The Vietnam War in American Cinema

Pijaca, Matej

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski sveučilišni studij anglistike; smjer: znanstveni (dvopredmetni)

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Zadar, 29. lipnja 2021.

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1. Introduction

The Vietnam War was "the most visually represented war in history," (Anderegg 2) and Hollywood's reaction to its complexities was more than fascinating. This thesis explores war films from World War II to the Vietnam War, focusing on several key films of the latter. It also details the development of the war film through the WWII cycles and the Korean War. The reason for such a lengthy introduction is that, to understand Vietnam War films, one must understand the earlier films and their influence on the movie industry and American consciousness. Fluck says that for many young people "Hollywood movies have become the primary source of historical knowledge," (353) and Doherty (266) posits that the behavior of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam was influenced by WWII film images which meant that the Vietnam War itself "looked like a movie," due to all the television crews filming everyday action. Given the quantity over quality approach during World War II, a relatively small amount of those films will be analyzed, starting with the simple early films, followed by an analysis of the cycles and their individual complexities. The Korean War will also be considered, however briefly, as it bears some fascinating similarities and differences from both WWII and the Vietnam War, in real life and in films. A special interest in this analysis will be in Hollywood's portrayal of the military and their officers and enlisted men, and the portrayal of the enemy. This focus will remain in the analysis of the Vietnam War films, where we will once again go through the cycles and thoroughly dissect several key films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). A critical analysis of their thematic elements will be presented, as well as their critical reception and cultural impact. The thesis will show the evolution of the war film over a period of forty years, ending with the final recognized cycle of the Vietnam War films.

2. Classification of War Films

In his detailed chronicle of Korean War films, Lentz (3) considers movies that fulfill at least one of the following criteria: “at least some of the film’s story and action must be set in Korea during the war, or the war must be important enough to the film’s story that character action is affected by the war.” This would mean that many films can be considered as war films even if most of their plot is not directly concerned with it. In general, war films tend to feature military personnel, be it in or out of combat. Most war films contain one or several of the following elements: training, combat, captivity, or social issues. Another classification can be made according to the branches of military featured so we have Army, Navy, Air Force films, but this is a much simpler form of classification.

The first type of war film is military training film in which we follow military recruits during training and their escapades in and around the base. Suid (42-63) argues that this is Hollywood’s favorite type of film during peacetime and usually serves as a recruitment advertisement for the Army, which was particularly popular in the period between the two world wars. Films that focus exclusively on training have become increasingly rare since that period, and this element is usually combined with combat in many later films such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). One of the best known films of this genre is *Top Gun* (1986) which combines flying training with a love story, but also features combat scenes, albeit fictional.

The most easily recognizable and the most popular genre is combat films. It shows two sides engaging in combat, usually from only one perspective. Very rarely are we shown two perspectives of the engagement, one of the exceptions being *The Longest Day* (1962). The prototypical films of this genre are *Battleground* (1949) and *Platoon* (1986) since they cannot be classified as any kind of hybrid and focus mainly on combat. It is easy to see why these films are some of the most popular, as they tend to be big earners, and because, according to Suid

(99), “Hollywood’s only reason to exist is to make money,” this is a very natural genre for the studios to gravitate to.

The third genre within war films is prisoner-of-war movies (POW). These feature soldiers being held in captivity in prison camps, usually planning and executing their escape. In Hollywood films, American soldiers are usually portrayed, never the enemy (Lentz 16). Many great films have been made in this genre, such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) or *Stalag 17* (1953), but the genre reached the peak of its popularity with the counter-intuitively titled *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), a Vietnam War wish-fulfillment fantasy. The captivity element is also present in films dealing with the Holocaust, though those usually do not feature escape plots and mostly detail civilian captivity.

The last major genre of war films is the social issue genre, which deals with either the home front life during the war or returning veteran issues. *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) is perhaps the best known example of the first type, dealing with a British family’s life during the war, while *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is a great example of the second type, chronicling three veterans returning to their community, each with his own issues. *Coming Home* (1978) combines both these issues during the Vietnam War, while *The Deer Hunter* (1978) is a combination of combat, POW, and returning veteran genres.

In addition to these main genres, many more elements are present in war films: war tribunals (*Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961)), journalists covering the war (*The Killing Fields* (1984)), war crimes (*Casualties of War* (1989)), battlefield surgery (*MASH* (1970)), political biographies (*Wilson* (1944)), resistance (*Casablanca* (1942)), espionage (*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939)), and more. As we can see, the war film can be very versatile and combine many different elements which is why it has been one of the most enduring genres in Hollywood. The genre has also evolved during the years to include more location shooting, antiwar elements

and mythical dimensions. It has certainly come a long way from California sound stages of the early World War II movies.

3. World War II – The Good

The Second World War was a momentous time for the world and the same can be said for Hollywood. The studio system was at the peak of its power, before the passage of anti-trust laws that abolished their monopoly of theater exhibition in the form of the Paramount Decree decision of 1948. As Schatz has compiled in the appendices to his book (461-5), audience numbers were soaring during and in the few years after the war (numbers that would never be reached again), the studios were releasing a large amount of feature films, and all major studios posted profits every single year of the decade. A large part of this success were the numerous war movies produced at the time. However, Hollywood was apprehensive about making war pictures in the first few years of the war, before American involvement, when only about two percent of their output was related to the war (Schatz 118). But after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hollywood, as suggested by the chapter in the book by Haas et al., and the title of the book by Koppes and Black, truly went to war. Hollywood's involvement was ubiquitous, from making news bulletins and morale-boosting documentaries such as Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (Haas et al. 82), joining the armed forces in numbers that are estimated to have been around 22 percent of the whole talent pool (Schatz 142), and making many feature films to inform and divert the nation. Schatz reports (240-1) on two different surveys of feature films during the war which estimate that war films comprised between 20 and 28 percent of all feature films from 1942 to 1944, or 340 to 376 films in total. These films also comprised about half of the biggest money earners in their respective years (Schatz 240).

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a key role in shaping Hollywood production during the war. Days after Pearl Harbor he instructed the studios to "emotionalize" the war in order to raise public awareness, but he did not want them to be government mouthpieces, they

were to stay free of censorship, in contrast to Germany's filmmakers (Schatz 131-9). However, at that time, Hollywood was still not completely free when making war pictures, since, as painstakingly chronicled by Suid, they needed the Army's help to portray war realistically, and the Army's seal of approval was not always easy to acquire. In addition, Roosevelt formed the Office of War Information (OWI), a government agency to coordinate with Hollywood, whose many disagreements with the filmmakers are described in detail by Koppes and Black. The OWI wanted films that would "help win the war," and they intended to achieve that through "subtle propaganda," (Koppes and Black 63-4) but, as we can observe in the following examples, Hollywood was perhaps overzealous, and went far beyond the office's wishes.

3.1. The Combat Films

Since American involvement at the beginning of the war was confined to the Pacific, so were the first combat films, and since America had no major victories and was constantly on the retreat, the films resembled the Alamo rather than reality. The two best examples of this are *Wake Island* (1942) and *Bataan* (1943). *Wake Island* was the first major combat movie of WWII, and it became the prototype for many wartime films (Schatz 243). It tells a story of a Marine regiment stationed at Wake Island who fight to the last man against an overwhelming Japanese attack force, taking many more enemies down with them. While the film's real life counterparts fought bravely, in the end they surrendered, rather than fight to the last man (Dull 26). *Bataan* condenses the fighting and retreat from the Philippines into a small infantry unit that includes Americans from all backgrounds, representing American unity. They too fight to the last man, with the heroic Sergeant firing his machine gun at the invading force from his grave, sending the message that America will be back, stronger. The OWI and modern critics share the opinion that the racism and the portrayal of the Japanese as savage and treacherous in these movies was far from appropriate (Koppes and Black 250-1).

