

A GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF VIETNAM WAR FILMS

By Mark Freeman

Introduction to the Course

Civil War. Domino Theory. Honoring Our Commitments. Supporting the

Troops. "Hey, Hey LBJ, How Many Kids Have You Killed Today?"

The war in Vietnam exists for many of us in slogans and catch phrases. And in searing images: a naked young girl, her flesh burning, is running down the road, after she was napalmed; a captured Viet Cong is executed by a pistol shot to the head by South

Vietnamese Col. (later General) Nguyen Ngoc Loan.

It's nearly a quarter of a century since the last helicopter took U.S. ambassador Graham Martin from the roof of U.S. Embassy in the final evacuation in April 1975. Today's twenty-somethings are as removed from the Vietnam War as I was from World War II when I was twenty-something. For the generations born after the war in Vietnam the war exists in images and in the memories of their parents and grandparents.

This is a course about images of that devastating war. It's about exploring for ourselves what the war was, what it meant then, and what it may mean for us now. It's an opportunity to look at the shifting boundaries between art and history. The groundbreaking films we'll view are truly stories of war and remembrance.

As Charles Dickens observed (regarding a revolutionary war in another

context): "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."

The Vietnam War challenged our understanding of fundamental values

that Americans have always revered. Americans who saw themselves as

peace-loving, were called warmongers. Americans who believed in

freedom, were castigated as foreign oppressors. A generation raised

in the greatest prosperity in history stood accused of rejecting

work, constituted authority and the American Way, in favor of sex,

drugs and rock 'n roll. It was a time when many American's re-

evaluated their political and their personal choices, taking risks

to embark on previously unexplored paths.

Vietnam was a watershed, a cultural divide. At the height of the war nothing revealed a person's beliefs and values more than their stance: pro- or anti- war. Today we are challenged to understand the

Vietnam Era from the perspective of those who participated in it.

We also have the privileges and clarity that comes from perfect hindsight.

Perhaps it was these very divisions which were responsible for the fact that Vietnam was the first U.S. war not to dominate the movies during the actual conflict. So we'll look at the war through the eyes of a generation of filmmakers who took up the challenge of trying to deal with the war after its ignominious conclusion. We'll see how three accomplished filmmakers wrestled with, but never resolved, the powerful enigmas of the Vietnam War.

In this course we will critically examine the response of three of American directors to the war that shaped their generation. Francis Coppola, Michael Cimino and Oliver Stone are baby boomers. Stone

is a combat veteran. We'll consider their films---Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter and Platoon---from a variety of perspectives.

Overview of the Course

The Vietnam War shaped a generation. To young people who came of

age during that bloody and ill-fated conflict, the world divides

into two distinct times--- before the war and after the war. The

Vietnam era encompasses a period of enormous political and

social upheaval commonly called the 60s, but actually extending from

about 1963 (the assassination of JFK and the Civil Rights Movement)

through 1974 (U.S. Withdrawal from Vietnam and Watergate.)

Prior to the war in Vietnam, the combat film in America was a well

established, comfortable and popular genre. WW II ---the good war---

was the setting for films which typically placed a group of buddies

in an adverse situation. Overcoming all hardships, they were

successful and victorious over despicable enemies. (See for example

Bataan 1943. Or a transitional film set in the Korean War, Steel

Helmet.)

The Vietnam War shattered that paradigm. It was the war America lost. There was plenty of blame to go around. Bitter veterans blamed protesters and the media. Protesters blamed the system. And everyone blamed the government.

Hollywood filmmakers thought they knew how to make war films. Often blockbusters, almost always star vehicles, traditional war films appealing to patriotism, manly virtues and ending in life affirming-victory were nearly always sure-fire box office successes. But how do you make a popular film about a war that divided the country like no other since the Civil War? How do you produce entertainment when the subject is defeat and loss and grief?

During the war and immediately after, documentaries and U.S. government produced propaganda dominated Vietnam related filmmaking.

Among the more notable films---

Hearts and Minds Peter Davis

The War at Home Glen Silber

In the Year of the Pig Emile de Antonio

Vietnam! Vietnam! John Ford

The Anderson Platoon Pierre Schoendorffer

Inside Vietnam Felix Greene

Perhaps the first Hollywood feature set in Vietnam was John

Wayne's Green Berets (1968). The Pentagon expended an estimated \$1

million in support of this pro-war polemic. Here Wayne trots out

all the cliches of his World War II movies. To no avail. Times

had changed and the Green Berets bombed. It crashed and burned at

the box office and with the critics.

This is a course about the intersection of art and politics. The

best artists take the "facts" of human experience and transform

them by the power of their talent and vision. The films I've

selected for this course are valiant, if not always successful,

attempts to make us see Vietnam anew. To experience through art,

what was so difficult to comprehend as it occurred in life. This is

a formidable, nearly impossible mission.

Viewing Plan

Each film will be preceded by a Before You Watch lecture and followed by an After You Watch discussion. Let me give you a capsule preview of the series.

Class 1

The Deer Hunter Michael Cimino 1978

This 183 minute epic is a white, ethnic working class view of the war. A good starting point, unlike the other films in our series it integrates the experience in Vietnam with a portrait of life in the States.

Class 2

Apocalypse Now Francis Coppola 1979

Coppola's fable set in Vietnam is the directors attempt to grapple with evil that lurks in the human heart. Although visually stunning, the film is something less than convincing dramatically.

Class 3

Platoon Oliver Stone 1986

The most grounded and naturalistic of our films has an apparent veracity not to be found in Stone's bio-epics like JFK and Nixon.

