and I wanted to break out of the mould," (Oliver Stone, Time 1986). "Mayby from down here I can start up again and be something I can be proud of," (Chris). These sentiments tell us that this film is all about Chris' initiation into manhood. On his way the two forces of good and evil (or rather good-evil and evil-evil) fighting for influence are manifested in Elias and Barnes respectively. Stone has divided the army into Dopers and Juicers, Dopers being the predominantly Black soldiers, who, in their attitudes to the war, are like the peace movement in army uniform. Juicers are the "moron white element", who, like Kilgore, exist for the war. Chris aligns with the Dopers, smoking his first joint down the barrel of a gun from Elias. In this scene we see this group offering the same male bond as in The Deer Hunter and The Best Years of our Lives to Chris. Stone has however gone beyond the traditional buddy image as we see soldiers dancing in what could be a cliched gay bar scene, emphasised by the phallic analogy of Chris smoking Elias' gun.

In Platoon the enemy is unseen, literally and metaphorically. They are rarely glimpsed in the fighting scenes and the majority of American deaths come from either American mistakes or booby

fig. 30 *Platoon* 1986

traps. It is not about the Vietnamese struggle but America's. This is a traditional 'war as hell' story with Hemingway machismo. Elias is the true macho spirit and his dramatic death, or crucifixion (with outstreached arms), outlines how this spirit was destroyed. In this hell atrocities such as the one depicted (a conscious reflection of the Mai Lai massacre, fig. 30) will arise and far be it from us to condemn it, we were not there, Stone was. We have to accept this as reality, in the words of Barnes, 'I am reality'. It is the definitive description of 'the grunt', we are given a grunt's eye view so to speak. It is this emphasis upon realism which is problematic in a film like Platoon. As with The Deer Hunter the film's realism gets wound up, and confused, with truth and we must accept Stone's viewpoint. The T.V. ads for Platoon's video release claimed: "It's not too late to do something about Vietnam. See Platoon and understand." (25 pg. 194). With such claims one must take into account the messages of heroism and rites of passage to manhood that the film gives. These are to be read as the positive forces in this film and I feel that any true criticism of a war must be based on a criticism of these notions. In his **Time** interview Stone stated that he :

> "wanted to show that Chris came out of the war stained and soiled - all of us every vet. I want the vets to face up to it and be proud they came back. So what if there is some bad in us ? thats the price you pay."
>
> (**Time**, 26 January 1986).

So if this film is to be read as rehabilitive and Stone's

reasoning for the atrocities he depicts being man's inherent 'badness', then the repetition, on screen, of the war can be read as a "compulsion to repeat the traumatic experience." (25 pg. 179). In Vietnam the Remake J. Hoberman equates this desire with Freud's studies of the dreams of traumatized World War I veterans.

Full Metal Jacket

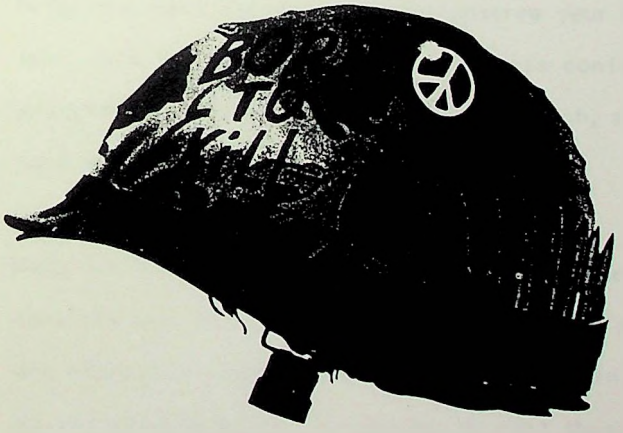
Stanley Kubrick however goes to pains to distance himself from the war, he was not there. In Full Metal Jacket we are not afforded a grunt's eye view, rather an Auteur's eye view. Whereas Stone humanizes his soldiers Kubrick prepares his for a lobotomy. (the opening scene is of the soldiers having their heads shaved as if for an operation). Kubrick is not interested in any commentary on the Vietnam war it serves as a means to an end. It could be said he exploited the war as America attempted to exploit Vietnam. He has taken the war and squashed it into his narrow view of mankind.