Many of the wartime films were made merely to sell war bonds, and few rise above that status, but Phillips (*Major* 44) argues that Howard Hawks' *Air Force* (1943) is one of them. This film must be credited with many innovations with regard to plane fights and the plane crew dynamic, but its portrayal of the Japanese as treacherous, use of many racial slurs, and a plot based very loosely on facts makes it merely a prototype for future films (Koppes and Black 245). One of those films is *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944), a film based on actual events, though the final portion of the film set in China is laughable (Suid 83), and a rare film that bears no hate for the Japanese (Koppes and Black 267), with the characters expressing feelings of their mission being an unfortunate necessity, not a mission of hate and revenge.

While Hollywood merely embellished its Pacific stories, it went so far to invent stories on battlefronts in which America was not yet present. In *Sahara* (1943), Humphrey Bogart commands a solitary American tank, the Lulubelle, in North Africa, far before actual American involvement (Suid 72). *Sahara* is once again a story of retreat, during which the Lulubelle picks up an international crew, and even an Italian and a German prisoner. The ending is a last stand, in which the small Allied crew defends a desert well against a large German force. Unlike the Pacific last stand films, they even manage to win, though sustaining many casualties. Another Hollywood invention was *Objective, Burma!* (1945), in which Errol Flynn's squad almost single-handedly liberates Burma from Japanese occupation, when that territory was actually liberated by British forces (Suid 74). It is another movie that "reeks of hatred for the Japanese," (Koppes and Black 263) where the Japanese are once again portrayed as treacherous savages.

As the war was coming to a close, more realistic films started to appear, under the influence of documentary films, exemplified by *Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), which follows war correspondent Ernie Pyle and C Company through their Italian campaign. This film is often praised as one of the best wartime pictures for its realism in portraying "the day-to-day struggles with the elements and a formidable enemy," (Suid 95) for avoiding "almost all the inflated

political rhetoric, histrionics, and stereotyping that characterized most other World War II films," (Quart and Auster 18) and for acknowledging the randomness of death in war (Koppes and Black 308). It is not without its propagandist flaws, of course, and it should be criticized for excusing the Allied destruction of the Monte Cassino monastery, which was in reality totally unnecessary (Koppes and Black 306). However, it was a very influential film and it anticipated films of the second WWII cycle and beyond.

3.2. The Social Issues Films

While the combat films struggled to gain much traction with the Academy, with only *Wake Island* being nominated for Best Picture, the films about the home front and returning veterans excelled, with wins by *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), both directed by William Wyler, who made the first one before joining and the other after completing his service (Monaco *History* 86). *Mrs. Miniver* is a story of a British family's experiences during the first years of the war. In it, the usual British "middle-class" melodrama is intertwined with war episodes that affect everyday life in the English countryside. Koppes and Black argue that the timing of the release was crucial to the success of the film, the mother as symbolism for Britain repelling the Nazis resonating at the time the US was entering the war (222-3). However, as Phillips puts it, "*Mrs. Miniver*, though a good morale booster, doesn't hold its own next to *The Best Years of Our Lives*" (*Exiles* 79).

Wyler began work on *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a three-hour melodrama about veteran readjustment immediately upon returning from the war. He wanted it to be authentic, an "honest portrait," and he achieved this through direction and through casting of Harold Russel, a first time actor who lost both his hands in the Army (Monaco *History* 98). It was enthusiastically received when released with very few detractors (Monaco *History* 100), evidenced by reviews and its seven Oscars. However, later it was criticized for reducing social issues to individual level and offering no real solutions for veterans, other than "the love of a

good woman and the passage of time would heal all wounds" (Haas et al. 132). Even though it was a great hit with both critics and audiences, there were few similar melodramas released at the time (Schatz 370) because the interest in the war was waning, prompting Hollywood to take a brief hiatus from the topic.

3.3. The Post-war Period: Hollywood Comes Back for More

After three years without major releases, the studios returned to World War II in 1949 with three unqualified successes: *Battleground, Twelve O'Clock High,* and *Sands of Iwo Jima*. With added realism, both in the portrayal of battle scenes and the psychology of war, the films of this cycle represent a significant evolution from the wartime films, and they will prove to be highly influential in the following decades.

Battleground, directed by William Wellman, is similar to his wartime film *Story of G.I. Joe* in the way it portrays the struggles of infantrymen in difficult weather conditions during one of the most important battles against the Nazis, the Battle of the Bulge. It shows an updated version of the combat formula, where American soldiers' faith is sometimes shaken by the horrors of war, exemplified by the scene where one of the more senior soldiers (Van Johnson) nearly flees the battleground. Ultimately, he realizes that he has a responsibility to the younger soldiers and the country and achieves victory. The ending scene in which the battered squad falls in and marches off to the next battle is a prototype for many future films: victory was won and casualties were sustained, but there is no time for rest or celebration, because it is a soldier's duty to serve his country until the war is over. This sort of patriotic message often undermines any antiwar elements the film previously portrayed, such as showing the brutal randomness of death in battle. *Battleground* also updates the portrayal of the enemies and shifts the blame from the German population to the Nazis which is how the enemies would mainly be portrayed in the future (Suid 107-8).

Twelve O'Clock High (1949) seeks to continue this realistic approach to war and apply it to the portrayal of Air Force. The film explores the burdens of leadership through an Air Force General, played by Gregory Peck, tasked with training and leading his squad on bombing missions, focusing on the psychological effects, a rarity for the time (Suid 109). After a rocky start to his task and initial disagreements over his methods, Peck's General Savage gains the respect of his pilots and "establishes the squadron as an excellent fighting force" (Lev *Transforming* 46). However, he reaches "maximum effort" before the film's climactic mission and falls into a catatonic state, slumped in his chair, and breaks out of it only when his squad finally returns to base. Thus, the climax of the film is not an action sequence, but a psychological one, where the viewers worry about both the squad's safe return to base and Savage's mental health.

One of the most popular and most influential films of this revival was *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), starring John Wayne. Wayne, having avoided the draft, had played several military roles during wartime, most notably in John Ford's *They Were Expendable* (1945), but it was his Sergeant Stryker that made him a war icon in addition to his western hero status (Suid 117). The movie revolves around the training of a group of Marines and their assaults on two Pacific islands. Wayne's Sergeant Stryker, "who knows just when to be tough with his men and when to take it easy," (Lev *Transforming* 44) is the protagonist and a hero, respected by his men by the end. The conflicts he has with his men during training are resolved in battle, when he risks his life to bomb an enemy bunker. In the final assault, he dies rather unceremoniously and almost off-screen, shot by a sniper, having almost conquered Mount Suribachi, while his men recreate the famous flag-raising photo. The whole scene is shot quite clumsily, focusing more on raising the flag, even using some of the Marines who participated in the actual event (Suid 122), than on character drama, but it apparently had a great patriotic effect that motivated many young men to sign up for the Marines in the years to come (Suid 123). Ron Kovic cites this film

specifically, along with Audie Murphy's *To Hell and Back* (1955) as some of his main motivators for joining the Marines (54).

Two of the most significant films produced near the end of this cycle are *To Hell And Back* (1955) and *Attack* (1956), for very different reasons. The first stars World War II hero Audie Murphy who plays himself in a recreation of the events which earned him his Congressional Medal of Honor. Murphy is shown as a hard-working, patriotic young soldier who, thanks to good care for his men, quickly advances through the military ranks. In the film's climax, he single-handedly defeats a whole German platoon, in a scene that will help distort many young men's perception of war (as seen from Kovic), and provide the aesthetics for many future action films (e.g. *Rambo*).

Biskind (85) notes the similarities between Audie Murphy and Lieutenant Costa, the main character in *Attack*, but Costa's care for his men is not rewarded. He constantly quarrels with his company's incompetent and corrupt Captain, whose indecision often results in much death, and the double-faced Colonel, who only cares for his political advancement. In one of the rare films that indict the military, and especially its officers, of that time, the film ends with Costa's fellow Lieutenant Woodruff shooting the cowardly Captain. He is then also supported by his men who shoot the Captain's dead body to stop Woodruff from turning himself in. However, Woodruff puts his trust into the system in the end, when he calls the commanding General, though it is left ambiguous whether the General is going to clean up the corruption or if he is as corrupt as his subordinate officers. Another great commentary on America's global war efforts happens when a young soldier refuses to believe that he, "an American," could be considered as an enemy to the Germans. It is a great insight on the American single-minded thought process which undoubtedly guided the portrayal of the enemy in earlier films, as well as in many later ones. However, the criticism in this film is mainly on the command chain and

its corruption, as Costa does not hate his prisoner "because he is a Nazi, but because he is an officer" (Biskind 87).

