HOLLYWOOD'S VIETNAM: WAR FILMS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE DURING THE 1980s

by

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Abstract

Films are an incredibly important medium for transmitting culture among the general populace, due to their high potential of immersion and ease of mass circulation among the population. However, when it comes to historical films, the power of films can easily lead to the spread of historical narratives that might not necessarily be accurate. This project will analyze several films made about the Vietnam War during the 1980s, and attempt to frame the content of the films within the cultural contexts of their release. This project will argue that the content of Hollywood's Vietnam narratives ended up promoting the Vietnam War as a noble cause ruined by poor judgment and morality, rather than a destructive conflict enacted by incompetent leadership that inflicted considerable devastation to the Vietnamese people. The legacy of such portrayal would become part of a wider, revolutionized American popular culture in the 1980s that tried to move away from the cultural trauma that Vietnam had inflicted upon the American populace. A handful of select Vietnam War films from 1979-1990 were chosen to be analyzed, alongside appropriate written primary sources and secondary literature from other historians, in order to create a narrative that showcased how American popular culture responded to such a painful part of their history.

Introduction

American involvement in Vietnam is a point of cultural trauma for the United States. For much of the 20th century, Americans believed in the concept of American exceptionalism, a philosophy that argued that Americans were uniquely exemplary compared to all other nations in the word, usually because of their democratic, Christian ideals. This philosophy had been emboldened by the Allied victory in the Second World War, and the growth of the United States

to superhero status. The Vietnam War challenged American exceptionalism by exposing the true brutality of American intervention within the country. News of massacres, civilian casualties, and a distinct lack of progress in the fight against North Vietnam quickly led to the war's unpopularity, and the conflict would become a point of cultural trauma. Historian Christopher Appy would call it an "American reckoning" in his monograph of that title.[1]

Manifestations of culture, including events that signify cultural trauma, can take many forms, whether that be in the form of music, visual art, literature, architecture, and more. However, one of the more important signs of popular culture in the 20th century has been films and cinema. Film, in an age of consumerism, can be considered one of the major mediums where culture is spread due to their ease of access and high potential for creative depth. The amount of depth and meaning that could be present in a single film, through the manipulation of details such as set design, story narrative, actor choice, music score selection, camera work, etc. lead to the ability to portray stories in a way that could appeal to an audience in ways that simple novels or photographs can not. This is largely due to camera technology, which allows films and photographs to carry an air of authenticity in the eyes of the viewer. Combined with the aforementioned traits, it is understandable why people often call film viewership an "experience." Nicholas Mirzoeff noted that "seeing is actually a system of sensory feedback from the whole body, not just the eyes."[2] Eyes are just not transparent sheets of glass that humans can see through. Our brains have to process what we see, and what we visualize ends up becoming a whole-body sensory experience. Historian Alison Landsberg also verified the psychological effects of watching films by analyzing film psychologists, reaching the conclusion

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[1] Christopher Appy, *American Reckoning,* (New York: Penguin Group, 2015), xxiv.

[2] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Map to Movies, and More,* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 13.

that “film’s power to shape consciousness derives from its sensuous and tactile mode of address; the sense experiences it generates in its spectators ‘become as vivid as realities.’ Film addresses people intellectually as well as sensuously, through their bodies.”[3]

If films have such ability to manipulate our consciousness, then it is clearly obvious why historical films can be of great concern to historians as a medium of popular culture. It is important to recognize that the near infinite possibilities of expression within films means that directors can essentially construct a compelling narrative however they wish. Should the film be compelling enough, without a background of reasonable historical knowledge, an audience member can easily regard a historical film as the way history played out before. Landsberg calls this phenomenon “prosthetic memory,” aptly named after the 1907 film, *The Thieving Hand,* which involves a criminal gaining the memories and actions of a severed prosthetic hand that weren’t his own. In the words of Landsberg:

> Prosthetic memories are those not strictly derived from a person’s lived experience. Prosthetic memories circulate publicly, and although they are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person’s body as a result of engagement with a wide range of cultural technologies. Prosthetic memories then become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well one’s relationship with the present and future tenses. Made possible by advanced capitalism and an emergent commodified mass culture capable of widely disseminating images and narratives about the past, these memories are not “natural” or “authentic”, and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on.[4]

Essentially, Landsberg claims that films are able to recreate and allow the viewers to experience memories of a past that they have not lived by themselves. As a result, it gives

[3] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 29.

[4] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 9.

viewers the false notion of having an idea of the past that might not necessarily be the case. Many audiences see historical films, shows, and documentaries as their way of interacting with history, especially in the 21st century where such media is readily available at one's leisure. Films often dramatize or exaggerate events in a way that might deviate from history. Such narratives are then consumed by audience members and can be spread incredibly quickly through discussion among viewers, critics, newspapers, and more. Many individuals who don't engage in the work of history often do not spend time doing further research and choose to keep the films in their lives as memories of that event, because the film was relatable enough to them for them to consider it history.

The cultural trauma Americans suffered from the Vietnam War ties directly into the context of this project, and what it aims to do: to analyze films specifically about the Vietnam War from the 1980s and observe the narratives and themes that the films tried to prosthetically impart upon their audiences for its time period. The project will then observe the political and cultural climate of America during the 1980s to study how American audiences reacted to such narratives a decade after one of the most controversial American conflicts had ended. Films can be a common way for the American audience to try and understand their pasts, which means that Vietnam films during the 1980s would be released in an incredibly important time of reflection for America after their failures in Vietnam. Indeed, the 80s gave rise to the most critically acclaimed and memorable films about the Vietnam War, with many being heralded as being classics in film history. The 80's were also a time where Americans could finally explore the memories of the Vietnam War, now that the conflict had ended after the final American troops left Vietnam in the mid 70's. The films that were chosen for analysis were as follows:

Apocalypse Now (1979), Platoon (1986), Full Metal Jacket (1987), Hamburger Hill (1987), and *Born on the 4th of July* (1989).

It is important to acknowledge that there are some limitations to the scope of this project. Not every single film made about the Vietnam War in the 80's was analyzed due to time constraints. As a result, the narrative that is being suggested by this project may not be complete. However, the films that were selected received critical acclaim at the time of their release, alongside having very high viewership numbers. For example, *Born on the 4th of July* would become an Academy Award winner. *Apocalypse Now* was one of the highest grossing films of 1979 and would go on to be regarded as a classic by many critics and organizations decades after its release. While critical reviews may not be direct evidence of public popularity, many individuals are more likely to view films that are seen as true works of art. Higher viewership numbers also indicate that the films were widely disseminated into American popular culture. Thus, the quality of the films, and their immense popularity among Americans would be more than enough to justify their use in the arguments of this project.

