How Hollywood Invented the Vietnam Genre

The Vietnam war came to an official end for America in 1973. The war is typically seen as a failure for American forces and is remembered less fondly than other significant wars in the country's history. Hollywood, not so coincidentally, has a genre dedicated to films portraying the Vietnam war, and those movies also broadcast a negative opinion on the war, reflecting on the time with regret and confusion. This is no accident, as the Hollywood industry has worked hard to release films that look and feel relevant. As the Vietnam war unfolded, creators in the industry took careful note of how the politics went and how the people responded, making sure that the memory of the war would be informed by truthful experiences. In this essay I will explore Hollywood's past relationship with war films, the evolving relationship between Vietnam and the American public, the ambition of Hollywood to accurately preserve the Vietnam memory on film, and how three of the first significant Vietnam films- *The Deer Hunter, Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now*- to define the genre impacted the legacy of the war as time passed. Hollywood's adherence to the ever-changing public opinion in regard to war allows the industry to release films with a definitive opinion on whether or not the war was fought over a just cause, but it also allows the industry to continually be on what they believe to be the right side of history. Waiting for war to end in order to place judgement on it offers insight into how carefully the industry scrutinizes world events and how they will be portrayed, but also illustrates how aware and afraid the industry is of committing a faux pas by releasing a film that might become controversial.

Part One: Hollywood and Public Opinion

Hollywood as an industry loves to tell stories that have their basis in both fiction and nonfiction. In nonfiction, war is a topic that has been broached time and time again. The Hollywood machine tends to glorify war in film, to make man's struggle into something that appeals to the greater good, and made viewers proud to be Americans. In his article that explores the legacy of war films in Hollywood, Peter McInernery writes, "Traditionally, Hollywood war films have served the goals of national policy makers and promoted mobilization and patriotism during wartime."[1] In order to stay in vogue, but surely also to drive a profit, films must be careful with the message that they want to share. Dealing with real events, no matter how fictionalized they become as the script is written and the film produced, is a delicate process that must take into account the emotional impact of true events and how recreating them on-screen will affect the viewers. In the past eras of American wartime, films explore the war with public opinion in mind, and often a more positive take on war and the patriotism created to boost morale go hand in hand.

The war film's take on true events must adhere to a certain narrative, and ultimately deliver a thesis on the nature of the war, whether the producers want to make a pro- or anti- war film is impacted by what the general consensus of the war is at the time. Films have been used to glamorize war while it is on, and once the war is off, public opinion helps to inform the collective memory. As time passes, memories and opinions contribute to how society collectively chooses to remember things, including war. Hollywood, in order to stay relevant, will reflect on the collective memory of a war and help contribute to it with their carefully chosen side of the conflict. Ralph Donald's discussion of anti-war themes in war films confirms

[1] McInerney, Peter. "Apocalypse Then: Hollywood Looks Back at Vietnam." *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1979): 21-32. (Page 23)

that Hollywood is careful to reflect the majority. He discusses how the end of major wars are the perfect time to deal with the fallout on film, and it is only when the war ends that film is allowed to discuss the horrors of man fighting man, which has been the case in film since the first world war.[2]

With war films prior to Vietnam, Hollywood often chose to portray the subject in a positive light, as a necessary evil, and the soldiers within the silver screen as people to be admired. In the case of the Vietnam War, the industry changed tactics once public opinion shifted. Vietnam, historically remembered as an unpopular and unwinnable war, has secured a legacy in American film as a war that broke the pattern of patriotism. Ralph Donald elaborates on this way of thinking, writing "The overwhelming majority of themes found in Hollywood-produced war films have portrayed all but Vietnam as grand, gallant American struggles for freedom and democratic values."[3] As the opinion of the people shifted against supporting the Vietnam War, so did Hollywood. While attempts were made to positively portray the Vietnam situation, it did not go well. John Wayne's Vietnam film is one such example, as McInerney explains, "The Green Berets was released in June 1968, after the Khe Sanh siege had ended anticlimactically, after the Tet offensive demonstrated the failure of the American war of attrition, and with domestic protest against the war mounting, the work seemed to many an anachronism which jeopardized the war film itself".[4] The Green Berets gave Americans insight into the pro-war way of thinking during a time when public opinion was shifting in the other direction. The film follows American soldiers as they fight to reclaim a camp that has been