The violence seems far from gratuitous or titillating in this unflinching treatment of the ground war from the grunts' point-of-view.

We'll compare and contrast the approaches and techniques demonstrated in these films. Let me encourage you to watch them chronologically in the order of their release. Just as the filmmakers benefited from the early efforts of their colleagues, we'll also build our discussion commenting in later lectures about films viewed earlier.

(Be prepared. These are not easy films to watch. The violence is graphic and often far from cartoon-like. Brutality and intentional cruelty run like a bloody stream throughout these films.)

These films differ from each other in the techniques they use, in their point-of-view, in their form and style. But they all use the power of film to tell us a story about the war, to shape our

perceptions about core human values and ideas. War by its nature is

a life and death struggle. It's a time to cut to the bone and determine what really matters. These are big films, treating large themes including: loyalty, honor, trust, responsibility, madness, horror and shame. Not to mention "Truth" and the "Meaning of History."

Our task as critical viewers is to look carefully at what they each have to tell us, and to learn more about how they work. Why do these films affect us so strongly. Beyond the narrative, how do the acting, production values, camerawork, sound and editing come together to create the virtual world of these films?

Finally let me end this introduction on a personal note. One of the lessons of the Vietnam era for many of us was that, "the personal is political (and vice versa)." My personal experience of that time indelibly marked me. It seems reasonable and likely that my reading

of the films we're screening is through the lens of my own memories

and values. Although I had been involved in a Junior ROTC program in high school, in college I was an anti-war activist. I helped

organize protests on and off campus. These films are in many ways

the closest I'll ever get to what I believe to be the terror, horror, cruelty, boredom and stupidity of combat. I recognize that the theater of war also includes the possibility of incredible bravery, courage, loyalty and determination. It's up to each of us as viewers to sort out the complex mix of emotions, memory, fantasy and fact that these demanding films call forth.

Viewing Suggestions

Give yourself some uninterrupted time to view these films. Unplug the

phone. Put the kids to bed. Whatever is necessary. Try and watch each film completely at a single sitting. Then look at it again after you've read the "After You Watch Lecture." This time take advantage of the features of your remote control. Pause. Take notes. Develop your own questions. Closely examine intriguing sequences. Consider the structure and editing. Does slow motion reveal anything to you?

Be bold. Ask questions and become involved in your on-line

discussion group. Actively engage these films and you will be challenged, provoked, stimulated. In the vocabulary of the 60s these films are "heavy." Between films take pleasure in the real world, don't let the imagery and emotions of war and death overwhelm you. The war was all too painfully real. But our virtual Vietnam is in some ways "only a movie"---a film you can turn off or walk away from.

Recommended Books and Articles

Pat Aufderheide's article on Vietnam films in *Seeing through Movies*, edited by Mark Crispin Miller (Pantheon, 1990) is excellent. For a vet's perspective on Vietnam Films see *Vietnam at the Movies* by Michael Lee Lanning. For a more scholarly compendium see *From Hollywood to Hanoi: The Vietnam War in American Film*, edited by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. Finally for an encyclopedic view of Vietnam related films (over 600) from around the world, consult *Vietnam War Films* edited by Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams.

Class 1

The Deer Hunter Michael Cimino 1978

In many ways *The Deer Hunter* tells us much more about a certain kind

of life in middle America, than it does about the war in Vietnam.

The strength of the film is found in its long, loving portrait of patriotic-working-class-ethnic-white-male rituals of friendship.

You could say that the war serves only as the background for what in

many ways is a classic buddy film. At its simplest it's a story of

Mike (Robert De Niro) and his (to use today's vernacular) homies.

These are guys who work in the mill, drink hard, hunt deer and go off to Vietnam because it's the right think to do.

What makes these characters different from and more interesting than

the hard-hats (construction workers) who were regularly featured on

the nightly news beating up anti-war demonstrators? It's the

Ukrainian Orthodox Catholic community that they're a part of. This choice of setting accomplishes a great deal for the film.

Politically this Eastern European immigrant community comes by its virulent anti-communism naturally. These are generally families who

had suffered under the Soviet system. It was no great leap for them to believe that the war in Southeast Asia was primarily about freedom and anti-communism. These are people whose feelings for America are still fresh and unashamed. How surprising to cynical viewers of the 90s to find that in the context of the film, it's poignant and believable ---not false, not maudlin, when the Mike and his cohorts spontaneously sing God Bless America at a nearly wordless post-funeral breakfast in John's bar.

For the moment let us just consider that portion of the film---by far the largest part---that unfolds in Clairton, PA. The locations, costumes and set design are nearly perfect. (In fact the imaginary Clairton here is a composite drawn from eight locations.) From Mike and Nick's tacky trailer quarters at the base of the steel mill to John's Bar and the Eagle Superette, the V A Hospital, the VFW hall and Mike's beater caddie coup de ville with enormous fins and a trunk that opens only with a kick--- an entire world is captured. The most symbolic location of all is the onion domed church---site of the opening wedding and closing funeral which bookend the film.

The extended wedding sequence is a marvel which relies on long

shots, natural sound, numerous nonprofessional actors and improvisation. (Look for telling details like the blood red drops spilling on the pregnant Angela's white wedding dress, as she and Stevie drink from a double cup, toasting their nuptial bliss.)

The opening sequences are filled with salt-of-the-earth faces: the steel workers pouring molten metal like socialist realist model-workers and then stripped bare in the shower-room, the "babushkas"

(old grandmothers dressed in black) walking the four layer wedding cake through the streets and into the rented wedding reception hall and the WW II vets on the street who offer encouragement and congratulations to the boys headed off to Nam.