A clash of a strong-willed individual and a repressive military system occurs in the only Hollywood Best Picture winner from the second WWII cycle, *From Here to Eternity* (1953). In this account of the final weeks before the Pearl Harbor attack at a military base in Hawaii, the base's Captain torments Montgomery Clift's character Prewitt to join an intra-Army boxing competition, which Prewitt stubbornly refuses due to past trauma. In addition, his friend Maggio (Frank Sinatra) dies in the base's prison as a result of Sergeant "Fatso's" cruelty. Prewitt avenges Maggio in the end by stabbing "Fatso" but is then killed by friendly fire the morning of the Japanese attack. The film is a scathing critique of military rigidness and the book it was based on was much more damning but, due to the Production Code censorship, many risqué elements were cut (Monaco *History* 133). For example, the base's Captain is fired for his mistreatment of Prewitt in the film, showing that the Generals still retain good judgement, but in the book he was promoted (Suid 147), showing the pervasiveness of military corruption. Biskind notes that higher rank only brings more incompetence, while valor can be found at the bottom of the chain (77), but this point is slightly undermined by the Generals. However, after everything the Army has done to him, Prewitt still remains loyal to it, "even if it does not love him back" (Phillips *Major* 118).

4. The Korean War – The Forgotten

For a war that was considered to be a "police action" and is dubbed as "The Forgotten War" in the US, the three-year fight between the China-backed North Koreans and the UN-backed (led by the US) South Koreans that ended in a near white peace, offers many interesting parallels with America's previous and subsequent wars. This is especially true with regard to the films produced during and after the war, which were in many ways similar to the WWII films, but also had some crucial differences. To begin with, in the war years very few films

treating the war were produced. According to Devine (xiii) there were only nine films, while Lentz (2) counts about twenty. Lentz also chronicles a total of "ninety-one English language films, most of them from Hollywood" (2) in his detailed book, a relatively small number in comparison to WWII. In addition, he argues that most of these films were minor efforts, with the exception of Samuel Fuller's films *The Steel Helmet* (1951) and *Fixed Bayonets!* (1951), though these films were modestly budgeted too.

Long (16) claims that Korean War films follow common WWII film formulas and reinforce the stereotyped portrayals of Asians. For the first point, we can examine the Fuller films and see that they share many similarities to WWII efforts, mainly in focusing on a small group of soldiers having to fight off an assaulting enemy force that outnumbers them. The portrayal of the enemy reinforces Long's second claim, since not much has changed from the portrayal of the Japanese in WWII films, except that now they are Korean or Chinese. They are once again shown hiding in trees and bushes while being described with racial slurs, and a common theme is their horde-like attacks. Ironically, the same old stereotypes are now, only five years later, also attributed to the Chinese, who were portrayed as sophisticated and democratic in WWII films, a change that clearly demonstrates Hollywood's politics of the time.

The themes of these films, according to Long (16), are "individual loss of innocence, denigration or elevation of the human spirit in response to war, an inability to discern between combatants and civilians, and the clash of national and global agendas." Out of these, only individual loss of innocence can be found in WWII films, though in those films it was usually accompanied by a patriotic feeling. In contrast, the Korean War protagonists do not have a good reason to be there so they are more skeptical and unhappy (Lentz 9), a similarity with future Vietnam War films. There was no place for the other themes in WWII films since that was a "good war" but in Korea there was no such consensus, and though some films tried to justify the war, Suid (141) notes that even those "could not avoid a pessimistic ending." The inability

to discern between combatants and civilians will be a major theme in many Vietnam films too, same with questioning the American agenda.

From the films following the conclusion of the Korean War, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1954) was the most commercially successful (Lev *Transforming* 50). It stars William Holden as a Navy pilot and Grace Kelly as his wife, which may have been its reason for success because it was a minor effort, other than some well-directed flying scenes and scenes showing Holden's character's psychological state in which he questions the "rationale for the Korean War in general" (Lev *Transforming* 50). Lewis Milestone's *Pork Chop Hill* (1959) starring Gregory Peck offers a view into some intriguing aspects of the war as it portrays a fight for a meaningless hill as final peace negotiations were happening. It prominently shows a Black soldier who always stays in the back and avoids dangerous situations by all means. It shows much unnecessary death but is, as Lev argues, "ambivalent about whether the sacrifice was necessary" and is in general sympathetic to the military (*Transforming* 229), like many war films of the time, *Attack* (1956) and *Paths of Glory* (1957) being the exceptions, which then results in the antiwar message being diluted, evidenced by Kovic's and other Vietnam War veterans' memoirs.

It is fitting that perhaps the most famous films about "The Forgotten War," *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *MASH* (1970) only use the Korean War as the background while dealing with other, contemporary issues. *The Manchurian Candidate* places a decorated Korean War veteran in a Cold War spy thriller full of Communist brainwashing, infiltration into politics, and assassination plots. The release of the film was plagued with controversy and subsequently it was entirely pulled due to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but after its later re-release it became recognized for its brilliant critique of American politics and was included in AFI's list of "One Hundred Greatest American Movies" (Monaco *Sixties* 172).

Robert Altman's *MASH* (1970) is set in a Korean War Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and its very serious scenes of war surgery are inserted into a highly improvised comedy full of satire and spoof. One of the most memorable scenes involves a recreation of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in honor of the camp's dentist's anticipated suicide, which also features the film's iconic theme song "Suicide Is Painless." Most comedic scenes revolve around sexual themes, such as the affair between a very religious surgeon and a nurse nicknamed "Hot Lips," or the scene in which an audience brings down the shower tent in order to find out whether said nurse is actually a blonde. Many of these scenes are very misogynist and the character "Hot Lips" is an absolute caricature, changing her demeanor without motivation, when the film needs her to. Many, including Devine (29) and Suid (278) have argued that this film has little to do with Korea and much more with Vietnam, and given the sexual nature of its comedy, it certainly belongs to the Vietnam War period. In any case, the film was very popular and it spawned a highly successful television series (Monaco *History* 198), whose final episode, according to Nielsen ratings, still holds the record for the most viewed scripted television broadcast in the US.

4.1. A Different Perspective

As the second cycle of WWII films was coming to a close, Hollywood started to include the enemy's perspective more often, even having multiple directors shooting different parts and the enemies speaking their own languages. *The Enemy Below* (1957), one of the first films to split its attention between Americans and Germans, is directed by an American, while the German U-boat crew speaks English, but are played by German actors. The film portrays a prolonged game of cat and mouse between an American destroyer and a German submarine in which both Captains are shown as skillful and earn each other's respect. The German sailors are shown merely as soldiers who dislike Hitler and just wish to go home. In the end, the

American Captain risks his life to save his German counterpart, showing the possible future alliance between the two peoples.

The film that perfected this multiple-perspective technique and became a prototype for subsequent war films (Suid 188) is *The Longest Day* (1962), portraying the Allied assault on Normandy, which Ambrose (236) dubbed "one of Hollywood's most remarkable logical achievements." The film employs four directors, each for American, British, French, and German portions, in addition to the omnipresent producer Darryl F. Zanuck, who could be called the film's actual director, to create ultra-realistic scenes of the attack (Suid 185). The film also features an all-star cast, with John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and Robert Mitchum portraying high-commanding officers, while Sean Connery is employed as comic relief. All sides are portrayed as brave and heroic, and the Germans are shown as a "worthy opponent," (Worland 194) criticizing Hitler, whose laziness and authoritarianism is blamed for their defeat. One of the most fascinating scenes is the quiet coda between a wounded British pilot and a lost American soldier. In a "tonal contrast with all that has gone before," (Worland 196) the scene offers a quiet musing on war and all the confusion that it causes, with the young American exclaiming: "I wonder who won." Worland (193) agrees with Suid's (168) point that *The Longest Day* ended the second WWII cycle which started in the late forties while also starting a new era for epic war films.