He takes as his starting piont The Short Timers by Gustav Hasford, who co-wrote the screenplay with Michael Herr. Whereas relatively little of the book is dedicated to the training sequence, Kubrick dedicates over half the film to it. So this is a film about conditioning. It is about how man is ultimately shaped by his environment. The Parris island scenes centre around Gomer Pyle, the obese recruit, (a Kubrick invention, in the novel he is described as 'a skinny redneck') and his treatment by the

fig. 31 Gomer gives us that Kubrick stare in *Full Metal Jacket* 1987

fig. 32 Hartman roars in *Full Metal Jacket* 1987

IN VIETNAM
THE WIND DOESN'T BLOW
IT SUCKS



Stanley Kubrick's

FULL METAL JACKET

drill seargent Hartman. Hartman sings the praises of Lee Harvey Oswald and other psychopaths whom he considers ultimate marines.

"If you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon."

He proceeds to turn Pyle into such and the only conclusion can be for this weapon to go off in his face as Frankenstein destroyed his creator. This takes place in the 'Head' or 'John' which is seen as the ultimate institutional environment where we are all reduced to the same basic primeval act (fig. 31). This setting suits Kubrick's themes of man as ignoble savage and is a recurring theme in his films like The Shining (1980) and Lolita (1962). The 'head' can be read as Hartman's temple, "what are you doing in my John ?" he roars at Pyle. Hartman's whole language is a result of this environmental conditioning and as Adair points out Kubrick has taken it upon himself to "catalogue, Cyrano-style, the largest possible number of verbal permutations and variations on the word 'shit', possible." (9 pp. 172-3). Hartman being the most lyrical: "I will unscrew your head and shit down your neck." (fig. 32). Later at a press conference Vietnam is described as: "one great big shit sandwich, and were all gonna' have to take a bite."

Kubrick has succeeded in portraying the army as purely totalitarian, his insistance on this is what sets it apart from any other training-combat film. To a certain extent Kubrick is guilty of what he is condemning. He cast this film by video and there is only an ounce of characterization, as with Hartman, he has also erased any sense of individuality. In his early films he

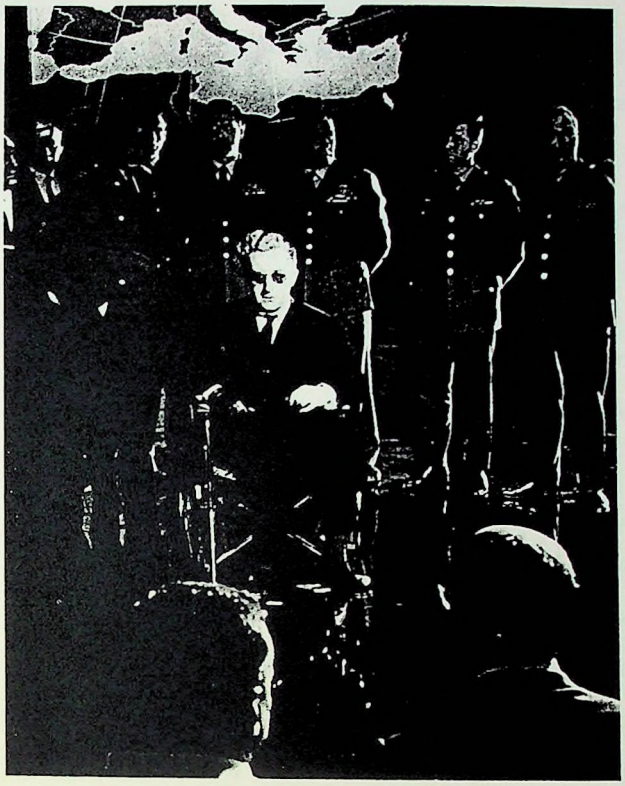


fig. 33 Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangeglove* 1964

fig. 34 *Dr. Strangglove* 1964

shows us that the notion of individuality is not one he aspires to (the casting of Peter Sellers who plays a variety of characters in both Dr. Strangeglove (1964, figs. 33/34) and Lolita). Thus Kubrick's depiction of a totalitarian army goes above reflection and becomes a production. He is totalitarian in his portrayal of the institutional forces which shape the characters in the film. These are Kubrick's themes and he follows them dogmatically regardless of his source or the viewers sensibilities.