De Niro's star presence clearly dominates the film. His Mike is a complex character who talks about "sun dogs" ---Indian omens of good

hunting--- a macho man's man who seems to have a mystical relationship

with his deer kill. He's certainly strong and self-confident in a way much more reminiscent of John Wayne (or even Rambo) than of the

"heroes" of Apocalypse Now and Platoon. Mike's character is

reminiscent of James Fennimore Cooper's Natty Bumpo. The Deerslayer in this 19th century fiction was a mythic figure who carves out his identity in confrontation with nature. (It's interesting to note that in contrast to his usual tough guy demeanor, De Niro played a draft evader in the 1968 film *Greasy*.)

Meryl Streep is the other major star. While she's appealing and attractive as always, she's given very little to work with here. We get a hint of her "backstory" as the daughter of a physically abusive drunk. But we know little of the basis of her relationship with her fiancé Nick. Basically she's cast as a love object, what the boys are implicitly fighting to protect and waiting to go home to. Her talents are for the most part wasted in this man's film.

It's the strength of the male ensemble acting that provides the coherence to the film. The beer drinking, deer-hunting, occasionally sex-talking buddies provide the emotional foundation for the picture. There's even character development in the supporting roles. See what you make of Stan/Stosh. He's physically much less imposing than most of the crew. He's obsessive about

packing his piece---a cheap handgun. He boasts of his sexual prowess, and is involved in several confrontations with Mike (De Niro), at one point calling him a faggot--- fighting words in their social context. There may in fact be an undertone of unacknowledged

sexuality in the male bonding of the film. Some might even suggest that Mike who seems generally uninterested in women, finally goes along with Linda's (Strep's) insistence on sleeping with him, primarily as a way to be close to their shared love---the missing Nick. What do you think?

Cimino, the director, indulges himself relentlessly. (His excesses here foreshadow his colossal catastrophe, Heaven's Gate, released three years later.) Cimino seems to delight in his ability to move the camera. If you can accept the pace and style of the film, his artfulness is generally not a hindrance. For example to establish the camaraderie and group identity of the guys, Cimino has a long dolly out as Mike and the boys leave the mill and walk through the parking lot. (Not nearly so dramatic as Altman's opener in The Player.) This has the advantage of allowing the banter of the group to play out in real time in a single shot. Less successfully there's a similar real time extended sequence of the guys driving

off and then coming back and then driving off again---a practical joke on John after a piss stop in the mountains on the way to the deer hunt. Cimino's decision to link the darkness of Mike's nights in Clairton with the blackness of his return to Saigon seems effective.

The Deer Hunter is really two films. We've spent a good deal of time discussing the first which is set in the States. The second film is in Vietnam. As we might expect, these scenes are tense and violent. But unlike the other films we'll view, the action except for the first sequence is not set in combat. The experience of the war in Vietnam is symbolically reduced to extended, gruesome, high-stakes games of gambling and russian roulette. Let me clearly state that this is a conceit of the film. No one has established that there were ever such deathly rituals in Vietnam. It's important for us to consider the impact of Cimino's decision to reduce the war to the metaphor of Russian roulette. But it would be better, I think, to continue our discussion after you have viewed the film. The movie runs over three hours. Given the graphic brutality of the second half, I can't recommend it as bedtime viewing. See it with a

group of people. Take the time to discuss your reactions and process your feelings.

See if you think that the film deserves its five Oscars including Best Picture and Best Director.

After You Watch the Movie

The Deer Hunter was the first major motion picture to treat the Vietnam War. And as such we need to understand it in the still highly charged political context of its time. The film was released in 1978. This was only three years after the ignominious evacuation

of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. In fact it's this chaotic event that provides the background to Mike's abortive attempt to rescue his pal

Nick. (Here Cimino's hand-held shaky camera work intercut with apparent newsreel footage seems an appropriate, if by now a predictable way of signaling confusion and imminent hysteria.)

The Deer Hunter was made at time when Americans still were raw from

the divisiveness of the war years. This was not a time of nationally

healing or reconciliation. Many Americans had not come to terms with the full dimensions of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. And many clung obstinately to an almost religious sense of American superiority.

In this context, it's not unreasonable to describe the politics of *The Deer Hunter* as racist. On the one hand we have loyal, honor-and-duty-bound, white American virtue. On the other hand, we are offered

images of the cruel, murderous and mercenary Vietnamese. It's telling that in his fabrication of Russian roulette *Cimino*

depicts these imaginary games as being organized by both the brutal

Viet Cong (our enemies) and by venal war-profiteers (our putative allies) from Saigon, the capital of the South. The result is a portrait in which the Americans are the innocent and guiltless victims of brutal Vietnamese aggressors. *Cimino* offers us no close personal view of Vietnamese people in any other context.

To my mind, this is immoral filmmaking which turns history upside

down. After all it was hundreds of thousands of American troops that invaded Vietnam, not the other way around. And it was the U.S.

Air Force that dropped more bombs on Vietnam than were exploded in

all of World War II. It seems to me that the case that the U.S. was the aggressor against the people of Vietnam is much more plausible,

than the blatant lies of *The Deer Hunter*. Cimino for political reasons tries to turn the debacle of the Vietnam war into a tired fable about American heroism.

The Deer Hunter has had a visceral effect on its audience of U.S. vets, the one group that had on the ground experience. One of the vets responsible for the creation of the Vietnam Memorial recalls in an interview in a film about Maya Lin that it was after viewing *The Deer Hunter* that he vowed to build a Vietnam Veterans Memorial. On a

much sadder note, there are numerous accounts----perhaps not all apocryphal---of despondent vets modeling their suicides on the Russian roulette sequences of the film.