In the following years, there was a number of similarly structured films, some set in Europe, such as *Battle of the Bulge* (1965), *Bridge at Remagen* (1969), and *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), while others were set in the Pacific: *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) and *Midway* (1976) (Suid 188). While critics have lambasted *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Suid 282), it remains one of the more significant films of the cycle due to the scope of the project. It was the biggest Pearl Harbor endeavor since *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and it was significant for its portrayal of the Japanese. Though the focus was firmly set on explosions and action instead of the people, it

features Japanese actors directed by Japanese directors and the Japanese characters receive similar treatment to German ones from that period: they are finally portrayed as skillful instead of barbaric (Suid 290-1). This is particularly true for the portrayal of Admiral Yamamoto, the attack's architect, who expresses doubts over provoking a war with America and who is even shown as heroic (Iriye 228). This positive trend will not, unfortunately, continue through the films that will problematize the Vietnam War, which was ongoing while this epic cycle was being filmed. On the contrary, Hollywood will once again return to its WWII roots and largely place the enemies off-screen, hiding in the bushes and tunnels. In the following chapter, this will be thoroughly examined through some of the most significant films of the Vietnam War.

Once again, to finish this loose third cycle of WWII films, the only Best Picture winner of the period, *Patton* (1970), deserves a closer look. The film follows the campaigns in North Africa, Italy, and France of the eccentric General George S. Patton, brilliantly played by George C. Scott from a screenplay by a young Francis Coppola. It shows many epic battles as well as quiet moments in which the General's character is explored, though, Fussel (244) notes, many of his flaws were omitted. The film, released in the middle of the divisive Vietnam War, is fascinating because it seemed to appeal to both supporters and opponents of the war (Monaco *History* 197) and even the people instrumental in making the film disagreed whether the result was pro or antiwar (Suid 268). Lev (*Conflicting* 108) concludes that, though the antiwar interpretation could have some merit, the film is primarily "patriotic, pro-Army, and pro-war." In general, a good way to determine this is to look at how the film ends, and *Patton* ends with its main character metaphorically walking out into the sunset, and though he is musing about "fleeting glory," that is still a positive conclusion. In any case, the uncertain ideological position and its successful broad appeal make this film a unique rarity, one that will not be made again, and especially not about the ongoing Vietnam War.

5. The Vietnam War – The Unrepresented

The lengthy analysis of Hollywood's practices during World War II and The Korean War and the films produced while those wars were ongoing and during peacetime is crucial to understanding Hollywood's relation to The Vietnam War, one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. The evolution of the war film from its patriotic early WWII beginnings to semi-critical portrayals of war in the seventies will only be continued when Vietnam War films finally reach their audiences. However, not everything will evolve, evident from many films clearly being influenced by images and structures from before, especially with regard to the portrayal of the enemies, which are at best not seen, and at worst once again shown as barbaric. A long time, more than a decade after the war's start, will have to pass before any meaningful Hollywood contribution will be made. This goes along with the old adage, as Lentz (2) notes that Hollywood is often five years behind the times on important topics, but this was not even true for the minor Korean War, and especially not for World War II. In contrast to those wars, only one major war film was made during American involvement in Vietnam (1964-1973), John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968).

So the question must be raised: why did Hollywood, for so many years, fail to make a significant movie about a war that was itself, as Anderegg (2) succinctly puts it, a movie? A part of that very complex answer lies in the question itself, as the reason why we can say the Vietnam War was a movie is because of the many TV documentary cameras that were present, which brought, for the first time, the brutal realities of the war to American living rooms each night (Haas et al. 164). Another major deterrent for Hollywood was the nation's polarized stance about the war (Quart and Auster 92), a polarization that will with time shift more toward opposition to the war (Zinn 459). Fluck argues that precisely this opposition to the war was a major reason for Hollywood's avoidance because the public would not be receptive to traditional war movie values such as reaffirmation of masculinity and patriotism (277). Though

by the end of the war the opposition was widespread, the protests were led by college students (Zinn 458-9) and that had increasingly become the main demographic for Hollywood films by that time. In addition, the military would often deny the filmmakers' requests for assistance in the seventies (Suid 315), thus increasing the budgets of potential films. Most of these excuses have one thing in common: money. As reported in Haas et al. (29), John Frankenheimer once said that Hollywood has nothing against message movies as long as they make money and, given the potentially bloated budgets due to the lack of military assistance and the daily barrage of war footage on television causing the so-called "living room war," (Martin 21) taking away both patriotic and antiwar audiences, Hollywood simply stayed away from the topic, protecting their bottom line. They believed that neither the classical patriotic films nor the antiwar message films would make money, and they might have been right.

They also might have been wrong, we will never know how the films would have been received, because we only have one example which is certainly not an adequate sample size. However, that one film, John Wayne's[1] *The Green Berets* (1968), was a financial success (Suid 256), even amid a historic panning from the critics and major antiwar protests (Haas et al. 164). But the film's squarely negative reception, sparking more division rather than the intended patriotic consensus (Quart and Auster 92) made it clear, in Hollywood's mind, that the potential for profits (*The Green Berets* were only a modest hit) did not justify the risks and no other war films were made for more than ten years, other than those dealing with World War II (Devine 20).

As for the film itself, few positive things can be said about John Wayne's stale propaganda attempt. The direction is static, the action boring, the acting wooden, and the events depicted are invented. Wayne, sixty at the time, leads a squad of "elite soldiers," almost all of them older than forty, when the average age of the servicemen in Vietnam was nineteen

[1] Co-directed with Ray Kellogg.

(Lawson 27), into Vietnam, where they fight the swarming enemy just like Wayne fought the Indians in many of his westerns (Worland 218-9) and spend the final hour inventing a caper plot in which the squad infiltrates and kidnaps a Viet Cong General. The ending is "as accurate as the rest of it," (Anderegg 25) with the sun setting in the east as Wayne delivers the patriotic message to the South Vietnamese child that had been following the team. The film irresistibly recalls of some of the more formulaic early WWII films, with the classic "good vs evil" plot and the conversion of a cynical outsider and his integration into the group (Worland 213), seen in, for example, *Air Force* (1943). The conversion of the initially skeptical journalist is cynical though, because, as Suid (317) reports, journalists were at first supportive of the military but they were shocked at what was really happening in Vietnam and reported the facts. Adair says that this approach could have worked if the film was released twenty years prior (24) and Martin (108) agrees, saying that it was a "formulaic recycling of hackneyed themes and conventions that the popular films of the period had for the most part undermined." Obviously, if this were a WWII film, time would have still judged it poorly because of its poor technical elements, but there was no excuse to make a horrendously dated film at such a time. Thankfully, Hollywood will rectify their inaction, even if a little too late.

In the meantime, a slew of returning veterans, prisoners of war, and social issues films will have been released. This is a total inversion of the WWII cycle where the topic was relatively unexplored and the films produced in the few years following the war. But unlike those films, which directly dealt with the readjustment of the returning veteran, the veteran status after Vietnam was often secondary, used as a background to explore different issues (Devine 28). The main issue is usually violence and veterans are shown as "beyond redemption" and a threat to society, exacting revenge or joining outlaw motorcycle gangs (Martin 103). Some of the diverse films included in this cycle include *The Visitors* (1972), *Magnum Force* (1973), *Heroes* (1977), and *Rolling Thunder* (1977). Martin argues that even though Vietnam

was not portrayed directly through combat films and the veteran films were only taking that status as a starting point, "the conflicts that the war generated within the culture can be said to have had a powerful influence on film production in general," (106) evidenced by a wide array of counterculture films and films that reject old conventions such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or *Easy Rider* (1969).