Ultimately this project will take Landsberg's ideas of prosthetic memory within films and apply it to films that portray an incredibly divisive topic in American culture and history. Using films as primary source evidence is not a revolutionary development, of course. Historians who wrote the secondary sources utilized for this project have used similar forms of film analysis such as *Platoon* in order to try and understand American popular culture regarding Vietnam, and their insights have proved valuable to this project.[5] However, Landsberg's ideas of prosthetic memories are never implied to have direct impact on the American populace, and films are often treated as circumstantial evidence that are a byproduct of their political climate. Hopefully this

[5] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 93.

project will serve as a point of reference of films potentially having direct impact on American popular culture and serve as a gateway to further research building upon Landsberg's work.

Fog of War and the Vietnam Battlefield

Within military conflicts, there is a concept known as the fog of war, which pertains to the uncertainty in situational awareness experienced by all participants on the battlefield. Combatants experiencing the fog of war are unsure of their capabilities, or their adversary's capabilities. Normally, military commanders try to reduce this fog of war by hunting for military intelligence on enemy positions and maintaining constant communication with confusion on the ground. However, perfect clarity is almost impossible to achieve. In the words of Robert McNamara, who had served briefly as U.S. Secretary of Defense during the 1960s: "war is so complex, it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables."[6] With McNamara's definition of the fog of war, the American public, in a way, was kept in its own fog of war that caused much frustration, and in some, ignited suspicion. For example, historian Steven Casey noted that it was much harder to explain to the American public whether any progress was made in Vietnam due to the lack of clearly drawn battle lines, leading to confusion.[7] Vietnam was one of the first wars that began a trend of American military interventions without the consultation of Congress or the American people, leading to many

[6] Errol Merris, *Fog of War (2003)*.

[7] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159.

feeling uncertainty, as seen with the anti-war protests that started almost as soon as the Vietnam situation first escalated in 1965.[8]

It shouldn't be too surprising, then, that the Hollywood depictions of Vietnam love to gravitate towards this idea of uncertainty and chaos on the battlefield. Combat is often portrayed as sudden bursts of chaos that break the tension within the room. Ambushes and booby traps become the typical weapons of the adversary, and American G.I. 's are stuck shooting blindly into forests with no vision of the enemy. The enemy almost appears to be an extension of the jungle itself, as if nature was rejecting the American foreigners. The enemies of the United States are often portrayed as cruel, crafty, and cunning, resorting to guerilla tactics and all sorts of creative booby traps in order to achieve the majority of their victories. *Platoon* sees the use of a seemingly abandoned bunker to lure soldiers into entering and looting the fortification only to trigger an explosive. *Apocalypse Now* sees textbook guerrilla combat as the protagonist, Captain Willard, makes his way upriver with his crew, where he is ambushed from the shoreline. *Born on the 4th of July* showed very little screen time of actual combat within Vietnam, but always highlighted the enemy as always being unseen and hidden among the dense jungle. More importantly, the combat portrayed by *Born on the 4th of July* implies that the enemy has among the civilian populace as part of their guerrilla warfare in order to reach maximum effectiveness. Civilians are often thought to have been harboring guerilla fighters as well. The end result is massive confusion among American forces, who have a hard time distinguishing friend from foe on the battlefield, enemy from civilian, leading to problems in using their mass firepower advantage. The fog of war obscures all but the enemy, who know exactly how to navigate the chaos in order to gain an advantage over the Americans.

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[8] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 158-159.

There were some films that did showcase "traditional" combat reminiscent of the old World War II films, where fog of war doesn't seem to play much of a factor: *Full Metal Jacket's* second act showed scenes of mostly conventional jungle and urban combat that wouldn't seem too out of place from World War II films. An American platoon bravely holds their military base against an onslaught of enemy attackers in an event that bears heavy similarity to the Tet Offensive. Later, the protagonist's squad is pinned down in an unnamed Vietnamese city by a lone sniper, where they stressfully attempt to find ways around their obstacle. *Hamburger Hill* attempted to portray one specific battle from the war to American audiences, and as a result, was relatively straight-forward in concept. Americans attempted to displace a well-entrenched enemy over the span of several days, suffering heavy casualties in the process. There was little to no sign of the typical jungle hit and run tactics, only brutal firefights as American G.I. 's bravely attempted to wade through monsoons and enemy machine gun/rifle fire. There are numerous reasons, perhaps, for this tonality shift. John Irvin, the Vietnam veteran who had directed *Hamburger Hill,* clearly had attempted to have a more neutral portrayal of Vietnam compared to other directors such as Oliver Stone. His portrayal of soldiers, combatants, and battlefield events were very muted with little hostility or atrocities present and focused primarily on the experiences of the platoon member protagonists. Irvin even included a brief scene where the sergeant of the platoon threatens a war correspondent for trying to take photographs of dead bodies, claiming that it is a disrespect to his men. *NY Times* correspondent Vincent Canby put it eloquently: "The film leaves it up to the audience to decide if the war was, from the start, disastrous and futile, or if it was sabotaged by those same bleeding-heart liberals who figure so prominently in the oeuvre of Sylvester Stallone."[9] *LA Times* writer Kevin Stone agreed with

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[9] Vincent Canby, "'Hamburger Hill:' On a Platoon In Vietnam," *New York Times,* August 28th, 1987.

Canby's observations, noting that the film "hasn't *Platoon's* overriding struggle between good and evil or *Full Metal Jacket's* protest against the dehumanizing effects of war to give it dimension," and expressed concern over whether or not *Hamburger Hill* would have an audience for doing so.[10] Kubrick's film was largely based on the veteran Gustav Haford's novelization *The Short-timers,* where the urban combat scene with the sniper is indeed present. Should it be a representation of Hasford's experiences, perhaps more "conventional" forms of warfare weren't completely absent from the war. However, it still remains clear that the directors believed that the heart of Vietnam lay within the chaotic jungles within.

The most effective plot device that the films of 1980s cinema uses to extremely emphasize the chaos associated with extreme fog of war was the utilization of friendly fire. The battlefield has become so blurred and obstructed that friends cannot even tell each other apart, let alone the enemy. Many of the films in discussion for this project involved a scene of Americans shooting Americans due to inability to determine friend from foe. In *Platoon,* the incompetent Lieutenant Wolfe mistakenly calls an artillery barrage on his own men. Later, in the final battle of the film, American soldiers panic as they become overrun by a NVA assault, leading one of the characters to confuse the protagonist for an enemy and almost kill him. In *Hamburger Hill,* a helicopter attack group is sent to reinforce the soldiers attempting to take the hill, only for them to mistake the very soldiers they were supposed to be helping as enemies, causing them to open fire on shocked G.I.'s. *Born on the 4th of July* adds a fictional element to the autobiographical story of Sergeant Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise), having him shoot his innocent subordinate Private Wilson after mistaking him as an enemy in the chaos of battle. Friendly fire has actually always been a hidden aspect of warfare that many countries justifiably do not discuss with the public in

[10] Kevin Stone, "Movie Review: 'Hamburger Hill': On the Lean Side," *LA Times,* August 28th, 1987.

order to prevent embarrassment of the government and the deceased's families. There were numerous friendly fire incidents during the European theater of World War II, that were hastily covered by the United States government in order to maintain civilian morale.[11] However, the Vietnam War films tend to showcase these kinds of mistakes, almost normalizing them to the American audience. Interestingly, *Platoon,* was marketed as a pro-military experience.