---

[2] Donald, Ralph R. "Antiwar Themes In Narrative War Films: Soldiers' Experiences As Social Comment." *Studies in Popular Culture* 13, no. 2 (1991): 77-92. (Page 90)
[3] Donald 90.
[4] McInernery 23

captured by the enemy Vietcong and go on a mission to kidnap a North Vietnamese General.[5] McInerny refers to the film as a piece of professional propaganda that intended to reaffirm patriotic wartime values, but the events of the war challenged what had quickly become and old school way of thinking.[6]

The Vietnam genre emerged after the final withdrawal of troops. The films tend to look negatively at the war, and connect themes of regret with disillusionment and loss of sense of self. The genre has seen such films as *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. However, three films have made significant contributions to the establishment of the Vietnam genre and memory of the war. All three of them touch on the major genre themes, and question the morality of both the war and the protagonists of the story, reflecting the decisions of the Hollywood industry to follow and align with public opinion in order to tell relevant stories.

The Vietnam war may have started out seeming like a noble cause, for those who enlisted had come of age with films that glorified the concept of war. McInerney writes, "For a generation which went to Vietnam, like memoirists Ron Kovic and Philip Caputo, nurtured on television broadcasts of Wayne's Marine Corps heroics in The Sands of Iwo Jima, the Hollywood myth of warfare was fragged by events in Vietnam."[7] Public sentiment against the war was justified by news of atrocities like the massacre of innocent citizens in My Lai, which was then covered up by the American government, or news of political defeats like the previously mentioned Tet offensive. Morley Safer and Walter Cronkite released blistering reports of what they experienced firsthand, and television audiences witnessed soldiers burning homes to the ground and piles of bodies stacked upon each other. Images from Vietnam contributed to the

[5] "The Green Berets." imdb.com
[6] McInerney 23
[7] McInerney 23

shift in public opinion against the war as it unfolded, unlike previous conflicts that are still recalled through a more patriotic lens, with a separation between Americans and the rest of the world. With frequent updates on Vietnam, it was easier to look down on it and question the morality of the situation. Phillip Catton discusses how the media was more critical of Vietnam than acting patriotic toward it, writing, "As several commentators have noted, this initially critical stance reversed the pattern of historical analysis that had developed in the case of America's other major wars. Whereas the initial interpretations of other conflicts, such as the two world wars, tended to defend U.S. policy, the first analyses of the struggle in Vietnam reflected the war's unpopularity and were almost all very critical;"[8] Perhaps watching reports of soldiers lacking a sense of duty, shown on the news smoking marijuana from their guns, contributed to the negative stance on the war at home. Beatniks and hippies, spurred by the growing American social justice and rights movements, having been drafted into a war because the government determined a need to send more soldiers than were enlisting fought side by side with soldiers who had quickly, loyally enlisted to serve their country. While men believed in their cause, others lost faith in what they were fighting for, and sometimes were not even sure what it was they were fighting for.

In terms of film portrayal, the facts, presented in stark images by the news, informed the story. Catton elaborates nicely on this, writing,

> "The police action in Vietnam simply did not fit the forms in which war is usually represented as part of a society's past, and the way most of our society perceived the war at the time - literally as well as ideologically - has equally resisted the traditional forms of personal continuity and communal bonds. It was inevitable, then, that the earliest attempts to represent the memory of the Vietnam war would portray that memory as a disruptive, alienating force that isolated the veteran from the community, and even when that popular perception was replaced by more serious attempts to represent veterans as heterogeneous groups with quite different experiences and responses to the war, the primary format would be collections of oral

[8] Catton, Phillip E. "Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 7-11. (Page 8)

> accounts that explicitly rejected the possibility of a single point of view that could unify the separate accounts in a single coherent narrative."[9]

The anti-war sentiment that had taken hold of the general public informed the collective memory of Vietnam, influencing the portrayals that are still seen today. Gone was the drive, the determination to beat the bad guy that united men from all corners of the country as soldiers.