Filmmakers and audiences are both responsible for the impact that

films have on us. I believe that a film is more than "just a movie."

Cinema reflects our world's dreams and hopes and wishes back at us.

Films can change our view of the world, our ideas about ourselves, our understandings about how things are and how they ought to be.

What we believe profoundly effects who we are and what we do. It's of no small importance then that we critically examine the messages

(i.e. films) we consume. Whose ideas do they represent? Why are they showing us these things? We need to take control and consciously reflect upon the role of these fictions in our lives.

For telling ourselves stories is our way of shaping and understanding our world.

Discussion Questions

All the films we'll view in this course confront moral issues of good and evil. The filmmakers have for the most part chosen not to address the larger political (and moral) questions of the war--- Why were we in Vietnam? Was it a just war? (Is there such a thing?)

Were U.S. strategies of assassinations (for example the CIA's Phoenix

program) and massive bombings ---including hospitals and schools in

North Vietnam---right? Are there rules of war? (Would they cover "free-fire zones" where any civilian becomes a legitimate target?

Or a policy of "strategic hamlets" ---forced relocation of communities from their ancestral villages? What about napalm and agent orange, a chemical defoliant?)

These films work, as perhaps we expect them to, as dramas of individuals. We're confronted with characters who make a series of decisions divorced from historical context and political analysis. So we're left to ask our questions only about the rightness and wrongness of these individual choices.

The climax of *The Deer Hunter* is Mike's decision to play Russian roulette against Nick. This is the proximate cause of Nick's death. Is the right thing to do? What's the meaning of this? Is Mike making some great self-sacrificing gesture ---putting his life on the line for his friend? Is he trying to re-act their escape from the North Vietnamese tiger cages? Or is it the images of home that can break through to the drug addicted Nick? Why does Mike

believe he's responsible for Nick? For Steve? (Remember Nick calling him a "maniac control freak?") Is Mike an heroic figure? Why/why not?

Class 2

Apocalypse Now Francis Coppola 1979

"My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It's what it was really like---it was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the way the American's were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little-by-little we went insane." Francis Coppola at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival

Coppola made Apocalypse after Godfathers I and II, at the height of his commercial success. Attempting to make the definitive statement

on the war and to assure his independence from Hollywood studios, Coppola invested his own financial resources in a quixotic attempt to meld personal vision and blockbuster filmmaking.

Apocalypse opened to mix reactions at a time when the memories of

Vietnam were still too raw. Although nominated for eight Academy

Awards, it received only two for Best Sound and Best Cinematography.

Apocalypse is today regarded as a classic of American cinema, a staple of university film courses.

The most satisfying films are delicate balances of Story, Star and Production Value. Coppola makes a valiant effort to secure each of these elements. And each element in turn costs him and the film dearly.

Story

The story is based loosely on the Joseph Conrad novella, Heart of Darkness. Apocalypse transports the tale from the blackness of Africa

to the gruesome greenness of Vietnam by way of the Phillipines. (But

more about the location later.) The screenplay was written by John

Milius and Coppola. Milius created his fantasy of Vietnam without

the benefit of any first-hand experience of the war. A notorious

hawk, most of Milius's output consists of eminently forgettable blood

and guts action films. (See the execrable *Red Dawn* or *The Wind and*

the Lion for example.) Some of the most insightful writing in the film is Willard's (Martin Sheen's) voice-over commentary. This first person testimony was created by Michael Herr after the film was shot. Herr was the author of *Dispatches* a nonfiction book about

the war from a soldier's perspective.

Simply put, the story of *Apocalypse* is on one level the story of a mission Willard undertakes by riverboat to locate Kurtz (Marlon Brando) and to "terminate [him] with extreme prejudice." The murkiness of the plot and especially of the heavily symbolic ending may be traceable at least in some part to the turgidness of the Conrad tale. (Describing the mysteries of the Congo, "It was the stillness of an implacable force, brooding over an inscrutable intention.") But the dramatic weaknesses of the tale are ultimately traceable to the episodic structure of the narrative. The sure-fire way to heighten tension in an adventure film is to have our ever-more-desperate hero overcoming an ever-escalating series of attacks.

Audiences typically are frightened by the dangers and relieved and satisfied by the triumphs. (See the Indian Jones school of

crisis-to-crisis filmmaking. Note Harrison Ford's small role in Apocalypse.) In the case of Apocalypse, this episodic structure is an inappropriate formula which fails to meet our expectations for serious drama.

Despite this structural weakness, we need to recognize that Coppola

does take large risks in his approach to filmmaking. He's willing to risk failure in his bold pursuit of the extraordinary. This risk taking may be in part a result of the unpredictable nature of attempting to film an epic on location in the jungles of the Phillipines, with a changing cast of drugged out actors. (Sam Bottoms for one admits to using pot, LSD, speed and alcohol.) More

to the point, Willard/Sheen is not John Wayne. If anything, he is an anti-hero. Life in the States doesn't work for him. His wife has divorced him. He's seen too much. No longer a gung-ho believer, he

still is capable of carrying out an assassination. Willard is extremely detached. We watch him as he watches the action, even as

he seems to observe himself---impassively without emotion. It's this sense of one thing just following another, unpredictably,

without apparent reason---that "shit just happens"---that is most responsible for the dramatic weakness of the film. Without strongly developed positive character identification----there is no reason for us to particularly care about Willard or his mission---viewers are left primarily with the pleasures of the episodes or set pieces.