Kubrick in this dehumanised institutution has taken cinema's popular analogy between gun and penis, suggested in Bonnie and Clyde, to an explicitly cynical level. The soldiers are made sleep with their rifles: "my rifle is my best friend. It is my life." They march, one hand with rifle other on crotch shouting, "this is my rifle this is my gun, this is for fighting, this is for fun." Kubrick has painted a picture of a totally male world where the only females are prostitutes. It would seem then that the ending is a destruction of this world, where a sniper wipes out half of Jokers platoon, the sniper is a woman. But this is not the end. The final shot is of the soldiers marching chanting "m-i-c-k-e-y m-o-u-s-e," proving their training and thus their male world to have remained intact.

These are themes central to Kubrick, what about the war? The only scenes where any true analysis of Kubrick's depiction of the war can be made is in the fighting scenes. These are depicted, as in

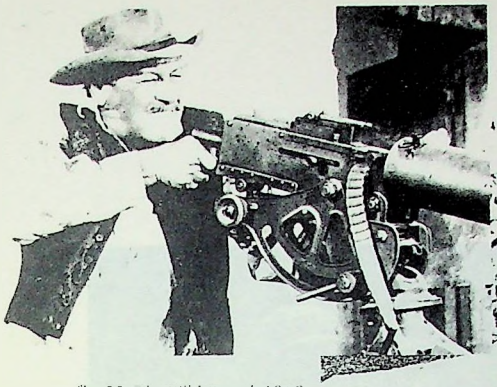


fig. 35 *The Wild Bunch* 1969

fig. 36 *The Wild Bunch* 1969

fig. 37 Dustin Hoffman in *Straw Dogs* 1971

fig. 38 *Full Metal Jacket* 1987

fig. 39 *Full Metal Jacket* 1987

A Clockwork Orange (1971), with detatchment, in slow motion. In folowing the tradition of slow motion violence pioneered by Sam Peckinpah in The Wild Bunch (1969, figs. 35-37) it seems that Kubrick wishes to detatch himself from the violence he has created. The steadicam sequence of the soldiers advancing on the sniper are cinematically quite beautiful and are detached from any reality (figs. 38/39). In Dispatches Michael Herr describes how soldiers, in an attempt to distance themselves from the war, "were actually making movies in their heads." (21 pg.61). The whole thrust of the film is distancing and underlines his inability to offer any other discource other than nihilistic cynicism. Platoon attempted to involve the viewer in the foliage of Vietnam, offering traditional notions of heroism for reintegration.

Do we get to win ?

Another body of films were developing around these notions of heroism, climaxing in Rambo. These 'revisionist' Vietnam films take as their basis the unproven fact that there are still P.O.W's remaining in Vietnam. Good Guys Wear Black, (Ted Post 1977), involve a group of soldiers, led by Chuck Norris, being tricked by corrupt politicians to return to Vietnam to recover prisoners. The basic thrust of these films (Missing in Action I and II Joseph Zito 1984, and Rambo, First Blood Parts I and II George Cosmatos 1985,) is that there were two enemies, Politicians and Vietnamese, (curiously the Russians make an appearance In Rambo II as advisors to the Vietnamese). This is