The portrayal of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in combat is also demonstrably reductive. NVA soldiers were given very little humanization in Hollywood's Vietnam, let alone the Vietnamese population in general. The few memorable Vietnamese characters were female brothel workers serving their American clients which is a topic due for discussion later. For the most part, they were faceless cannon fodder for our heroes to try and tackle, or nameless civilians that were killed. At first glance, they have little empathy for their own countrymen, willing to resort to what audiences could see as every dirty trick in the book to prevail. However, there is evidence that both the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong were actually capable military forces. They had armored units and aircraft at their disposal. Their units were well versed in the art of warfare and had their own command structures. The famous Tet Offensive of 1968, one of the most famous offensives during the Vietnam War, was a planned maneuver that dictated the minds behind North Vietnamese military doctrine. As mentioned previously, John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* demonstrated the full capability of North Vietnamese soldiers, as a platoon of U.S. Marines spent days trying to assault a well-fortified position that clearly had much thought and care placed into the defensive strategy. Near the end of the *Born of the 4th of July,* Ron Kovic praised the NVA as an experienced enemy force with a long history of fighting for independence while attempting to protest against the war.

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[11] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77-79.

However, upon reviewing critical response, it becomes clear that it was the appeal of the "weak, yet powerful" enemy using tactics that the audience would call unconventional that would define Vietnam. Americans wanted to believe in the harsh jungle environment, where chaos reigned supreme. Renowned movie critic Robert Ebert criticized the combat portrayal of the finale of *Full Metal Jacket,* saying that having soldiers pinned down by sniper fire in a city was extremely stereotypical , and paled in comparison to the harsh jungle warfare seen in *Platoon,* which had been released only a year prior.[12] Critic Robert Criliss was also quite critical of *Full Metal Jacket's* "Hollywood ending" for similar reasons, calling it uninspiring.[13] Such disinterest in more conventional lines of warfare heavily implies that such portrayals of Vietnam had little relation to the hearts of critics, and most likely other Americans who agreed with their opinions. The near ubiquitous association of Vietnam with a jungle teeming with unseen threats has a unique charm towards American audiences. The constant inclusion of an unbreakable fog of war and moral confusion provided psychological justification to justify the friendly fire and atrocities. Labeling the enemy as being one with the environment plays into the "taming the wilderness" pillar that American exceptionalism previously relied upon, which would be of some familiar comfort to American patriots. Perhaps, by allowing Americans to experience and relate to the feelings of chaos and confusion that pervaded the country during and after the war, unrelenting jungle and its enemies became an important prosthetic memory that they would keep close to themselves.

[12] Roger Ebert, "Full Metal Jacket", 26 June 1987.

[13] Richard Corliss, "Welcome to Vietnam, the Movie: Full Metal Jacket," *Time,* 29 Jun 1987.

The Death of Morality

The fog of war had not just clouded military intelligence and battlefield clarity, but seemingly clouded the moral judgment of Americans themselves, in the eyes of Americans. The alleged death of glorious American warfare came as a massive shock to a population who had previously supported the supposed heroic wars of World War II. It had first seemed that Vietnam would have gone a similar route to World War II. Many had believed that communism was a threat to the free world, and that military intervention abroad was warranted. At first, 60% of Americans had expressed support when President Lyndon B. Johnson first escalated the situation in Vietnam in 1965.[14] Protests against the war as an immoral conflict had begun alongside the escalation but were simply disregarded. However, anti-war sentiment would drastically escalate after the Tet Offensive of 1968, where the war's popularity would drop into the void, never to be recovered again.[15] This divide quickly escalated into open confrontation with the concept of patriotism, and the role the American serviceman played in promoting it. Alongside this struggle came the blame of American G.I. who were seemingly complicit with the government's immoral actions in Vietnam. The American soldier-hero had died, and the psychotic veteran had taken its place.

No longer were the freedom-seeking Americans portrayed as being the noble civilization as they always held themselves to. Oliver Stone's film *Platoon (1976)* captured this decline of morality the best, as this theme is one of the key components of the film and is arguably what made it so popular among audiences and critics. The narrative follows a young, inexperienced

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[14] Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (Cass Military Studies: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 8-10.

[15] Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (Cass Military Studies: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 9-20.

Private Taylor (Charlie Sheen), an idealistic young man from the Midwest eager to serve his country. As he interacts with his fellow platoon members on their numbers of treks through the harsh Vietnamese jungle, he looks up to his superiors Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe), both of whom are experienced officers. Sergeant Elias is a dreamy, optimistic, and compassionate champion of the underdog, which draws the respect of his peers. On the other hand, Barnes is cold-hearted, stoic, and emotionless, yet well respected for his combat experience. The nature of the two sergeants would come into conflict when the platoon runs into a nearby village hunting for North Vietnamese combatants. Barnes would later shoot one of the women in cold blood, much to Elias's anger. The two come to physical blows, with Barnes threatening to kill Elias. Taylor serves as a representation to the old hero-soldiers of the Second World War, breaking up and attempting to resolve the conflict between Elias and Barnes. Later, Private Taylor manages to stop some of his platoon from gangraping two Vietnamese children, and preserve their morality, but not before he was openly mocked and berated by his comrades, who would scornfully remark that "he was too good for 'Nam."

This notion of supposedly "doing what is necessary " is perhaps what draws the audience's disgust towards Barnes, who is a hardened, experienced killer. It is safe to assume that there perhaps is a sense of agreement among general audiences towards the argument that suggests that a soldier's duty is very grim and requires a will of steel. The act of taking another's life does not come lightly, after all. Francis Ford Coppola's Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), in his brief appearance in *Apocalypse Now*, had argued that the American soldiers didn't have the motivation to do what was necessary to win the conflict, and took matters into his own hands. Kurtz most definitely was not talking about murdering civilians and raping women and children, but rather the seemingly impossible nature of trying to win a war with soldiers that aren't even

trying to win in their hearts. Kurtz was known to have a history of targeting his own allies should he find them corrupt, but he has never shown any signs of stooping so low to targeting innocents. Yet, Sergeant Barnes and some of the platoon showed no concern with such atrocities, full of the judgment that Kurtz believed that soldiers in Vietnam needed to be free from. Barnes even kills the righteous Elias out of fear of facing justice for what he has done, implying that he is well aware that his actions were not necessary in the slightest. After Elias's death, the scenes that follow are filled with chaos and slaughter as the platoon fights off a North Vietnamese attack, which kills most of the platoon and injures Barnes severely, after the latter seemingly mistakes Taylor for an enemy and attempts to kill him. In the morning after the fighting is over, Barnes would suffer the same fate as Elias, when Taylor kills Barnes by shooting him four times in the chest in the final minutes of the film. Yet this moment of apparent justice has no sweetness, despite the viewer's temptation to cheer when Taylor executes Barnes. He had brought the justice Elias had wanted but was forced to become a killer like Barnes in order to perform this. So how can he ever see himself as the hero? This is the conundrum that Oliver Stone had wanted to pose to his audience, mentioning in an interview: "I also wanted to show that Chris came out of the war stained and soiled — all of us, every vet. I want vets to face up to it and be proud they came back. So what if there was some bad in us? That's the price you pay. Chris pays a big price. He becomes a murderer."[16]