Perhaps the most famous example of a Vietnam veteran's readjustment (or his failure to readjust), though him being a veteran is only subtly acknowledged, is Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). In it, Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle drives a taxi through the streets of New York, disgusted by the incredible amount of filth that he sees every night. Rejected by his love interest after bringing her to an adult theater, he decides to take matters into his own hands by planning the assassination of a presidential candidate. Having failed that, he settles for "cleansing" the streets of a pimp and his accomplices, for which he is praised in the much debated hallucinatory ending. Cynthia Fuchs observes that the film is about the "unrepresentability of the war" (37) as the war is never mentioned and Travis is usually unable to properly express his emotions or his intentions. Adair (61) argues that it is a parable of the war, or at least a parable of Coppola's future version of the war, where Bickle aimlessly roams the urban New York jungle, on the verge of losing control, just like America roamed the Vietnamese jungle for nine years with no success.

5.1. *The Deer Hunter* – America Grows Up

Hollywood Vietnam combat film was finally released from "quarantine" in 1978, seemingly sparked by Francis Ford Coppola's production of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (Adair 77). However, the many delays in that film's production meant that the films that started filming later would be released before Coppola's epic. Those films include *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) and *The Boys in Company C* (1978), films with smaller budgets and ambitions, but nevertheless interesting works. Both of them are rooted in the tradition of early WWII combat films, *Boys*,

for example, ending in almost exactly the same way as *Battleground* (1949). However, many of those elements are undermined: in *Spartans*, the overzealous officer who does everything by the book is looked down upon and another officer, who was a decorated veteran in previous wars, commits suicide. The ending, in which the main characters are killed and left lying naked in the mud, is a great precursor in the changing ways Hollywood would portray war and the military. *Boys* is interesting in the way training is portrayed[2] and for the fact its main character is a Black Marine who becomes a leader of his squad. Some unsettling racial bullying from other soldiers is shown and the Marine gets backed by his senior officer, though it is questionable how representative this action was.

The most important film released that year which was, unlike the films previously mentioned, not produced to capitalize on the perceived inevitable success of *Apocalypse Now* (Adair 78), was Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Cimino was a relatively novice feature film director, only having one studio movie under his belt, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), a heist film starring Clint Eastwood (Monaco *History* 239). He will, however, become one of the most impactful directors in Hollywood history, though not for his Oscar-winning *Deer Hunter*, but for his next film, the western *Heaven's Gate* (1980), a film that is thought to be the biggest reason for the demise of one of the largest and oldest Hollywood studios, United Artists (Balio 341). After that, he made several smaller films, but none of them were particularly successful, either critically or commercially.

Heaven's Gate is an epic western, nearly four hours long in its original release, portraying the infamous Johnson's County War of 1890, a war between government-backed cattlemen's association and the Wyoming immigrant community. The center of the story is a love triangle between characters played by Kris Kristofferson, Isabelle Huppert, and Christopher Walken. The film looks and sounds incredible, every shot done with much care,

[2] In a quite similar sequence to the iconic *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

but there lays the problem: the slow pace of shooting caused the budget to bloat to almost four times of the initial $11.6 million, which was already high at the time (Cook 63). In his memoir, Steven Bach (81) retells the story behind the final years of United Artists and their unbroken faith in Michael Cimino, lasting from before the release of *The Deer Hunter*, which was a Universal release, to the disastrous production of *Heaven's Gate*. Wood argues that the much publicized production issues may have influenced the horrible reviews, in addition to the backlash after *Deer Hunter's* Oscar wins (267). Haas et al. (191) claim that the reviewers treated the film unfairly, calling it "boring, pretentious, and overlong." We will never know what the public's reaction to that version would have been at that time, though, because it was immediately pulled from its limited release, but the shortened 149 minutes long version bombed with both the critics and the public (Balio 341).

Before his *Heaven's Gate* fiasco helped sink United Artists, Cimino made his controversial, but highly successful *The Deer Hunter*, both in terms of box-office and awards (Monaco *History* 240). *The Deer Hunter* is a story of three small town steel mill workers from the fictional town of Clairton, Pennsylvania, Michael (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Steven (John Savage), who enlist for The Vietnam War and are completely changed by it. Not only are they changed, so is their Eastern European Orthodox community, as well as America as a whole. The film begins in that community, as Steven is getting married a few days before they ship out and the group takes the opportunity to go out for one last deer hunt in the mountains. After this lengthy sequence, the action moves to Vietnam where the group is captured by the Viet Cong and forced to play Russian roulette for the amusement of their captors. Michael orchestrates their escape, but Steven is severely injured and disabled, while Nick is mentally scarred and begins to play Russian roulette for money in underground locations in Saigon. Michael returns home relatively unscathed and becomes intimate with Linda (Meryl Streep), but he is changed too as he finds no more joy in the deer hunt. He returns

to Vietnam to save Nick, but Nick is lost as he cannot stop playing Russian roulette, and he finally loses in a game against Michael. The final sequence deals with Nick's funeral and ends on a somber note of "God Bless America," signifying the "devastation of a once-confident and boisterous male group" (Martin 116).

The film's structure is one of its more distinguished points, so much so that even its detractors such as Adair (93) must acknowledge the skillful and smooth transitions between segments. Robin Wood details the segments and their transitions, noting that the five parts, three set in Clairton, two in Vietnam, are all "exclusive" – there are no cut backs from one location to the other (246). The length of these segments is also of great importance, not only for the pacing, but also for the meaning, as each segment is shorter than the previous one signifying the losses and the impoverishment of the characters and the community (Wood 247). The transitions between locales also suggest thematic motivations, a good example being the helicopter noise from Vietnam becoming television footage in Clairton, thus suggesting the intrusion of Vietnam into American homes (Wood 247). Wood also notes that the dominant motif of all these blocks is the "one-shot," Michael's principle when deer hunting, which will be shattered upon his return from Vietnam, and the roulette scenes culminate with Nick's "one-shot" suicide (248).

The Russian roulette scenes were the main focus of the controversy surrounding the movie, controversy that evolved into fully fledged protests after its Oscar wins (Quart and Auster 125). At the time, a wide array of people was calling the film racist for its portrayal of Asian people (Monaco *History* 240). The first time we see a Vietnamese character, it is a Viet Cong soldier who throws a grenade in a shelter full of women and children, before being incinerated by Michael's flamethrower. For the rest of the film, they are rarely seen outside of the Russian roulette scenes which are played out of cruelty by the North Vietnamese, and for money by the South Vietnamese. It does not help that there is no factual basis to the roulette

scenes (Suid 357). Cimino's film will thus always remain stained and has to be analyzed purely as fiction, because if a film is "oblivious to the impact of the war on the Vietnamese," (Haas et al. 186) as many other American films are, then at least it should not be overtly racist. It could be said that the roulette den is a criticism of capitalism, especially when considering the politics of *Heaven's Gate*, and Hellmann claims that the roulette scenes are not racist because Vietnamese are also shown as victims, and white men are shown placing bets (59). This second argument works if the film is observed as part of the mythical tradition of the western genre.

Many critics have pointed out the fairly obvious influence of James Fenimore Cooper's classic *The Deerslayer* on Cimino's very similarly titled *The Deer Hunter*. Hellmann (60) argues that Cimino's Michael "embodies salient traits of Cooper's prototype and every other western hero to follow." He is part of his community but clearly alienated, living at the edge of town in an isolated trailer and Nick is his only friend because only he understands his ritualistic "one-shot" philosophy (Hellmann 60). Wood calls him a "virgin knight," (249) a chaste hero which is also a characteristic of many western heroes. Wood also finds an apt comparison between this film and the John Ford seminal *The Searchers* (1956), in which John Wayne's young niece Debbie is abducted by the Comanche and seduced by their culture (248). But while Wayne's Ethan manages to rescue Debbie, though his initial intention was to kill her, Michael cannot save Nick who was "seduced" by Vietnam. In his final moments, Nick seems to remember the good times and their friendship but he cannot stop playing the most dangerous game and Michael has to take partial blame for his death (Wood 149). Cimino clearly knows the tradition of the western and his intention is to undermine it. While the western hero usually outgrows the community he saves, Michael fails to save his friend and he is forced to integrate in his community, a community that has been forever changed by the intrusion of the Vietnam War.