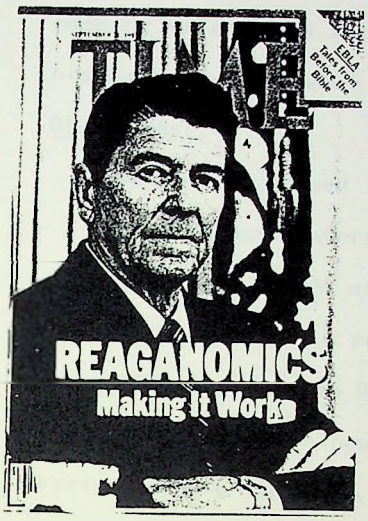


fig. 40 *Time* 1986

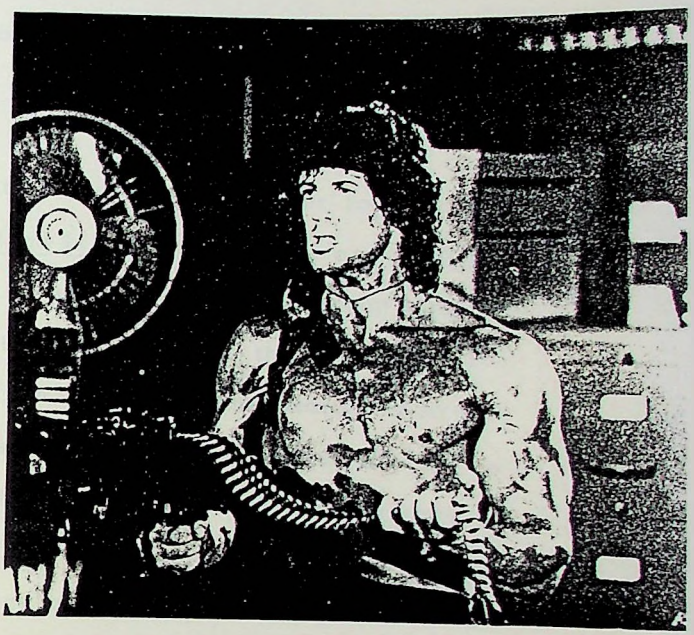


fig 41 *Rambo* 1985

fig. 42 *Time* 1975 v 1981

also the case in the Dirty Harry cycle, Dirty Harry has two enemies, bureaucracy and criminals (the first psychopath to 'make his day' wears a peace badge). One soldier in Good Guys Wear Black asks:

> "Whatever happened to the good old days when Randolph Scott and John Wayne where happy to have their asses shot off for the good old U.S. of A."

These films portray a return to Vietnam in order to "win this time," (Rambo in First Blood II). This theme of returning and winning the war can now be identified as the second wave of Vietnam films. Rambo is the embodiment of the true Hero. The outsider who cannot be accomaoated into any community by the nature of his psychotic acts, which he only does in order to protect that community. Rambo eschews all the technology of modern warfare and becomes the modern eco-warrior, fully in tune with his natural surroundings, able to down a helicopter with bow and arrow. In his own way Rambo is a perverse and perverted response to the contemporary green awareness !

Rambo is every cultural or psychological analysists dream, a large pectoral phallus, seeking ecstacy in explosions. Reagan said he "would know what to do next time" after viewing Rambo First Blood II, (he was referring to the Middle East hostage crisis in 1985). Rambo has achieved status as an icon of Reaganomics and the eighties spirit of entrepeneurship (figs. 40/41). Gone is the inarticulatness of the sixties, replaced by the neo-conservative eighties (fig. 42).

Conclusion

Conclusion

While Rambo can be seen by most as overblown heroics, his twin, Dirty Harry, while offering the same dose as Rambo, will not be viewed with as parody or as distanced as Rambo. We can now see how these latest films form the second wave of Vietnam films. Whereas the films of the first wave were involved in helping the Americans forget the experience, (take the liberal romanticism of Coming Home or the overblown pyrotechnics of Apocalypse Now) the second offers a cinematic victory. In these films the war was not seen as a loss rather incompleted act.