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* brought an entirely different perspective into the death of morality, arguing that it wasn't the war itself that was immoral, but that it was ridiculous to expect war to be moral in the first place, due to the nature of warfare. *Full Metal Jacket* showcased atrocities in a brief scene, with a veteran soldier, Animal Mother, gleefully gunning

[16] Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film," *Time,* 26 Jan 1987.

down women and children from a helicopter as his platoon is being transported to their mission. However, the true charm of *Full Metal Jacket's* messaging lay within the first act of the film. The story begins with a bunch of young men (presumably drafted) being initiated into a U.S. Marine boot camp, where they are hazed, belittled, and slowly molded into "model soldiers" by their drill sergeant Hartman (Lee Ermey). Slowly their civilian identities are stripped away from them, replacing them with military identities with their own nicknames. The audience is then invited to focus specifically on two soldiers: our protagonist, Private "Joker" (Matthew Modine), and Private "Pyle" (Vincent D'Onofrio). Joker is shown to be quite intelligent compared to the rest of the peers, as well as having a witty personality that earns him his titular nickname. Pyle, on the other hand, is an overweight, mentally slow man who struggles to tell left from right. Pyle's initial inability to follow even the most mundane of military orders makes him the perfect punching bag for Hartman. Even his own comrades would begin to haze him once the drill sergeant begins punishing the entire barracks for Pyle's mistakes. However, Joker, whether from a sense of compassion and/or a sense of desperation to avoid punishment, begins to help Pyle learn what it means to fit into military life.

As training progresses, with Joker's help, Pyle does finally show improvement, especially in marksmanship, where he even wins Hartman's praise. However, he slowly begins to show signs of mentally falling apart. He begins to give sinister smiles towards the camera and talk to his M14 rifle, much to Joker's concern. All of this leads up to Act 1's climax, where Joker wakes up in the middle of the night to find Pyle loading his rifle in the bathroom with live ammunition, monotonously repeating the steps that he had learned from basic. Hartman barges in to see the ruckus, and in a fit of dramatic irony, immediately begins to berate Pyle once again, seemingly unaware of the situation, much to the audience's horror. The feared outcome comes to fruition:

Pyle has his last straw and shoots Hartman dead, to Joker's horror. For a tense moment, the audience is left wondering what this madman's next move will be, but after studying Joker's expression, a moment of regret, of Pyle's old self, seemingly comes back into the mentally broken man he is before he takes his own life.

Full Metal Jacket took inspiration from a short novel written by Vietnam veteran, Gustav Hasford. All of the characters in the film are present within the novel. When reading the novelization of Pyle's suicide, Joker's narration ends up revealing an entirely different circumstance for the drill sergeant's death. Instead of his last words being a final moment of bullying Private Pyle, when Pyle levels the rifle at the Hartman, he gains an "evil smile, as though [he] were a werewolf baring its fangs."[17] His last words before dying were him expressing how proud he was of Private Pyle before being shot, his smile lingering on his face after his death. Hartman had successfully turned Private Pyle into the hard-hearted killer that he wanted him to be, at least so he thought. Joker would remark that Pyle's suicide indicates that he was not hard-hearted enough to do what is necessary to be a Marine, saying that Pyle's heart was a "rifle of glass" that shattered upon firing.[18] Kubrick was able to captivate Hasford's thoughts through brilliant acting and utilizing the art of "showing, not telling" the audience, allowing them to decipher Hasford's narration of the scene themselves. Pyle's story makes it clear to the audience that this is what was truly expected from American soldiers. Not heroes fighting for country and democracy, but hard-hearted killers that are trained to just do as they're told. It is fascinating to note Kubrick's portrayal of the American G.I. continues to build upon this idea of "emotionless killers," which is still a far cry from the kind of soldiers that Colonel Kurtz had

[17]Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 26.

[18]Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers,* 27.

desired in *Apocalypse Now.* Colonel Kurtz didn't necessarily want emotionless soldiers per say, but rather, soldiers that were true patriots who knew what they were fighting for and were willing to do what was necessary to achieve that goal. In his mind, soldiers don't kill for the sake of killing. They are fully aware of their thoughts and feelings, but remain "without judgment, because it is judgment that defeats us." Kubrick's depiction of military life had shown that morality had not died in the Vietnam War but had died within the American military itself. If soldiers were just hardened killers who did whatever they deemed necessary, it was no wonder that warfare was immoral.

Yet, reviews and viewership numbers demonstrated that Americans responded quite favorably to these portrayals of the American military within Vietnam and were largely accepting of Stone's and Kubrick's seeming criticism of the war. David Halberstam, who was a former Southeast Asia correspondent for the *New York Times* during the war, gave *Platoon* particularly high praise, even going as far as to say that *Platoon* was "historically and politically accurate. Thirty years from now, people will think of the Vietnam War as *Platoon*."[19] *Full Metal Jacket* received great acclaim for the first act of the film from critic Roger Ebert, despite him being harshly critical of the second act of the film.[20] However, the mention of these films to be accurate history warrants concern. In the words of Fred Turner regarding the ending of *Platoon*:

> By suggesting that American behavior in Vietnam was born of the twin fathers of idealism and blood lust rather than the incompetent, often immoral, and sometimes illegal decisions of political and military leaders, Stone has taken the issue of responsibility off the table. The fact that many Americans supported their government's policies throughout the war no longer matters: Vietnam, implies Stone, was the product of widely shared *emotions,* not individual *choices,* and who can be held responsible for their feelings? What's more, American attacks on

[19] Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film."

[20] Roger Ebert, "Full Metal Jacket", 26 June 1987.