The visual power and drama of these set-ups shouldn't be underestimated. The scene of Lt. Col. Kilgore (Robert Duvall)-- cowboy of the helicopter cavalry strafing villages to the strains of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries remains one of the most enduring images of all Vietnam War films. ("I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like victory.") In contrast to the gritty realism in a film like *Platoon*, *Apocalypse* adopts an hallucinatory, nearly surreal stance, as if to say only the exaggerations of dreams and nightmares can convey the subjective reality of Vietnam. As Michael Herr wrote in *Dispatches*: "Vietnam is as much a state of mind as a place or event. It is a kind of mystery which cannot be represented or even adequately named by straight history."

For examples of the surreal, catch the image of Coppola himself playing the role of director of a television news film crew, directing Willard/Sheen not to look at the camera. Or how can we understand the playboy Bunny-USO show in the middle of absolutely god-forsaken, hell-hole nowhere, except as a fever dream---a wish for the fantasies of home--- as much the fantasies of the actors' endless trapped in the Phillipine jungle as that of the soldiers whose roles they play.

Star

The acting in Apocalypse is for the most part extremely strong and convincing. In general there is a strong correspondence between the screen persona of the actor ---the kinds of roles he's usually cast for---and the characters each actor assumes in Apocalypse. This typecasting is an accepted shortcut, helping audiences to quickly become comfortable with the tale being told. (A good example of this is Dennis Hopper as the totally over-the-top photographer.)

Production began with Harvey Keitel in the role of Willard.

Dismissed after the first week of shooting, he was replaced by

Martin Sheen. During the course of the filming, Sheen suffered a massive heart attack. And production was delayed once again.

The casting of Marlon Brando is the most problematic. Brando by reputation is difficult. He arrived on the set unprepared. He had never even read *Hearts of Darkness*. Apparently he and Coppola had

more than a fair share of problems working together. What do you think of Brando's performance? The confrontation between Willard and Kurtz should have been the absolute high point of the film. I found their interactions flat, murky, confused and mostly of little interest. It's probably fair to speculate that the script ---or lack thereof ---is at least as much to blame as any deficiency in acting.

Production Values

In keeping with Coppola's intention to create a blockbuster, the production values of *Apocalypse* are high. Investing millions in helicopters, explosions, stunts and special effects, the visual images are captivating.

Overcoming the logistical impediments to shooting on location in the Phillipines was surely one of Coppola's triumphs. In part this was made possible because of deals struck between Coppola and Phillipine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Marcos no doubt used some of the dollars Coppola paid for helicopter rental to fund anti-insurgency campaigns in the southern Phillipines. How ironic--making a movie about U.S. intervention in the Vietnamese civil war funds the war-making of another U.S. backed despot. (The only Hollywood film completely shot in Vietnam was the 1964 A Yank in Vietnam.)

I think it's time that you experience the film for yourselves. I suggest that in addition to following the developing story, you pay particular attention to how it's structured. We'll discuss the editing in some detail. Also note how you reacted to the larger issues that the film attempts to grapple with. Look for symbols and pay attention to the implied discourse about the nature of good and evil. How interesting and successful are these elements?

After the Film

Let's begin our discussion with an examination of the editing (Richard Marks) and sound design (Walter Murch.) The opening sequence is truly remarkable, a text book illustration of the power of editing to create a visual story. From the music of the Doors establishing the mood of an era to the incredible two minute multi-layered, hallucinatory montage, its the cutting which establishes this film as a potential masterwork.

Editing decisions are made on many levels. The most straightforward

is simple continuity--- moving the action in time and space in order to

tell the story without disorienting the audience. But editors are visual artists. They are sensitive to formal concerns like color, similarities of shape and the power of movement to capture attention. On the most abstract level editors deal with symbols.

Symbols, icons and images (a crucifix, a white cowboy hat, a swastika)

can represent much more than the proverbial 1000 words.

The most powerful form of editing is the " Combined Cut." This is filmmaking which unites formal concerns for similarity (or difference) with a symbol and or an idea. Let's look again at that opening sequence. The sound of the helicopters is a predominate motif that shifts and changes as the sequence develops. At first it's almost as if the sound is in slow motion, as if the helicopters themselves shown in silhouette are some kind of primitive prehistoric monster. The music of the Doors explicitly states the theme of the film---"This is the end of our elaborate plans."

For the next two minutes the sweating, blinking, upside down visage of Willard becomes the screen against which images of war and destruction are projected. He blinks over and over pushing back a nightmare. At several points the superimposition changes from images of helicopters to the rotating blade of the ceiling mounted fan in the hotel room. Here's the essence of the combined cut. The sounds and shape of the fan is combined literally and metaphorically with the helicopter death ships in Willard's claustrophobic Saigon hotel room. He engulfed, surrounded. The war exists internally as

well as externally.

Pay special attention to all the different ways the sounds of the helicopters and of the fan shift and change, until finally there's something about the pitch and the rhythm that clearly signals that the hallucinations of memory and dream are ending. Now Willard hears the helicopter outside his window in the present instant. This is a brilliantly executed sequence. It's emotionally moving, visually compelling and narratively effective. The intensity of these two minutes would be impossible to sustain much longer.

Coppola ---His own Vietnam

Coppola's claim that *Apocalypse Now* is Vietnam was at the least provocative, if not arrogant and self-serving. In its most critical dimension the film is not Vietnam. In fact the Vietnam war may be said to be only the background, the setting and framework, for a larger and ultimately unsatisfying (even pretentious) treatment of the nature of good and evil. The film is unwilling to deal directly with the complicated politics of the war. Instead Coppola chooses a strategy of ambiguity which allows us to see the film as confirming our pre-conceived prejudices. He poses an

unanswerable question: What is an appropriate response to "the horror, the horror" of incomprehensible evil? But the film really doesn't require us or help enable us to fashion an answer.