The memory of the war as a failure also impacted the public opinion of the veterans who had fought in it. In film, the men who enter the war are different men when they return. Their film portrayals were likely shaped by the public opinion of soldiers, who were looked down on when they returned home. According to Eric Dean, the image of the Vietnam veteran, or as he refers to them, *the Vietvets*, represented what Americans disliked about the war, following massive events like the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre. He writes, "On the one hand, he seemed to be an instrument of mass destruction; on the other hand, he seemed to be a victim himself, perverted by a strange war. The idea that American soldiers could commit atrocities shocked and disappointed the American public which opposed the Vietnam War itself in increasing numbers."[10]

Thus, the American soldier becomes a new kind of war film protagonist. Stories from Vietnam highlight the individual so as to look into one singular "war is hell" experience, and it is the collective of those narratives that keep the negative memory of the war alive in film. Characters in Vietnam films are often shown struggling with returning home and carrying on while weighed down by their actions, creating a rift between themselves and the rest of society. However, Dean proves that the myth perpetrated by Hollywood has not been entirely accurate.

---

[9] Clark 75

[10] Dean, Eric T. "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran." *Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1992): 59-74. (61)

Films seized on the notions that Vietnam vets were hostile individuals, survivors of something that few could relate to. Dean describes the vets rather uniquely, saying "As a result, the Vietnam veteran has acquired an almost mythic stature… who fought under insane conditions in Vietnam and then rebuilt his life in ungrateful America; some critics even see the Vietnam veteran - because he lost the most, because he did it seemingly for nothing as the most romanticized war hero in American history."[11][12]

The end of the Vietnam war led to the rise of the Vietnam genre, with the first major films coming out five years after the last of the troops withdrew from the country. The films depict a war that was lost before it started, and portray the lack of enthusiasm for the cause and argue that the conflict itself is without merit. Though public sentiment was against the war while it was on, Hollywood waited until Vietnam was slipping into history to comment on it, releasing the first significant Vietnam films in 1978. McInerney summed up the situation quite well, writing, "The film industry has had to wait until pro-war propaganda is irrelevant and antiwar sentiment is historical to make Vietnam films"[13] Though attempts were made to portray the war in a positive light, like Wayne's Green Berets, it was quickly realized that the most effective Vietnam film would not be one that supported the war. McInerney also writes, "Though the Vietnam genre was at the outset of 1977 "like a crap- shoot," as Robert Lindsey of *The New York Times* puts it, it has proven to be friendly terrain. Yet Hollywood's reluctance to go ahead with

---

[11] Dean 60

[12] While romanticized, Dean goes on to break down the trope of the Vietvet and show data to prove that Hollywood's portrayals of lost soldiers may be more fiction than fact. However, public opinion is only an opinion- and is not a statement of fact either. Some films sought to dispel that statement, as Jerry Lembcke writes in his article about the process of creating the movie *Coming Home*, "It is a narrative that has displaced the popular memory of the war itself with veteran coming-home stories and displaced the historically grounded image of politicized anti-war veterans with the image of the victim-veteran."# Hollywood as an industry chooses to raise the stakes for dramatic purposes and fictionalize reality, so the industry preys on public opinion and the validation it will give to viewers.

[13] McInerny 23

Furie's Boys in Company C early in the seventies, or Schrader's Rolling Thunder in 1974, suggests that the genre's exploitation had been deferred."[14] Due to negative public opinion, it became impossible to exploit an experience that was increasingly looked down upon.

Vietnam on film, as a genre, is part of a quest to further memorialize the war in the method by which it is already remembered- as a loss. Exploiting a war to incite patriotism did not work with Vietnam because public opinion, and with time, collective memory, looks back with regret rather than pride. The efforts of the Hollywood machine to capture the war accurately indeed led to the rejection of patriotism. Marilyn Young writes, "Yet at the same time, the war movies of the 1980s mark an unraveling of the American war story. They do not end in total victory; the cause for which the troops fight is obscure and probably unworthy; and honor and courage can be salvaged but only by abandoning patriotic rhetoric."[15] The loss shown in Vietnam films reflects losing the war, but also the main character losing some critical sense of identity.