The ending scene is a powerful example of the change, as the group of friends sing "God Bless America" after Nick's funeral, even though Adair calls it "emotional bullying" (98). The obviously patriotic song gains a new meaning in this context, a mournful meaning. Martin (116) claims that "The Vietnam War has been a degenerative experience that has devastated the once-confident and boisterous male group." The war has destroyed everything: Nick's life, Steven's legs, Michael's role of a lone hero, and everyone who stayed home experienced some pain due to the war. The film, through its disintegration of the myth of the western stands for the loss of America's innocence. The small community of second-generation immigrants has sacrificed everything for virtually nothing and the patriotic feeling of the centuries-old myths now have a much different feeling to those who have suffered.

5.2. *Apocalypse Now* – Vietnam: Mythical, yet Real

The film that started the Vietnam cycle, but was released a year after the films analyzed in the previous chapter, was Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The reason for the late release was its much publicized troubled production which prompted reporters' quips such as "Apocalypse When" or "Apocalypse Never," (Bach 120) and the reason for it jumpstarting Hollywood's coverage of the Vietnam War was one man: Francis Ford Coppola (Morrison and LoBrutto 51). Coppola was at the time one of the most wanted directors in Hollywood, having swept the Oscars and the box-office with his *Godfather* films, while also managing to squeeze the acclaimed spy thriller *The Conversation* (1974) between his two mafia epics. That was the clout needed if a director wanted to tackle the untouchable war, as Coppola was unable to start the project a decade earlier (Menne 44), and this unprecedented success guaranteed him a great deal of artistic and financial independence (Adair 103), but the film still ended up being "one of the most expensive films ever made" (Kern 50) at a budget of $31.5 million. The budget was bloated due to some unavoidable circumstances like typhoons, unavailability of the helicopters rented from the Philippines government, and Martin Sheen's

heart attack, but the mid-shoot script issues, not being able to find a proper ending, and failing to deal with Marlon Brando's ridiculous requests were mainly self-inflicted wounds.[3] Coppola took an enormous risk to retain control over the film, having to put up a large chunk of his own money (Adair 102), but in the end, the film managed to turn a slight profit, as well as eight Academy Award nominations (Cook 62).

The film follows Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) on a classified mission to "terminate with extreme prejudice" a rogue Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). In a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, which dealt with a journey up the Congo river to the heart of Africa in late nineteenth century, Willard is carried by a boat and its colorful crew up river across the Cambodian border. Coppola's story is an inversion of Conrad's as his hero is sent to assassinate Kurtz, while Conrad's Marlow is sent to save him. The film is structured as a hard-boiled detective story, filled with several unique and surreal episodes connected by Willard's narration (Hellmann 69). Willard has often been compared to Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe (Auster and Quart 128), whose name is interestingly similar to Conrad's Charles Marlow, something of a detective himself. The episodes shown in the film are diverse: a helicopter attack, a morale-boosting Playboy show, an encounter with a tiger, a confused nighttime battle. These are all fairly stand-alone episodes and some of them were even completely cut from the film, such as the French plantation scene, and later restored in various director's cuts. In the end, the decimated crew reaches Kurtz and his camp of fanatics, where Willard, intercut with a carabao sacrifice, ritualistically murders him.

One of the most recognizable sequences from the film is its first, in which Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) orchestrates an air raid on a Vietnamese village in order to secure a beach to surf on. Kilgore is, as his name suggests, one of the more bizarre characters in the film.

[3] A good summary of the production is shown in the documentary feature *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991), which includes footage shot by Eleanor Coppola accompanying her husband at the Philippines and contemporary interviews with the key players.

He is an emblem of how Hollywood saw the war, strictly from an American point of view (Desser 81). Lev (117) notes that this and the Playboy show scene "suggest that the Americans bring their culture with them, and they cannot escape that culture to interact in a meaningful way with Vietnam." In fact, this is a substantial issue with most Hollywood films: rarely do they show anything from a Vietnamese point of view. The treatment of the Vietnamese is eerily similar to the treatment of the Japanese in WWII, from invisible to barbarous. Willard is even anxious to accept the mission because, though he had killed before, killing an American was different. One of the rare visible examples was *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), a Robin Williams comedy which features a South Vietnamese family's perspective (Prince 334). In the Kilgore scenes, the inferior Vietnamese soldiers are mostly seen from above, mowed down by helicopters blasting Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries."

When Kilgore meets Willard, who has a confidential mission for him, he is unimpressed, but when he learns that Lance, one of the boat crew, is a surfer from California, he gets so excited that he orders his helicopters to raid a small village off the beach. He is more than willing to risk the lives of many of his men and slaughter many innocent civilians to get a bit of "R&R."[4] His "I love the smell of napalm" speech has been voted as twelfth greatest movie quote by the AFI and perhaps the most intriguing part of it was the final line: "Someday this war's gonna end." Having said that he simply walks off the screen, leaving Willard and the audience bewildered. We do not know if he would be glad or sad if the war ended and that is scary for Americans. In the previous wars they would always assume their soldiers and officers were good guys, and now they are faced with the possibility that they may be monsters and that some of them are never even reprimanded. As Willard ponders: "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz."

[4] Military slang for rest and recreation.

Another powerful scene, the unnecessary civilian slaughter by the boat crew, is a quick metaphor for the whole American involvement in the war. Against Willard's objections, the Captain orders the crew to search a small Vietnamese vessel, seemingly transporting food. Chef ransacks the boat, finding nothing suspicious, but when he reaches for a basket, a girl runs toward him and Clean unloads his machine gun, killing everybody. The girl, who was trying to protect a puppy that was hidden in the basket, is wounded but not dead, and Captain orders them to take her to the hospital, a hospital she would not have needed had they not interfered with her business. Willard stops the madness and kills her in cold blood, his mission is more important than the pointless war. This comes as a shock to the viewers even though they knew he had killed many people before, because Willard had been a passive observer and audience surrogate until that point, more concentrated on reading the Kurtz file than with the war going on around him. Now he shows that the people he had killed before might have not all been soldiers or bad people, a fact that he was ambivalent about.

The river trip is designed as a journey back in time: the further they go, the more primitive it is, just like in *Heart of Darkness*, where the Europeans are shown to be "at least as savage and primitive as the indigenous inhabitants of the Congo" (Lev *Conflicting* 117). The character of Lance, who had been taking many drugs during the trip, fully embraces the primitivism and seems almost liberated by it, but Kurtz is corrupted by it and has been resolving to brutal murders and ritualistically putting heads on spikes. The portrayal of the indigenous people, though it may have some basis in reality, has been justly criticized as it wildly exaggerates the level of their primitivism, drawing more from *Heart of Darkness* than from the Vietnamese realities (Lev *Conflicting* 119). Again, out of the whole camp of indigenous Montagnard people, the two characters who are introduced are white Americans, showing that Hollywood only cares about its own point of view.

One of those characters is Colonel Kurtz, who has gone "totally insane," according to Willard. Kurtz is a role fully improvised by Brando, which is one of the reasons why Coppola had trouble finding a correct ending for the film. He is usually filmed in shadow, largely due to his weight that made him uncomfortable, and that gives him a mythical dimension. He sets the foundations for some future films with his rants calling those who are running the war incompetent and unwilling to let the soldiers win the war. He tells an invented story about Viet Cong soldiers chopping vaccinated children's arms off as an example of the will power necessary for America to win the war (Adair 117). He is correct that the American soldiers were "unmotivated by their nation's imperial project," (Menne 82) but his thesis does not represent the filmmakers' point of view, unlike future films such as *Rambo*. He is further shown insane when Willard reads his notes where he advocated for dropping nuclear weapons on Vietnam and exterminating the Vietnamese people. That is why when Coppola finally conjured up an ending, inspired by the indigenous Philippine people (Lev *Conflicting* 119), he rejects Kurtz's ideas. After Willard assassinates Kurtz, he is offered to take his place, but he simply walks away and journeys back downriver. Martin (119) says that it is not clear whether Willard chooses to go back to the war and embrace its evil or if he would follow Marlow's lead and step back from it all. The beginning of the film, where Willard says: "When I was here, I wanted to be there; when I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle," announces this alienation theme, and by the end no answer is given, only that war is a surreal hell that destroys lives.