> the Vietnamese have vanished from memory. After all, says Taylor, "we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves and the enemy was in us." If Americans hurt only themselves in Vietnam, why should they be overwhelmed by shame? [21]

By portraying Vietnam as a simple moral conundrum that allowed the United States to lose face, Stone essentially made the Vietnam War palatable for American audiences by allowing them to feel absolved of their actions due to the excuses of moral crisis. Since the struggle is portrayed largely as irrational emotional corruption rather than rational decisions, audience members are allowed to be sympathetic towards Stone's and Kubrick's' characters without feeling guilty over the war's outcome. In this regard, Fred Turner would call *Platoon* not revolutionary, but ironically stereotypical.[22] Critic Robert Corliss was aware of the ramifications of Stone's portrayal of Vietnam, noting that such a message meant that "the nearly 1 million Vietnamese casualties are deemed trivial compared with America's loss of innocence, of allies, of geopolitical face. Neither Sly Stallone nor Oliver Stone can put the whole picture of Viet Nam on a movie screen."[23] *Born on the 4th of the July* also showcased the seeming indifference Americans showed over Vietnamese casualties in the brief scenes of battlefield combat. Sergeant Ron Kovic and his platoon accidentally kill civilians who they suspected of being affiliated with North Vietnam, but when Kovis attempts to stay behind to try and save what lives he can, his superiors urge him backwards, claiming that it was just a simple mistake. In his autobiography, the real Sergeant Kovic recalls the memory of that event, and that his lieutenant was of little consolation, saying that "it wasn't [their fault], they just got in the way!"[24] Christopher Appy

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[21] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 139.

[22] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 135.

[23] Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film,"

[24] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 192.

adds to the indifference of Americans towards Vietnamese casualties by citing a Colorado survey taken 2 weeks after the beginning of Gulf War in 1991, which revealed that the Americans taking the survey had believed only a median of 100,000 Vietnamese had been killed during the course of the war, when in reality, over 3.4 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians had been killed throughout the conflict per 2015 records.[25] For critics to call the themes and overall messaging of *Platoon* as representative history was quite an exaggeration. The response given by some of these critics to films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* suggests that Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory is playing upon the minds of the audience members. The events of the war portrayed by Hollywood provided an artificial, but immersive enough experience for the audience members in order to have them feel that they were truly witnessing a part of history, even if it wasn't possible enough for them to.

The Psychotic American G.I.

Before the Vietnam War, American servicemen had been lauded as heroes, particularly due to their service in World War II. They were labeled the "Greatest Generation" for having gone out against what Americans viewed as the evils of fascism and protected world security as a result. Huebner noted that the American warrior image was centered around the narrative that featured a (predominantly white and Christian) young man going off to war and finally achieving his maturity through his heroic acts, and coming back as a loyal, evolved member of society, ready to serve his country in other ways.[26] The view of military service as a rite of passage for

[25] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 242.
[26] Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 17-19.

manhood was a crucial component for the proliferation of the idea of "soldier-hero." Arguably, it was the attacks against the rite of passage that would lead to a vastly different portrayal of the Vietnam veteran. Youth counterculture and secularization suggested that military service and glory were past concepts that were no longer applicable, and the growth of the American postwar economy meant that other options other than military service could become more appealing. Historian Fred Turner also noted that there was no chance for much glorification of American soldiers because soldiers often were rotated home individually, rather than coming home from a conflict all at once in a mass demobilization such as World War II.[27] Television indeed played a vital role in the decline of the American soldier hero that defined World War II, but not through depicting brutal violence. Rather, it portrayed warfare as arduous, time-consuming, and wrought with boredom. Warfare was anything but glorious. For the first time in American history, to be a soldier was not viewed as a role for the brave and selfless.[28] Reports of atrocities such as the My Lai Massacre certainly didn't help support the idea of American servicemen as a noble hero.

So how would such sentiment be translated through the directors of 1980s Hollywood? In all of the films that were selected for analysis, servicemen were often portrayed as a mix of battle-hardened veterans and willing participants of the youth counterculture they had become a part of. They had become noticeably more humanized, instead of the crusaders of white Christian values that American had come to associate with their military. American G.I. 's willingly drink, smoke, seek out Vietnamese prostitutes, and do drugs, either to try and quell the boredom of their station or to cope with what they have seen on the battlefield. The focus on prostitution in particular was especially noticeable in certain films, with Vietnamese prostitutes often being one

[27] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996),
[28] Kathleen Mcclancy, *Iconography of Violence: Television, Vietnam, and the Soldier Hero* in *Film & History* 43, no. 2, (Center for the Study of Film and History: 2013), 63-64.

of the main ways American servicemen truly interacted with the population aside from hunting for Charlie. Such immoral portrayals of the American servicemen drew the ire of The Pentagon, who refused to support what they viewed as anti-war films such as *Born on the 4th of July* and *Platoon*, arguing that portraying it's soldiers as immoral hippies in their pastime was an insult to those who served.[29] The portrayal of American servicemen doing nothing but soliciting sex and doing drugs didn't really help the narrative that the United States was attempting to bring progress to the Vietnamese people. There also had been objections to *Born on the 4th of July's* portrayal as heartless proponents of police brutality against veterans, especially since one of the protests portrayed on film was actually peaceful.[30] However, Steven Casey would note that drug abuse had been a noticeable issue regardless, in 1970 and 1971 especially, with a hundred deaths being attributed to drug use.[31] The only military film that would win the Pentagon's full support in the 1980s would be *Top Gun (1986),* which is perhaps the most iconic pro-military film that would be released.[32]

The Vietnam War films had also noticeably introduced racial identity to the American serviceman. No longer was the stereotypical soldier just the Christian white man from World War II. African American representation was extremely generous across Hollywood, with all films chosen for analysis having the presence of two or more African American characters. It makes sense for directors to want to include people of color within their narrative of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War had been progressing concurrently with the famous Civil Right

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[29] Jack Anderson and Dale van Atta, "Why the Pentagon Did Not Like 'Platoon,'" *Washington Post,* 30 August 1987

[30] Nick Ravo, 'Fourth of July' Unfair to Syracuse Police, Some Residents Say, *The New York Times,* 15 Jan 1990.
[31]Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198.

[32] Jack Anderson and Dale van Atta, "Why the Pentagon Did Not Like 'Platoon.'"

movements of the 1960s, which was a massive part of the youth counterculture that many Vietnam draftees had participated in to some degree. In addition, the American military had been desegregated in 1948, so serving with African Americans definitely would not have been out of the ordinary for the military veterans who directed some of the Vietnam films of the 1980s.

Alongside the introduction of race came talks of socioeconomic class among American G. I's, which has a long history of interconnection with race within United States society. *Apocalypse Now* saw Captain Willard discussing the lives of his two African American crewmates, both of whom expressed that they had no choice but to be drafted into the conflict. *Hamburger Hill* made a massive effort to put racial and socioeconomic tensions in the spotlight, with an African American combat medic inflaming tension among fresh white recruits by claiming that African Americans had no choice to be drafted to fight in a "rich white man's war" while all the "white folks" got to enjoy high education and better opportunities. The white recruits would later retort that some of them were drafted without their consent as well and accuse the doctor of being spiteful. The two sides would even come to physical blows over the racial tension, but ultimately would resolve their differences in the face of death and adversity. Monotonously chanting "it don't matter!", the soldiers would realize that no matter their skin color, they were going to die the same anyway, so they might as well cooperate and call each other brothers. In *Born on the 4th of July,* Ron Kovic's hospital stay at the Bronx, which has a strong African American community, found himself contending with African American doctors who had no interest in his service in Vietnam, also calling it a "rich, white man's war." In fact, many would scoff at the idea of Kovic's insistence that he be treated with more respect for his service, saying that they "didn't give a fuck about Vietnam." *Platoon* included various African American members, but race was not explicitly mentioned for the film's duration, nor was any

racial tension highlighted in the platoon's interactions with each other. The soldiers were judged based on their actions, not their skin color. Stone tried to silently affirm what Irvin tried to highlight: the idea that regardless of race, all soldiers were treated equally. The African American presence within the military drew some interest from critics. Interestingly, Stone's attempt at downplaying racism was noticed by critic Richard Corliss, who would go on to argue that "there are darker currents, too, of a passive racism. The black soldiers are occasionally patronized and sentimentalized; they stand to the side while the white soldiers grab all the big emotions."[33] Kevin Thomas appreciated Irvin's attempt to portray the seeming plight of African Americans by having less options outside of service in Vietnam.[34]