Subverting the typical patriotic American war film became the way to understand it. Giving up their patriotism and losing faith in the war is a common part of the Vietnam character arc. It is a conflict that is seen repeated across multiple Vietnam films, as the disillusioning of a character is a deeply personal experience. The experience of losing one's patriotic sense of duty also serves to other them from their peers, which could also contribute to the individuality of the Vietnam film. Dean writes about individuality in Vietnam, saying,

> "In the portrayal of American participation in the Vietnam War, the primary focus has been on the experience of the individual soldier. Hence, the public has been bombarded by images of chaos, destruction, and meaningless death, and the larger questions of military and political strategy are essentially ignored as war in general is condemned as wasteful and immoral. This skewed presentation has revealed the Vietvet as a victim and survivor, and as little else."[16]

---

[14] McInerny 22
[15] Young, Marilyn B. "Now Playing: Vietnam." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 22-26. (24)
[16] Dean 71

While a Vietnam film often relies on surviving against the odds, or reaching the conclusion of the film mentally intact, the memory of real soldiers' survivals framed the fictional ones. Collective memory shaped the legacy of Vietnam, but in doing so, Hollywood may have mistaken the memory for the war. Vietnam is on the other side of the world from the United States. It was easier to layer personal conflict over a war seen and experienced secondhand for many Americans. American film was able to explore its own conflict and question the decisions made about the war, rendering the war a concept, rather than pervasive conflict. According to Michael Clark, "Vietnam was recollected by the cultural apparatus that had constituted our memory of the war all along, the intricate web of technology, political efficacy, cultural paradigms and institutional supports that makes up the ideological framework of our society and assigns each of us a seat as it traces its own image on the screen of the past."[17] The search for understanding reflected in the Vietnam genre is both personal and worldly. In their pursuit of knowledge as to why their experiences are such, the Vietnam film has been reflective on the individual's involvement, rather than exploring the broader concepts and and motives that prolonged the war in the first place. Clark writes, "The dwindling number of works that do attempt a more critical perspective on our memory of the Vietnam war have been content to relegate that memory to the private domain of individual recollection and have tried to evaluate the veteran's struggle for personal redemption in terms of a quest for historical Truth."[18]

Part Two: The Impact of The Deer Hunter, Coming Home, and Apocalypse Now on the Vietnam Legacy

[17] Clark, Michael. "Remembering Vietnam." *Cultural Critique*, no. 3 (1986): 46-78. (49)
[18] Clark 58

Three movies are quintessential to the Vietnam canon. They are *The Deer Hunter*, directed by Michael Cimino, released in 1978, *Coming Home*, directed by Hal Ashby, released in 1978, and *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and released in 1979.[19] [20] [21] They were the first Vietnam films to emerge following the end of the war, and they were the first to look down on the war, cementing the public opinion in celluloid.

The Deer Hunter follows Robert De Niro's Michael and his friends as they leave their conservative small town in Pennsylvania for Vietnam, and explores how what happens in the jungle changes them forever. The film is one of the more controversial takes on the Vietnam War, as it has been accused of racism in its portrayal of the Viet Cong.[22] There is debate around how stereotypical and incorrect the script is, but *The Deer Hunter* is not solely about Vietnam. *The Deer Hunter* transcends simply Vietnam, and makes a statement that has been made before in Hollywood: man embracing his inner darkness and becoming the perceived enemy in order to defeat them. *The Deer Hunter* falls prey to this as Michael is only able to escape and heal by becoming what he imagines the villain to be. McInerney writes,