Many debated whether these films were pro or antiwar (Haas et al. 188), and it seems as if people with different worldviews tend to see the films in different ways. Conversely, different people have different definitions of what it means to be antiwar. For example, Michael Cimino claims that any good war film is an antiwar film (Haas et al. 186), while Suid (199) says that Hollywood often has a lack of understanding of the matter, making war exciting and

showing sacrifices are necessary to win, without considering how this approach will be interpreted by the audience. Indeed, an average viewer, who is not well versed in the history of the western genre, would probably not be able to discern all the complexities of *The Deer Hunter*, and leave the theater with a patriotic feeling that sacrifices are just an unfortunate product of the American cause. Similarly, viewers might leave *Apocalypse Now*, awestruck with the spectacle and technical brilliance, and fail to consider the immoralities of the war and the imperial nature of American involvement. A lot of the blame for the diverse reactions about what critics called the "confusing politics" of *Apocalypse Now* (Haas et al. 188) stems from Hollywood of the forties and fifties. Many Vietnam War authors, such as Kovic, Caputo, and Herr, blame precisely Hollywood's unrealistic portrayal of war for their enlistment and incredible losses they suffered (Martin 79). Hollywood set the patriotic cornerstone back in WWII and when Vietnam came by, they could not properly comment on it. Thankfully, all the films made money (Haas et al. 188).

5.3. From Rambo to *Platoon* – Different Views

Naturally, Hollywood is not a monolith and soon Kurtz's opinion that the war managers prevented the troops from winning the war will be espoused uncritically in a revisionist cycle of patriotic pro-war films, starting with *First Blood* (1982). *First Blood* stars Sylvester Stallone as John Rambo, a Vietnam War killing machine who, now the only surviving member of his squad, is treated like a pariah by the small town police force. We were able to see these protests and perhaps unfair treatment of Vietnam veterans in *Coming Home* (1978), but here it is taken to the extreme. Rambo, having escaped police custody, has to hide in the woods and employ some of the Viet Cong guerilla tactics to defeat the technologically superior, but far less motivated and ineffective police force (Hellmann 147). In the end he breaks down in tears to his commanding officer complaining that "somebody didn't let us win." This film paved the way for a slew of prisoner of war films such as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), Chuck Norris' *Missing*

in Action (1984), and the Rambo sequels which transport the mumbling hero back to Vietnam to finally win the war, and later to Afghanistan. Prince (331) notes that, given the relatively safe topic these films covered, it was "remarkable how quickly they degenerated into comic book fantasy." Adair calls the second Rambo film's structure "a fairy-tale" (136) and he is absolutely right. Rambo is presented as an indestructible "god-warrior" (Adair 135) who defeats both his enemies (including the Russians) and the managers who betrayed him and left him for dead. It was a totally irresponsible and unrealistic portrayal of the war, but it ended up being one of the most commercially successful films of the decade (Adair 133).

This cycle of war glorification was broken in 1986 with Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. At the time of its release it was hailed as the "antidote" to Rambo (Martin 128), thanks to Stone bringing an actual veteran's perspective to Hollywood, and Stone openly criticized Rambo for being a wish-fulfillment fantasy and denying the truth (Suid 507). He also wanted to distinguish his long awaited film from *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, because he, as a Vietnam War veteran, wanted to show the reality of the infantrymen, not a mythical metaphor (Suid 505). While *Platoon* brings more realism to Hollywood's Vietnam, it, along with all other Vietnam War films, "remains trapped in Joseph Conrad's metaphor of the war" (Prince 335). This refers to its inability to portray the war straight, structured as a good versus evil morality play, a fight between the two sides for the soul of the protagonist Chris, representing America. However true to its realism claims the film was, it received praise for it, along with four Academy Awards, including the one for Best Picture.

The film is truly laser-focused on the soldier's experience of Vietnam, it opens with the hero Chris (Charlie Sheen) landing in Vietnam and it ends with him leaving. Chris is a young and naive volunteer who is torn between two strong willed Sergeants of his platoon, Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Elias (Willem Dafoe). Elias is more easy-going and is friendly with his men, while Barnes is more authoritative. The two come into conflict after Barnes kills two

civilians in a scene evoking the My Lai massacre, a much publicized event in which the US forces murdered many innocents (Monaco *History* 264). Soon after, Barnes shoots Elias who survives, but is killed by enemy fire before he can tell anyone, though Chris suspects Barnes was involved. The climactic night battle is a chaotic sequence which shows the confusion that was present for the foot soldiers, not knowing what they were shooting at, hiding in ditches under dead bodies to survive, shooting themselves in the foot so they can get a discharge. In the end, Chris kills Barnes as revenge for Elias and goes home, wounded in the battle.

Platoon is certainly more rooted in reality and a more accurate representation of the ground war than the awarded films of the previous decade (Suid 505), but like most Vietnam films, it fails to address the wider implications of the war, thus lacking in any substantial commentary (Dittmar and Michaud 6). It also, like most other films, avoids the perspective of the Vietnamese people, concentrating only on the American experience (Haas et al. 214). It lacks any political depth (Martin 129), but, to be fair, that was Stone's intention the whole time, he wanted only to show the soldier's struggles (Monaco *History* 264). But there is just one small problem with that statement: it does not simply show the experience of a soldier, it shows a good and evil dichotomy in the military, without the wider context. Like this, Stone's film is both antiwar and pro-military (Suid 505), as neither Barnes or Elias, whose side it takes, are antiwar figures (Klein 27), thus leaving us with "a monumental assumption that the war itself was fine and that it was the people in charge of running it who were the problem." (Taylor 172)

Platoon also falls into the same trap as many other would-be antiwar films, which is glorifying the spectacle of war in visual terms while trying to show its tragedy (Klein 24). This is most evident in the scene where Barnes kills two civilians and Chris stops the rape of a Vietnamese woman. Adair argues that "unmediated representation of violence constitutes in itself an act of violence against the spectator" (159). He criticizes the strict realism these scenes are subjected to and cites several examples of works that depict tragedies but "never descend

to any slavishly complacent imitations of 'the real'" (Adair 159). Fluck (377) agrees with this point of view, saying that "realism cannot create meaning by and in itself," and *Platoon* is a good example of realism creating a confused image of the war. Unfortunately, the film does not even manage to fully adhere to this maxim: at the end of the climactic battle, Chris escapes his bunker dodging bullets and grenades, killing many enemies, hardly the heroics ordinary soldiers experienced. He ends up being a Hollywood cliché, evoking the myth it was supposed to debunk: Rambo.

The films that continue this realist cycle are *Hamburger Hill* (1987) and Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Suid calls *Hamburger Hill*, a film in the tradition of Lewis Milestone's *Pork Chop Hill*, "the simplest most straightforward of Hollywood's movies about the Vietnam conflict and one of the least seen and discussed" (528). He is right that it is a simple film but he is wrong in his implication that it should have been seen and discussed more. It is a tedious film, with some good elements such as accurate portrayal of grueling battles and a poignant sequence of friendly fire deaths of American soldiers, but it also shows contempt for journalists and it is another Vietnam film that refuses to put the war in context or even add a secondary theme (Adair 164). The *Platoon* realism criticism applies here too, showing brutal deaths realistically does not create meaning. In the end, this was a minor effort released in between several major films so it could not make a great impact (Suid 528).

A film that made an impact and gave more context to the Vietnam War was *Born on the Fourth of July*. The film stars Tom Cruise as Ron Kovic, a paraplegic Vietnam War veteran and it follows his journey from childhood to his activist days after his return home, including both combat and home front scenes. One of the more interesting elements of the film are its recruitment and training scenes. The recruitment evokes Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), where young high-school boys listen enthusiastically to the men trying to get them to sign up for the army and a lot of them do, influenced by the media they had

consumed. The training is replaced by a wrestling competition, connecting sports and the military (Herzog 19), and not for the first time, sports featured in war films such as *MASH* (1970) and *The Boys in Company C* (1978). The film shows another My Lai equivalent and Kovic shooting his fellow Marine. Having been shot, Kovic is transported to a veteran's hospital in an even sterner criticism of the government's treatment of veterans than that of *Coming Home* (1978).