There is little if any factual basis for many of the episodes in the film. Wagner and water-skiing is in some ways the least of it. Kurtz belongs to Conrad, not to Vietnam. His ravings about Viet Cong hacking off the limbs of inoculated children are fabrications. And the climatic ritual slaughter of the caribou is based on the customs of a village Coppola visited in the Phillipines. This, the most symbolic construction of the film, has nothing at all to do with anything indigenous to Vietnam.

The ending of the film is problematic in many ways. To many viewers

it seems anti-climactic. In fact Coppola experimented with three versions of the ending. At the Cannes Festival the film ends with Willard looking over the crowd, perhaps uncertain as to whether he'll return to Saigon or stay in the jungle. The 70 mm and video version ends as you've seen it with Willard returning to the boat.

The 35mm and 16mm version may have been the best. The last image is

an explosion in the jungle. An air strike had been called in on Kurz's compound. (It's suggested that distributors favored this ending because it allowed the credits to run over images, rather than the long stately over-black crawl in the current version.)

Coppola's indecision about the concluding moments of the film are emblematic of his struggle for control during the whole process of production.

Let's end here with a surreal reality check from the Washington Post of 6/6/97:

... Ho Chi Minh City's trendy younger generation has abandoned their parents' conical straw hats for Motorola cell phones, Spanish tapas and Corona beer. They mix with young foreign lawyers and investors at places like the ultra-hip Apocalypse Now nightclub, where the young Turks of business shoot pool and dance past dawn beneath ceiling fans painted to look like upside-down combat helicopters.

Discussion Questions

What does a film based on history owe to history? When does

artistic license cross the line and become wanton disregard for the truth? To whom or what is the filmmaker ultimately most responsible? His own vision? His backers? The historical subjects of his film? The audience? How would you balance these multiple and sometimes conflicting demands?

Compare Coppola and Kurtz's fabrication of the Viet Cong cutting off

the arms of inoculated children with Cimino's invention of Russian roulette as a Vietnamese torture. Are these merely dramatic devices? Why would filmmakers resort to lies to demonize the Vietnamese? Is this art or politics?

What do you make of the symbolism of the tiger in *Apocalypse Now*?

Of the deer in *Deer Hunter*? (Recall the shot of the mounted trophy deer after Mike and Linda make love.) What do these symbols

represent for the characters in the film? For us as viewers?

Keep this animal imagery in mind and compare it to the battlefield deer we'll see in the ending sequences of *Platoon*.

Other Films

Documentary

Heart of Darkness F. Bahr, G. Hickenlooper and E. Coppola

Fiction

Aguire the Wrath of God Werner Herzog

Class 3

Platoon Oliver Stone 1986

Platoon, winner of Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director,

is remarkable for its view of combat in Vietnam from a grunt's (foot soldier's) perspective. In this way it is (literally) much more grounded than the previous films we viewed. Platoon is the story of Chris Taylor's (Charlie Sheen) transformation from a cherry (virgin) newcomer to hardened vet. Although the film appears to take a much more realistic approach to the war, it none the less shares themes and techniques common to both Apocalypse Now and the Deer Hunter.

Like *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon* is concerned with a working class view

of the war. *The Deer Hunter* makes few if any concessions to middle

class sensibilities. That film seems to be about and for working people---factory workers, the backbone of America. *Platoon* takes a

different point-of-view. The protagonist, Chris Taylor is a college dropout. He's enlisted and come to Vietnam to prove something to himself. We see his fellow soldiers and their experiences through his eyes.

Here's how Chris sees himself: "I've always been sheltered and special....Mom and dad didn't want me to come here. They wanted me

to be just like them---respectable, hard-working---a little house."

And this is how he describes his fellow grunts: "Two years high school about it---a job back in the factory. Most of them got nothing. They're poor and they're unwanted....The poor always get fucked over by the rich."

The film is clearly autobiographical drawing heavily on Stone's personal experience of 15 months in Vietnam. ("When you look at a

movie, what you are looking at essentially, I think, is a director's thought process." Oliver Stone.) Stone comes from a privileged background and spoke French before English. Against his family's wishes he dropped out of Yale and enlisted in the Army. (From Platoon: "I just want to be anonymous like everyone else. Do my share for my country." From an interview with Stone about his Vietnam experiences: "Nobody gave a shit about Oliver Stone.") Among

the earliest influences on Stone's work was Martin Scorsese. After Stone returned from the war, he studied under Scorsese at NYU. Among the student work he produced was Last Year in Vietnam.

Platoon unfolds as a coming-of-age tale. Chris Taylor (the innocent) arrives in the heat and dust of Vietnam to the sight of bags of bodies---war casualties--being transported back to the States. He's counting off his 332 day tour-of-duty, and the story is framed in the first person from Chris's point-of-view. Like Apocalypse Now this done through voice overs. In Platoon the interior monologue is presented as letters home to Chris's grandma.

This device serves several purposes. First it makes us see Chris as even younger and more innocent----as if he were a small boy away at

summer camp writing to his grandmother. The contrast between Vietnam and summer camp only heightens audience identification and concern for Chris's well being. The effect wouldn't be quite the same if Chris were writing home to his brother or a girlfriend. In addition, Chris's relationship with his grandmother seems to be a substitute for a working relationship with his parents. He appears to be especially estranged from his father, only acknowledging that he wants to do what "dad did in the Second [World War]."