> "For some The Deer Hunter is a bittersweet symphony of male friendship, of war as a frightening but glorious adventure, amounting to a rough blessing of macho homoeroticism: The Deer Hunter as a men's lib picture… For others, these qualities are present too but anathema, and the film is a racist flag-waver, deliberately and dangerously ignorant of the truth about the deaths the DeNiros caused and the damnation America earned... the third general point of view: audiences Rorschach the film's frames and then see the war according to their experience and politics. Given this pliancy, the film can't be fixed, and agreement about it- like victory in Vietnam-is elusive. All that is certain for most is that The Deer Hunter is the most moving movie ever made about Vietnam."[23]

While McInerney argues that *The Deer Hunter* is an exceptional film about Vietnam, the film itself references far older film tropes. In losing himself to find himself, Michael embodies

---

[19] "The Deer Hunter." imdb.com
[20] "Coming Home." imdb.com
[21] "Apocalypse Now." imdb.com
[22] "The Deer Hunter." imdb.com
[23] McInerney 30

something that has been seen on film before. He embodies what has become a legend in American folklore and storytelling, a trope in which the white man is able to defeat natives by learning how to fight like them.[24] The juxtaposition of an older story with a brand new, still horrifyingly fresh war, makes for an interesting narrative.

The quintessential American is shown in three parts. Michael is introduced in his element, with his friends, and the audience spends a decent amount of time learning how they exist in their world. Next, the audience sees Michael and his friends completely out of their world as they fight in Vietnam. Of the three friends that go to fight, only Michael returns in a state resembling the one they left in. Christopher Walken's Nick becomes addicted to russian roulette, and John Savage's Steven becomes an amputee who chooses to hide away in a veteran's hospital. While Nick ultimately dies, Steven is coaxed out of the hospital to join Michael in their somber new reality.[25] Leslie Fiedler describes the ending as quintessentially American, despite the film's message of opposition to the war. He writes, "The Deer Hunter is not anti-American -or even anti-American Dream. In the concluding scene of the movie… the aging survivors pledge allegiance to the traditional values to which their parents had earlier painfully learned to assimilate"[26] Michael is the best equipped to survive his new reality because going to Vietnam allowed him to release whatever anger he holds on to.

While a classic element of the Vietnam genre involves characters finding themselves angry about the war and their circumstances fighting it, Michael gives a unique contribution in that he brings anger with him when he enlists. John Hellmann compares *The Deer Hunter's*

---

[24] Fiedler, Leslie A. "Mythicizing the Unspeakable." *The Journal of American Folklore* 103, no. 410 (1990): 390-99. (Page 394)
[25] "The Deer Hunter." imdb.com
[26] Fielder 395

Protagonist to the hero of an American Western film, saying "Michael, like the western hero, finds a place for his violent impulses only in a threatened community. This scene classically parallels the image of the frontier hero protecting innocent settlers by killing the savage Indian." [27] Shaping the narrative of *The Deer Hunter* so that it presents not only as a war film but also as an American western means that it represents Vietnam not just as a war, but an inherently American war where the only side of the conflict explored is that of the hero. The motives of the North Vietnamese are not questioned in order to resolve a conflict, they merely are a conflict that needs to be eliminated.

The Vietnam genre is unique in that it is very one-sided, and the focus of the Vietnam film is completely American. The will to fight is American, the eventual disillusionment of the patriot happens at America's expense, and America is seen as the failing side of the war. Westerns are American films that deal with conflict in much the same way. Struggle is internal and there is no right answer to a complex problem. *The Deer Hunter*, in assuring its place in the new Vietnam genre, relies on an American classic- the western- to seal its fate. Hellmann relates the focus on America to the Vietnam genre, writing, "The Deer Hunter, through the western formula, presents Vietnam as yet another historic projection of an internal struggle of white American consciousness,"[28] The action of *The Deer Hunter* takes Michael on a journey during which his views are challenged and some animal part of him is let loose. His return home forces him to grapple with that, and how nobody else quite understands what he has gone through. A crucial element of the Vietnam genre is introduced with Michael.