To discuss the portrayals of Vietnam in American culture without including battlefield trauma would be a massive disservice to the topic. What modern psychiatrists would call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) first started becoming recognized as a diagnosable phenomenon after the First World War, when soldiers were returning back to their families with what they called "shellshock." Psychological forms of battlefield trauma slowly began to become more recognized in future conflicts. In fact, psychological disorders were counted as battlefield casualties, and the United States attempted to hide figures of psychological distress in their casualty reports.[35] Soldiers returning from World War II were largely expected to return to normal life without any trouble, as seen by some state media films.[36] However, the idea of mental trauma from battlefield exposure soon became a staple of the portrayals of the Vietnam-

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[33] Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film,"

[34] Kevin Stone, "Movie Review: 'Hamburger Hill'*:* On the Lean Side."

[35] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80-81.

[36] Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 22-23.

era American G.I., as part of the "psychotic veteran" narrative that began to propagate. It was even called "Vietnam syndrome" in the early 1970s, clearly linking symptoms of psychological turmoil towards American servicemen coming home from the war. The harrowing images and stories coming from the Vietnam War would lead to the perception of American soldiers being inherently violent and damaged, either as a psychotic traumatized man, or as a stone-cold fascist servant oppressing the population, unable to feel anything due to his detachment from the world around him. The latter perception was particularly reinforced by violent clashes between anti-war protestors and National Guardsmen/police during the course of the Vietnam War, some of which had resulted in fatalities.[37] In the words of Kathleen Mcclancy:

> The regenerative violence of the soldier is intended to protect and purify civilization; the soldier-hero leaves his violence behind in the wilderness. But the mythos of pacifying the wilderness had been stripped away from the Vietnam soldier, and he seemed to be turning that trained violence on civilization itself for no clear reason. [38]

The Vietnam-era films were some of the first films to try and encapsulate this portrayal of the American G.I. *Apocalypse Now* immediately opens the narrative with a 5-minute scene of the protagonist, Captain Willard, clearly suffering from some sort of trauma. He lies in his bed and drinks all day, waiting for his time to get into the field. He stares up at the fan blades and can only imagine the sound of helicopters flying through the air. Eventually, he breaks and begins dancing around his room in a frenzy, breaking various items and eventually falling back into slumber. He mentions ailing relationships in the form of a divorce, due to his inability to communicate his thoughts to his wife. The only thing that he desired was to go back to Vietnam

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[37] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 243.
[38] Kathleen Mcclancy, *Iconography of Violence: Television, Vietnam, and the Soldier Hero* in *Film & History* 43, no. 2, (Center for the Study of Film and History: 2013), 63-64.

where he felt right at home. It is clear that Willard feels out of place in a society that believes that war is not supposed to affect their day-to-day lives in the slightest. He has been conditioned to sleep in the jungle, wait for orders, and to live in fear of losing his life at any moment. He has trouble adjusting to civilian life, and that is why he is here today. And through the scenes of violence that are depicted later throughout the film, it becomes clear why he would struggle to adjust to civilian life.

Born on the 4th of July also directly confronts the idea of mental scarring among combat soldiers, and the inability to adjust. The story is a mostly autobiographical account of Sergeant Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise), who had spent two tours in Vietnam, only to become a paraplegic and wheelchair bound after injuries sustained in the war. He would later go on to become one of the most prominent anti-war protestors of the 20th and 21st centuries. His autobiographical film depicts not only signs of trauma, but the plight veterans face that contributes to their feelings of social estrangement that can further contribute to their feelings of trauma. Much like Captain Willard, he hears helicopters when he looks at ceiling fans, and flinches whenever he hears firecrackers go off on his birthday. At a 4th of July speech, Kovic is unable to complete his message as he sees hallucinations of civilians he had killed in the war. However, another point of frustration that Kovic has is his belittling for his service in Vietnam, with an African American doctor going as far as to say that he doesn't even believe that veterans from Vietnam deserved anything special. He is treated with neglect and as a disposable asset during his recuperation in the Bronx and is forced to come to terms with the fact that military service was not what he imagined it to be. He enlisted for glory and to sacrifice for his country, only to learn that his country didn't really acknowledge him, and that he should be ashamed for what he has done. Kovic would later sadly remark to fellow paraplegic as they are stranded, "Do you remember

when things made sense?" In such a mind-bending situation, how could the audience feel nothing but pity for the discharged veteran, who feels lost, alone, and crippled for what appears to be no reason at all? Interestingly the portrayal of veterans in some other films did not opt to embrace the trauma narrative, such as in the neutral portrayal of servicemen in *Hamburger Hill.* Animal Mother from *Full Metal Jacket* shows no remorse or signs of trauma from his atrocities whatsoever, and seemingly revels in it. In the finale of *Full Metal Jacket*, when Joker puts a female sniper out of her misery with a hauntingly distant glare, in the very next scene, he is seen marching singing the "Mickey Mouse" song with his brethren seemingly unbothered. Whether or not he will be traumatized by his actions is up to the audience's perspective.