The tone of the voice over in Platoon is much different than that of Apocalypse. Instead of world-weary cynicism in style of a Phillip Marlowe gumshoe, Platoon's commentary is thoughtful, concerned and poetic. In fact for my taste the voice over is over-written---too precious and too intellectual to be consistent with the character. ("Somebody once wrote hell is the impossibility of reason....")

Unlike the all white Deerhunter, Platoon recognizes the critical participation of black soldiers in the ground war. Black characters in Apocalypse Now were used superficially as "local color," if you will. In contrast the Black roles in Platoon are much more fully

drawn. And it is Chris's affiliation with his Black buddies, Black Music and the "potheads" that distinguishes him from the redneck, more violent, "juicer" (alcohol) contingent. Platoon is remarkable in that it explicitly acknowledged racial tensions. All the leadership from noncommissioned officers on up are white. Blacks literally get the "shitty end of the stick."

(Chris's identification with the underdog is cemented as he's assigned to latrine duty with a Black squadmate. In a heavy handed pun the film cuts from burning excrement from the latrines to smoking

shit (pot) in the heads clubhouse. Stone (no pun intended) himself was no stranger to dooper culture. Almost immediately after his return to the States from Vietnam he was busted for possession.)

Let's look at the use of music in Platoon. Like the other films in our series, pop music is used to establish mood and timeframe. In Platoon the Jefferson Airplane's White Rabbit introduces Chris (and us) to the drug culture. And the group sing along to Motown hits in Platoon is used in much the same way as the bar singing in The Deer

Hunter. Both scenes establish group identity and cohesion. But the predominate music in Platoon is Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings.

This requiem-like dirge is used repeatedly. The effect is a heavy-handed attempt to provoke pity for the sufferings and deaths endured by U.S. troops. (Neither Stone nor any other U.S. feature filmmaker ever used such music in the context of Vietnamese losses.)

The dramatic tension in *Platoon* is embodied by the war between two sergeants in the platoon. (Stone claims these characters are based on real life models encountered during his stint in 'Nam.) Elias (Willem Dafoe), a dooper represents the "correct" soldier---one who recognizes a sense of limits and rules in the midst of the horrors of war. Barnes (Tom Berenger), a scarfaced juicer, is more similar to the amoral fighter/heroes played by Robert De Niro (*The Deer Hunter*) and Martin Sheen (*Apocalypse Now*). As Chris sums it up in the final minutes of the film, "[Elias and Barnes were] fighting for the possession of my soul. [I was] a child born of those two fathers."

Like the other films we've viewed, it's important to consider the political and historical contexts. We're in a better position to do this, after viewing the film.

After You Watch

Platoon sees the jungles of Vietnam as a stage set for a moral battle over Chris's soul. I think it's useful for us to carefully consider the moral positions represented by Elias and Barnes. We'll see, I think, that this moral universe is narrow indeed. Elias is "good" only by contrast to the "bad" Barnes. The evidence of this moral dichotomy is provided by Elias's preventing Barnes's from executing a small girl after he had already murdered her mother. Elias not only prevents Barnes from killing the girl, but brings charges against him to higher military authority. (This allows the commander to self-righteously assert that such atrocities are counter to official U.S. policy.)

But Elias and Barnes perhaps have more in common than not. Both are

super-fighters. They each are able to single-handedly wipe out numerous enemy troops. Both are lifers who have built careers out of favorable kill-ratios. It's hard to decide who is the more debased. Elias stays and fights and kills with apparent gusto in

a war in which he no longer believes. Barnes remains a true believer–

--willing to kill whomever he perceives as the enemy ---including Elias. It seems to me that Elias is not good in any all encompassing moral sense, he is only not as evil as Barnes.

After Elias confronts Barnes, Chris and Elias's buddies suggest "fragging" (killing) Barnes. Chris is among the most eager to take action. Chris's reaction is depicted sympathetically as perhaps justified by Barnes's brutality (killing unarmed woman at point-blank range). More accurately I think we can read Chris's hatred for Barnes as personal revenge, and a defense of Elias. In the same village where Barnes murdered the woman, Chris tortured a one-eyed, mentally handicapped civilian by making him dance to bullets shot at his feet (an amusement from old western films which makes Chris a cowboy and the Vietnamese Indians). Other soldiers exercise their absolute power by raping a young girl. In neither instance is there any hint of punishment or military justice. Only Barnes's crimes are singled out. The climax of the film confirms this reading of personal vendettas between Elias/Taylor and Barnes. Barnes sets out to murder Elias. And Taylor is successful in

killing the injured Barnes. Although Stone has Elias die in a slow-motion crucifixion pose, I'd suggest that there is no real image of redemption in Platoon, and certainly no triumph of good over evil.

Neither Elias nor Barnes, nor indeed any voice in the film express any possible consideration of the position that U.S. involvement in the war was itself immoral; that refusing to participate in the war effort might be an option, that resistance to the war existed even within the Army. In fact it is commonly asserted that officers who were too "gung-ho"---true believers who put their men at above average risk---were "accidentally" killed by friendly fire from their troops. And war resistance including desertion was not unknown. Stone's view for dramatic purposes is hermetically sealed by the boundaries of what Chris sees and what Chris experiences.

Discussion Questions

Is the ideal audience for Platoon the same as the intended audience for The Deer Hunter? For Apocalypse Now? If so, why? If not, why not?

If Chris Taylor is a stand-in for Stone, is Stone justifying his enlistment in the Army? Was it the right thing to do? Or was it a mistake? (You might consider this in the context of Stone's portrait of anti-war vet Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Interestingly Wilem Dafoe also appears in this 1989 film.)