The aggressive fantasies of individuals fighting, and winning, the war, in films like Rambo First Blood are matched by fantasies of domestic peace being gained over massive obstacles in films like Star Wars (George Lucas 1977, fig. 43) and Jaws (Stephen Spielberg 1975, figs. 44/45). It is these themes of domestic harmony which are central to the most successful director of the Reagan administration, Stephen Spielberg. In Jaws and Gremlins (1984) we see individuals (not individuals as outsiders but rather as belonging to a collective community) overcoming huge obstacles and achieving a victory which was unattainable in the sixties, the roots of these films can be found in seventies disastor films like The Poseidion Adventure (Ronald Neame 1972). Speaking of films from the sixties Kolker summed up their frustrated inarticulatness:

"So much contemporary American film exposes or condemns and

fig. 43 A new hope in *Star Wars* 1977

fig. 44 *Jaws* 1975

fig. 45 *Jaws* 1975

then stops, refuses to re-integrate the viewer into some other moral or political structure that might offer amelioration rather than isolation." (26 pg. 329).

Spielberg's films offer amelioration in a return to the conservative values of the fifties and a reintegration of the adolesecent sixties into the family. A film which chronicles this collapse into the sixties is American Graffiti (George Lucas 1973, fig. 46). This film follows the fortunes of a group of teenagers on their last day of summer before they split up. The film is imbued with the popular fifties nostalgia of tailfins and drive-ins, this is America's Eden. The credit sequence has captions of where these characters ended up, some in college some in Vietnam shows how they failed to fulfil their aspirations outlined in the film.

One of the effects the war had on Hollywood was the collapse of the western. The beginings of this deconstruction of old genres is seen in films like The Long Goodbye and Chinatown.The final 'convulsions' of this genre was manifested in westerns dubbed as anti; post; spagetti; revisionist. The notion of the frontier was lost. A trip to your local video store will show the popularity Vietnam has for what can be considered 'pulp cinema' (fig. 47). The 'frontier' where Chuck Norris and Sylvester Stallone can prove themselves is now Vietnam.

With Dances with Wolves (Kevin Kostner 1990) Americans have

fig. 46 *American Graffiti* 1973

fig. 47 Helicopters and Jungles the recipie for video sucess.

acknowledged the culture of 'native Americans', the western has been laid to rest. Will Hollywood recognise the Vietnamese in a decade ? Dances with Wolves is similiar to a popular Hollywood notion, the 'loop' film. Back to the Future (Robert Zemekics 1985) is the ultimate loop film where Michael J. Fox can return to guide his father. Kevin Kostner returns to atone the sins of his fathers.

If it was America's intention to make it's 'presence and power credible' in Vietnam a parallel can now be drawn, one that is central to this essay, between this "image-making as global policy," (27 pg. 176), and the whole image-making process that is Hollywood. The languages of war and filmaking are linked, one shoots and cuts reels of film; and to some filmakers the directing of a film is a military campaign in itself (fig. 48).

And Now...

In a neat piece of retoric-twisting George Bush, while announcing the start of the land battle in the Gulf, claimed that this war would "not be another Vietnam". As regards people getting killed that remains to be seen, but he was not talking to the general public, rather to the media. The media has not experienced any of the freedom they were given in Vietnam, and the only casualties given full coverage have been sea birds. In mentioning the present conflict I wish to point to how, with films like Top Gun (Tony Scott 1986), Hollywood has rebuilt the image of the Army. Top Gun is the ultimate recruitment film. The video game images,

pop music and glamour appeal of this film are similiar to the T.V. coverage of the Gulf in that we are distanced and anaesthetized from any reality of warfare. The 'technowar' strategy has been taken to new levels.

Hollywood's representation of the war is a good example of the role Hollywood plays in American society. The films offer solid proof that Hollywood is a reflector of the dominant ideology from which it arises, showing the alienation of the sixties or the conservatism of the eighties

> "The ideas of order that (the culture industry) inculcates are always those of the status quo... Pretending to be the guide for the helpless and deceitfully presenting to them conflicts that they must perforce confuse with their own, for culture industry does not resolve these conflicts except in appearance - it's 'solutions' would be impossible for them to use to resolve their conflicts in their own lives."
> T. W. Adorno, The Culture Industry (28 pg. 42).

> "The mood of this country has changed from that of Easy Rider to that of Dirty Harry."
> George Bush on his 1988 campaign trail. (29 pg. 21).

fig. 48 Kubrick lines up a shot for *Dr. Strangeglove* 1964

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