Hollywood's Vietnam films were released into a political culture that was more aware of the psychological effects war had on veterans. PTSD has had a complex history within America, but the focus has always been on the distress of American veterans. However, the 1980s saw right-wing American political culture attempt to link trauma among veterans with what Appy calls "national impotence," or the idea that Americans were losing military effectiveness. Blame was often pushed on the political left for being the source of such weakness, suggesting that their emphasis on individuality and identity politics were dividing national identity, which is in turn creating weaker soldiers.[39] Alongside such propagation of "Vietnam syndrome" was a growing effort by both sides of the political spectrum to recognize veterans for their service. Many felt that the way veterans were treated after their return was a massive disservice, and that they should not be blamed for the war's circumstances. After the Iranian Hostage Crisis at the end of the 70's, and the seeming threat against American ideals, recognition of the service of veterans

[39]Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 284.

gained renewed fervor alongside the growing right-wing arguments for military expansion. Veterans groups had become more organized, and were in better positions to make demands from Congress, such as Agent Orange exposure compensations.[40] Memorials sprung up all over the country starting 1981, including the famous 1982 Vietnam Wall that would draw controversy from many for seemingly attempting to mire veterans in the immorality of the conflict.[41] Veterans also began to be portrayed as victims of a country who forced them into an immoral war, and failed to recognize them later. In the words of Christopher Appy, "mainstream political culture and politics promoted the idea that the deepest shame related to the Vietnam War was not the war itself, but America's failure to embrace its military veterans."[42]

Even during the 1970s, during the final years of the war, American faith in the military still held together somewhat. For example, those who were involved in the My Lai Massacre often walked free without any consequences. Only Lieutenant William Calley was convicted with a life sentence, and even then, Americans were quick to beg the White House for a pardon.[43] On the other hand, Hugh Thompson Jr. who turned the guns of his helicopter crew on his own soldiers to stop the senseless slaughter, was vilified by the American public and the military brass for his seeming betrayal of his brothers, and wouldn't be recognized as a hero until the 90's. Even in the spite of massacres that killed hundreds, many tried to dissociate military

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[40] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 202.

[41] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 240.

[42] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 241

[43] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 148.

members from the immorality of the conflict thanks to the longstanding pride in the United States military that had begun since World War II. This was the kind of cultural environment that Vietnam's Hollywood would be released under, so it leaves room for speculation: would the portrayal of veterans as traumatized and as immoral killers be accepted by the American public? Or would they end up being seen as the tragic victims of mainstream political culture in the 1980s has tried to propagate?

The Legacy of Hollywood's Vietnam: What Does it Mean to be Anti-War?

According to historian Steven Casey, during the Vietnam War, over two million servicemen would be sent overseas over a period of 8 years to fight in what the United States government called a necessary intervention against communism. As the war ran its course, over 50,000 Americans would lose their lives, over 150,000 would be wounded, with another thousand missing.[44] However, despite the protests over the draft, and the portrayals of the government seemingly sending millions of its youth to its doom, if these figures were to be put into the perspective of the total American population at the time of 1973, not even 1% of the population would participate in the war, with even fewer participating in combat roles.[45] Of note, these statistics do not indicate per capita losses in communities, nor the psychological impact on friends and family as a result of the war. However, it is clear that the overall number of casualties was much lower than previous American conflicts, such as in World War II, where over 405,000

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[44] Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77.

[45] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 241.

Americans alone had died, with 607,000 wounded.[46] Yet, Vietnam had quickly become a nationwide struggle at home, and American memories of the war largely lie within the political struggle, and the seeming divergence away from American exceptionalism: the aforementioned “American reckoning” described by Christopher Appy.

By the time of the war’s end, America was undergoing a significant cultural trauma alongside other socioeconomic issues. Critics of the war had seen the conflict as wasteful of lives for nothing of substantial gain for either side. On the other side, the pro-war hawks were lamenting the embarrassing defeat of the mighty American military against a technologically inferior enemy. The civil unrest that had defined the late 1960s and 1970s had left the country feeling fragmented and disunified. However, upon entering the 1980s, Appy argues that Americans actually had moved on from the pain of defeat quite quickly. If American exceptionalism relied on American superiority and victory in order to have a foothold in American culture, then Americans simply would have to adjust their philosophy in order to accommodate defeat. So came the rise of what Appy would call “American victimhood:" where Americans began to see themselves as being unjustly targeted by foreign threats, and that they must endure any pain and suffering in order to succeed as a nation. Appy argued it was a much more “embittered, fragile faith” compared to the American exceptionalism that had come prior.[47] President Reagan and his political campaigns were perhaps the primary cheerleaders of American victimhood, even going as far as to portray Vietnam as a “noble cause” corrupted by leftist politics.[48] The idea of scapegoating the protestors of the war and the media as scapegoats

[46]Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 17.

[47] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), xxvii.

[48] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 80.

for the failures of Vietnam would become synonymous with mainstream political culture of the 1980's, as seen when the United States military forbade journalists from covering the military intervention in Panama and Grenada.[49] Indeed, historian Jefferson Cowey described the ideals of Regan's New Right as a "tonic that promised to sooth cultural queasiness" in order to garner support for his policies.[50] Rather than focusing on directly resolving, Reagan advocated for a return to conservative values that would solve the country's woes, which included the rise of militaristic policies and positive reception of the American armed forces. Fred Turner would note that Americans were quite eager to use the New Right as a form of national healing, utilizing their militaristic nature to compare America's military reckoning as a threat to national unity.

The proliferation of the New Right ideals would prove to be the mainstay of political culture that Americans had turned to by the time films such as *Platoon* had been released in 1986: a culture of American victimhood. It is important to remember that films are subject to the subjective viewpoint of the viewer, like most visual imagery is. With regards to photographs in particular, Alan Trachtenberg especially emphasized the importance of subjective context in the creation of an image, noting that "without captions or surrounding text, photographs remain helpless examples of indiscriminate visual experience open to many understandings."[51] If such a statement were true for photographs, then it most definitely would be true for films, which is a medium that can be incredibly deceiving due to the director's control over all the content in the

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[49] Caroline Brothers, "Vietnam, Falklands, the Gulf," in *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 202-205.

[50] Jefferson Cowey, "Dead Man's Town," from *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 364.

[51] Alan Trachtenberg, "Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory," in *Social Research: An International Quarterly,* vol. 75, no. 1 (New York: New School for Social Research, 2008), 125.

film. Landsberg also noted that films often could serve prosthetic memories to the viewers much more readily if they had personal experiences that could relate to the content of the film.[52] Just like how *Platoon* had captured David Halberstam's heart, it could capture the experiences of self-doubt, chaos, and confusion found in Americans in the wake of the conflict. Films are an experience, and experiences can ultimately change how an individual perceives it. This is not applicable not just to films, but to other mediums of popular culture. Such was the case for *Born in the U.S.A* by Bruce Springsteen. Released in the summer of 1984, the lyrics suggested a mockery of American patriotism by telling a story of the struggles of a working-class man who went to Vietnam and back, only to be discarded with no life opportunities. Yet the pumped-up anthem of the chorus ultimately adds a controversial hyped- up experience of the song that resonates with the viewer, leading many, particularly those on the right wing, to view it as a national rallying cry for American patriotism.[53]

Due to the previous analysis of critical responses to various Vietnam War films chosen for this project, it becomes clear that the experiences of some of these Vietnam films from the 1980s could easily become interpreted as pro-war despite anti-war intentions by some directors, especially in the context of American victimhood. *Hamburger Hill'*s neutral stance on its portrayal of the war, and its reservation of judgment of the war's morality to the American public meant that it was essentially a blank slate for the viewer to interpret. *Platoon's* problematic portrayal of the Vietnam War being a test of an American soldier's morality allowed Vietnam to be dismissed as an American tragedy, a conflict where they had lost their way. Vietnam

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[52] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 7.