Stone writes in the introduction to the screenplay of *Platoon* that Barnes and Elias illustrate two views of the war, "the angry Achilles versus the conscious-stricken Hector, fighting for a lost cause on the dusty plains of Troy." Does *Platoon* meet Stone's Homeric pretensions? Do his characters embody the nobility and hubris of classic Greek tragedy? What other kind of (revisionist?) story might Stone be conjuring for us?

Wrap Up

Platoon, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, conclude with the (hollow?) triumph of the protagonists' survival. What the characters have learned about Vietnam, about themselves, about the nature of good and evil remains nearly as obscure at the end of these films, as it was at the beginning. It is (fittingly) up to us

as viewers to tease and pull at these questions, trying to hack our way through the jungle of debate which still engulfs the idea of Vietnam.

The more Vietnam fades into history, the more today's viewers have come to rely on film to understand the past. But the films we've viewed here beg too many questions; see the past through too narrow a lens; leave too much unconsidered and unsaid.

What these films fail to do, is what many Americans were loathe to do

throughout the war. They never look at the war, as anything more than an

American war. U.S. involvement in Vietnam is almost always

considered from the point-of-view of U.S. interests. What is never considered is the Vietnamese viewpoint. Surely those who suffered most

from the war in Vietnam were Vietnamese. You'd never know it from

any of these war films.

My disaffection with these films is that they are revisionist history.

The films don't merely document the confusion of the war, they re-enforce it. U.S. soldiers and U.S. audiences alike are offered the false comfort, and the false conceit of the Vietnam War as a tragedy---inexorable, inevitable, set in motion by capricious gods. Ordinary Americans and vets are portrayed as powerless victims, betrayed by unseen hands. And the real warmakers----McNamara, Johnson, Westmoreland and Nixon---as well as those millions who opposed them remain invisible. Our true history is turned into mythology. And we are denied the valuable, if painful benefits of experience carefully and fully examined.

Let me give you just one more example of how this process of mythologizing works. The video version of Platoon begins with a Chrysler commercial. The commercial is structured as if it's a prologue to the film, and in fact for all practical purposes it is part of the film viewing experience. The message of the commercial

is designed to be complimentary to Stone's point-of-view in Platoon.

Without irony or self-consciousness the president of Chrysler, Lee Iacocca links patriotism with their new Jeep Eagle. (Contrast this

with President/General Eisenhower's warning about the dangers of the

war-making proclivities of the "military-industrial complex.")

Besides plugging his jeeps, Iacocca characterizes Platoon as a memorial to those who fought in Vietnam. He praises the fighters because "they were called and they went." Does the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam really lead us to believe that ready (blind) obedience to authority (no matter how misguided, wrong or immoral)

is really a virtue?

The second point Iacocca makes is to link the war in Vietnam with the U.S. Revolution and with World War II---"good wars." (Notice he doesn't mention Korea or the numerous U.S. military interventions

in Latin America.) This verges on propaganda. By some reasonable accounts the Viet Cong's war of "national liberation" can be seen as a war in which the United States plays the role of the British Redcoats. By any account, there are substantial differences between

the Vietnam war and the U.S. Revolution and the war against Hitler's fascism.

Finally, Iacocca canonizes his paean to (false) patriotism, as the "spirit of America." If I'm not mistaken, this is a Chrysler tag-line. It's perfectly in tune with its times ---the 80s Reagan era and Reagan's promise of "morning in America." Denying the past, we are encouraged to believe that, "We are on our way, in the movies, to forgiving ourselves not for anything the U.S. government and forces did in Vietnam but simply for having felt so bad for so long. (Pat Aufderheide, Vietnam Good Soldiers) It seems obvious to me that Iacocca has revealed the (hidden) politics of Platoon and of most Hollywood Vietnam films.

The relationship between film art and history is complex. Surely no fiction claims to tell the whole truth. Nevertheless we have a right to expect a certain level of veracity, a basic respect for accuracy and attention to detail. At the same time we acknowledge the role of artistic license---the necessity of shaping and designing a story for dramatic effect. These are unresolved questions, and issues which filmmakers like Oliver Stone continue to confront. (Stone's JFK and Nixon focussed renewed attention on these issues. I once had a student in a nonfilm class cite the film

JFK as evidence---proof for an historical point he was attempting to prove.)

The films we've viewed have been successful in many ways including

financially and as we've discussed to greater or lesser degrees

artistically. But in historical terms they are nearly failures.

They fail to substantially enlarge our understanding of Vietnam.

They offer us little more insight than that war is hell and

that Vietnam was insane. Surely there is more to be said.

Let me suggest that if you're interested in thinking more deeply

about the politics and history of the war you consider the PBS

series Vietnam: A Television History. Or for a more polemical view

see Peter Davis's Hearts and Minds. These documentaries are

certainly not free from artistic license and (embedded) points-of-

view, but they offer a fact based approach that provides context

unavailable in the films we've viewed in this class. (Some

documentaries are unfortunately as limited in their compass as

any of the fiction we've examined. For example Bill Couturie, the

director of Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam, was ordered by

HBO to strike any references to Vietnamese deaths from his film.)

The Vietnam War and the Vietnam Era marked a true turning point in

American history and American culture. If this class has sparked your interest, investigate the period for yourself....see some more films....read a few books.

Other Films

Documentaries

Vietnam: A Television History Richard Ellison

Fiction

Born on the Fourth of July Oliver Stone

Casualties of War Brian dePalma

Full Metal Jacket Stanley Kubrick

Hamburger Hill John Irvin

The Killing Fields Roland Joffe

84 Charlie Mopic Patrick Duncan