The peacetime portion and Kovic's readjustment to his condition and the society is the core of the film (Suid 544). It brilliantly shows what the Vietnam War did to disintegrate the traditional American family and alter American perception of themselves. Kovic is portrayed as a perfect example of a patriotic American, as he returns he hates the protestors even after what he gave away for his country, for which the country was not grateful enough to treat him decently. But with time he begins to understand and shed himself of blind patriotism and in the end leads the movement, in a brilliant scene where he commands his wheel chaired regiment to storm the Republican National Convention. However, Stone once again flubs the ending: in *Platoon* he refused to condemn the military or the war, and here he makes Kovic's speech in support of Jimmy Carter a triumph, even though he knew Carter's antiwar victory would be short-lived and replaced by eight years of Reaganism.

5.4. Stanley Kubrick in the Mickey Mouse Club

The final film to be considered from this second[5] cycle of Vietnam War films is Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Kubrick is one of the most critically acclaimed (though not by the Academy) and most versatile directors of the twentieth century. He was adept at directing most genres: horror, sci-fi, comedy, historical epics, and war films. *Full Metal Jacket* was not his first war film, thirty years prior he made his WWI classic *Paths of Glory* (1957), one of the few antiwar films of the time. *Paths of Glory* shows a truly bleak image of war, with

[5] Or third, depending on the historian.

yet another pointless death-ridden hill assault, and self-serving and corrupt officers playing war from their castles before trying to find guilt everywhere but in their own actions. The ending of the film, where a German girl sings to the French soldiers, shows that these war-torn people can live together in harmony (Duncan 33). His other endeavor into contemporary war was *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a Cold War farce that heavily criticizes the military, nationalism, and the nuclear arms race. The ironic usage of the WWII classic song "We'll Meet Again," as nuclear bombs drop all around the world destroying humanity, is one of the strongest antiwar statements in film history (Kramer 93).

Full Metal Jacket is his attempt to bring some of those same messages to the Vietnam War, but many critics argue that it was not as successful, mainly due to its opening sequence overshadowing the later parts set in Vietnam (Quart and Auster 156). The first part shows the Marine training at Parris Island boot camp, led by the brutal drill Sergeant Hartman, portrayed by a truly unique actor R. Lee Ermey. The main protagonists of this sequence are Private Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio), who is the target of Hartman's sadistic dehumanizing brutalities, and Private Joker (Matthew Modine), who is responsible with helping Pyle do his tasks.[6] Pyle fails at everything (other than shooting practice) and his colleagues turn against him, tired of being punished for his failures. In the end he fully breaks and kills Hartman and himself, sparing Joker. We continue to follow Joker in Vietnam where he works for the Army newspaper with his photographer Rafterman. After the devastating Tet offensive, Joker joins up with a squad led by one of his boot camp friends, Cowboy, and they get ambushed by a sniper in the town of Hue. After losing several men to the sniper, they manage to find their position, discovering it was a woman. Wounded, she begs that they kill her and Joker does, taking a human life for the first time.

[6] Nicknames courtesy of Hartman.

The boot camp sequence, the one universally praised by the critics, is one of the most iconic sequences in any Vietnam War film, largely due to R. Lee Ermey, the foul-mouthed drill Sergeant. Ermey is a fascinating figure, having built his acting career at a very late age, by playing drill Sergeants in Vietnam War films. In this film, he practically reprises and perfects his role from *The Boys in Company C*, a film in which he is a bit more sympathetic and even plays a fatherly role to some of his soldiers. His Hartman is not a fatherly role, regardless of what his name might suggest, he is a brutal man tasked with making killing machines out of his men. Though one may think that this would be achieved by making boys into men, Kubrick's boot camp makes men into boys (Fluck 380), shown through numerous scenes of humiliating Private Pyle, by making him suck his thumb or drop his pants. Pyle also, in what White calls one of the film's more obvious messages, only fits in with the squad after he goes insane (209), only then is he shown to be good at something: shooting his rifle. The scary part is that this character is etched in almost every Marine's memory, as all of them encountered "a fat kid in boot camp who either killed himself or became an object of everyone's pity" (Lawson 29).

The second part of the film is often overlooked by critics, perhaps in part because it dares criticize the American imperial project in Vietnam (Klein 29). Private Joker wears a helmet with the message "Born to kill" written on it, but also a peace symbol on his uniform, and when asked about this dichotomy he says it says "something about the duality of man." He is an individualist, and individual thought is a danger for the Army. The film shows his transformation and integration into the "insane" squad of killers by confirming his "duality of man" principle. He shows that a man can do good and bad at the same time (Phillips *Major* 140) by killing the wounded Vietnamese sniper in a chilling scene showing his eyes change from innocence to "the thousand-yard stare," the stare of killers. The film ends in a similar way to other war films: with a march, but the soldiers are not singing one of the classic songs they might have learned in boot camp, they are singing about Mickey Mouse. This is one of the

strongest antiwar and antiimperialist statements in any Vietnam War film (Klein 33), but it was ignored by critics and the film was initially not received as well as some other similar films. Fortunately, with time and distance, it has come to be considered as one of the best Vietnam War films (Hill and Phillips 130).

6. Conclusion

In the end, Hollywood can have a major influence on people's perception of events and this is especially true for wars America was involved in. This thesis shows how Hollywood participated and even championed the formation of a positive perception of the military during World War II and how that decision will hamper their creative liberties in the decades to come. After decades of simplistic view of the military and very few films that disagreed, it was extremely difficult for them to portray the unpopular Vietnam War. The American Army was suddenly not "the good guys" anymore and it was tough for filmmakers to show that on screen because it would interfere with Hollywood's main goal: making money. They had "programmed" people to think in a certain way and now they thought they could not change course. However, with some delay, filmmakers showed critical films can be made and some of those films became some of the most popular and awarded war films of all time. A very diverse slate of films was released during a ten-year period, from hyper-realistic to extremely metaphorical. None of them were without faults and all of them were debated and criticized from one angle or another, but all of them were also praised. Hollywood finally showed that it could, if it wanted to, make films that the American government did not want it to make.

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Abstract

The Vietnam War in American Cinema

The period of The Vietnam War was a tumultuous time for American society, and Hollywood films, albeit slightly delayed, reflected the dynamic and confused realities of the war. Rooted in the traditions of the war film which were largely established during World War II, a diverse collection of films was produced during a relatively short period of ten years, some of them conforming to the traditions, others subverting them. Many great directors tackled the topic, resulting in acclaimed films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). These films showed, some more successfully than others, that being critical towards American war endeavors was possible, a rare occurrence before Vietnam.

Key words: The Vietnam War, war films, Hollywood, film studies, World War II.

Sažetak

Vijetnamski rat u američkoj kinematografiji

Vijetnamski rat obilježio je uzburkan period za američko društvo, a hollywoodski su filmovi, s malim zakašnjenjem, odrazili dinamične i zbunjene stvarnosti tog rata. Na temelju tradicija ratnog filma koje su većim dijelom ustanovljene za vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata, snimljena je raznovrsna kolekcija filmova, u kojoj su se neki držali tradicije, dok su joj drugi prkosili. Brojni veliki redatelji su se bavili ovom temom pa su tako nastali hvaljeni i nagrađivani filmovi: *Lovac na jelene* (1978), *Apokalipsa danas* (1979), *Vod* (1986) i *Bojevi metak* (1987). Ovi su filmovi pokazali, neki uspješnije od drugih, da je kritički odnos prema američkim ratnim nastojanjima moguć, što je prije Vijetnama bilo gotovo nemoguće.

Ključne riječi: Vijetnamski rat, ratni filmovi, Hollywood, filmologija, Drugi svjetski rat.