[53] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (New York: Viking, 2015), 254.

becoming an American tragedy, and a reluctant proponent of militarism was a definite path that these films could have been taken down. Indeed, such was the case for *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket,* where they were both showcased to Marines based in Iraq in 2004, where servicemen could watch themselves and their comrades triumphantly gun down Vietnamese innocents to Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries and relive their memories of their drill sergeants in basic. In the words of Marilyn B. Young:

> The men in the Mojave were "excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man . . .." A young man "raised on the films of the Vietnam War," Swofford wants his "ammunition and alcohol and dope, I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers"[54]

Kubrick most likely would have been dismayed at this interpretation of his film, as he affirmed his critical belief in the war during the development of the film in an interview.[55] However, it already has been discussed how interpretation of war could be taken as separation of military actions from immorality. Perhaps, it should be no surprise that the arguably anti-war nature of the films intended by Kubrick had gone over the viewer's heads, who now saw the bloodlust and violence in the movie as carnal desires that they wanted to partake in. Anthony Swofford, the Marine who had been the topic of Marilyn Young's quote, would later write a 2018 article for the *New York Times* that his decision for joining the Marines had been significantly influenced by viewing *Full Metal Jacket* for the first time at its release, despite its supposedly negative portrayal of Marine life. He remarked that the "The Gunny pointing his finger in a recruit's face while shouting profanity, hurling insults at the recruits' manhood and

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[54] Marilyn B. Young, "Now Playing: Vietnam," in *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 18, issue 5, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

[55] Lloyd Rose, "Stanley Kubrick, At a Distance." *The Washington Post*, 28 June 1987.

mothers and posing questions and insinuations about their sexuality indoctrinated us with the idea that coded racism, physical abuse and psychological hazing went hand in hand with becoming a man."[56] While this is a singular case, it suggests that it is possible that the aforementioned military ideals of self-sacrifice and victory at any cost (even your humanity) were still considered part of military service. American men did not see the belittling and hazing as being treated as a worthless cog in the machine like Kubrick most likely would have suggested. Rather, it was doing what was necessary for immature boys to come of age, and become an American man, just like how military service was touted back during World War II.

Francis Ford Coppola, director of *Apocalypse Now,* was clearly aware of his film being able to be seen as pro-war, noting that his sequences of violence were immediate evidence of romanticizing warfare. The helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village alongside Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries is currently regarded as one of the most iconic shots of the film. The commander of the attack, Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, was not portrayed as a heartless, incompetent leader, but as a competent man with moral convictions. He cares for his men, saves Vietnamese civilians even after one of them destroyed one of his copters, and laments the end of the war, where he will no longer do what he believes he does best: be a loyal American soldier. Kilgore is most definitely a romanticization of the old World War II soldier-hero, and Coppola most likely inserted him as a mockery of the double standards of the American military that would come later. Yet, his presence could affirm American military might and exceptionalism to the audiences who watched him exclaim about how he loved the smell of napalm in the morning. "No one wants to make a pro-war film, everyone wants to make an anti-war film," Coppola said,

> "But an anti-war film, I always thought, should be like [Kon Ichikawa's 1956 post-second world war drama] The Burmese Harp – something filled with

[56] Anthony Swafford, "'Full Metal Jacket' Seduced My Generation and Sent Us To War," *The New York Times,* 18 April 2018.

love and peace and tranquility and happiness. It shouldn't have sequences of violence that inspire a lust for violence. Apocalypse Now has stirring scenes of helicopters attacking innocent people. That's not anti-war. I always thought the perfect anti-war film would be a story in Iraq about a family who were going to have their daughter be married, and different relatives were going to come to the wedding. The people manage to come, maybe there'd be some dangers, but no one would get blown up, nobody would get hurt. They would dance at the wedding. That would be an anti-war film. An anti-war film cannot glorify war, and Apocalypse Now arguably does. Certain sequences have been used to rev up people to be warlike."[57]

Coppola's quote regarding war films perhaps indicates a sign of a larger issue regarding anti-war films: that films are better at romanticizing warfare than they are at demonizing it. A director's beliefs and their interpretation of their film is not enough to provide their narrative. As noted emphatically by Robert McNamara, "people will only see what they want to believe."[58] With the prevalence American victimhood culture that still remains in American society today, it is very possible to speculate that the famous anti-war Vietnam portrayals in the 1980s, ended up doing nothing but imparting romanticized, prosthetic memories of an event to the viewer, filling them with notions of noble sacrifice and necessary evils in order to prevail against the enemy, as it did for men such as Anthony Swofford.

Conclusion

The Vietnam films of the 1980s had been the work of several directors seeking to portray Vietnam as it was. Yet, from analyzing the content of the films, and the narratives that were chosen, it becomes clear that to call these films accurate representation of history would be questionable. These films have incredibly American-centric points of view, with little regard for

[57]Kevin E.G. Perry, "Francis Ford Coppola: 'Apocalypse Now is not an anti-war film,'" *The Guardian,* 9 Aug 2019.

[58] Errol Merris, *Fog of War (2003)*.

the Vietnamese people they tried to help. Instead, they focused on presenting Vietnam as a moral tragedy that could have been avoidable with the right gestures and mindset, which is incredibly reductive towards what historical experts would suggest. The fact that all of the aforementioned films from American critics received critical acclaim at the time of their releases demonstrates that positive reception was highly likely among the American populace, who were all viewing Regan's film from the new light. The critical reception also indicates a strong desire to take these Vietnam films as authentic history despite the film's shortcomings, which means that the films were impactful enough to viewers to begin seeing Vietnam in the light of an "American tragedy." By building upon the work of other historians studying this particular time period, the desire to move on past the Vietnam War as an American tragedy increasingly becomes the mainstream form of cultural thought of the 1980s, which suggests that the anti-war nature of the films, in fact, was seen in a more positive light. Pat Aufderheide would refer to this particular generation of Vietnam films as the "noble-grunt" movies.[59]

Ultimately, such findings strongly coincide with Landsberg's ideas of prosthetic memories, which cements these films as important sources of cultural dissemination that warrants further analysis in future discussions of Vietnam in popular cultures. Yet, the true extent of the impact of these prosthetic memories on the public could not be covered due to time constraints. To attempt to quantify and portray the "general populace" is quite a complex issue due to the numerous subgroups that are present in U.S. societies, separated by race, gender, class, etc. As a result, further research into the reaction of the public, and more personalized accounts will need to be necessary, not just critical reviews. Hopefully, the analysis of films provided by this project will serve as a sufficient framework for future researchers seeking to utilize film as a

[59] Marilyn B. Young, "Now Playing: Vietnam," in *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 18, issue 5, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 23.

primary mechanism for the spread of popular culture, and to consider their impact more thoroughly on human mindset. This project demonstrated that Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memories can have newfound applications when it comes to utilizing films as primary source evidence in historical contexts, and hopefully, raises awareness in readers of being mindful of the narratives that historical films try to portray.

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