---

[27] Hellmann, John. "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in the Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now." *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1982): 418-39. (page 424)
[28] Hellmann 421

The movies asks a question about how to survive and move on after experiencing the trauma that the characters go through. Michael's entire world has turned upside down, and he is left unsure how to proceed. According to Hellman, "There is no revenge/quest in The Deer Hunter because it would be beside the point; the point is to determine how a culture proceeds once it has experienced the inversion of its central assumptions about itself."[29] At the end of *The Deer Hunter*, the question of how to proceed is not answered. Michael is back at home, one friend dead and the other more damaged than himself, but they are alive and coping. The first of many Vietnam films, *The Deer Hunter* does not offer a solution to the great question of how to deal with Vietnam, it merely shows two veterans back home, and completely out of sync with everything they know.

The next film to help found the Vietnam genre is Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*. Unlike *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home* does not show the audience Vietnam, and focuses on how it has already impacted others. *Coming Home* is more of a recovery tale, one that frowns on the war and tries to look to the future. McInerney writes, "The war behind Coming Home is a waste, service in Vietnam a moral error, and nothing really turns out all right in the end… Coming Home reminds us that the Vietnam years were the worst of our lives. But it doesn't blame the audience for that, and tries to make the best of them." [30] The ending of the film is a little more optimistic than *The Deer Hunter. Coming Home* seeks to explore the conditions that returning vets faced during their time in veterans hospitals, which were overcrowded and underfunded. In creating a romance set against the backdrop of the hospital, Vietnam is presented as a war where the focus is not on the men who have been injured, but those who are

[29] Hellmann 426
[30] McInerney 26

fighting. Anti-Vietnam sentiment brewed in the hospitals where men felt abandoned by the government, who was eager to ship them out to fight, but ignored once they've returned home. It is easy to resent the man when mistreatment and neglect shapes the early days of rehabilitation. While the setting of the film is one that does not necessarily create a happy ending, the characters are allowed to reflect on their actions and draw their own conclusions about what they have done.

Coming Home was created by interviewing Veterans on their experiences to try and re-create an authentic one on screen. Screenwriter Waldo Salt conducted the interviews, and the characters and story that became *Coming Home* began there. The film focuses on Sally and her relationship with a paralyzed veteran named Luke, an affair that develops while Sally's Marines husband fights in Vietnam. Sally and Luke know each other from high school, but reconnect when Sally begins to volunteer at a veteran's hospital. Including the hospital was crucial to the story, as the screenwriters wanted to create a realistic portrayal of wounded vets recovering.[31] Coming Home also focuses on a less-discussed part of the war: recovery. Donald writes, "This scenario enables the audience to visit a veterans' hospital and witness the less-publicized results of war: the broken bodies, the wounded psyches."[32] The film also tried to take a symbolic approach to how injured its characters were.

Creating Luke's injury had a specific motive, according to Lembcke, who wrote, "Talking about the physical paralysis of paraplegics was a way of speaking metaphorically about the psychological and emotional paralysis of Vietnam veterans."[33] The film sought to portray injured vets as sympathetic, and used real life examples to shape the story, including writer Ron

[31] "Coming Home." imdb.com
[32] Donald 85
[33] Lembcke 71

Kovic[34], whose memoirs about Vietnam remain iconic and honest portrayals of real-life loss of patriotism in the face of the war.

Though, according to Lembcke, Waldo Salt disagreed with the writer's radical behavior, so he leaned on Kovic's views more so than he relied on the actual Kovic. He writes, "The war was not theirs to begin with-neither to win or lose-and many had fought as gallantly against the war as they had fought in the war… In Kovic, the makers of Coming Home did not have the character they wanted "Luke" to develop into. Kovic's story would have to wait for Oliver Stone."[35] While Kovic's real life experience was beneficial to the script, his journey contributed to the script's stereotyping the Vietnam vet, and helping cement the genre's inaccurate portrayal. Lembcke writes that the screenwriters behind *Coming Home* used those stereotypes in their story.[36]

While Dean, in his article, did use evidence to disprove that the Vietnam vet was a tortured individual, *Coming Home* actively contributes to a false stereotype advertised by Hollywood. The film itself might be a narrative that seeks to heal, but its legacy is not quite able to do that. In fact, Lembcke argues that Coming Home made the damage irreversible, saying, "The image of the veteran as a character disabled by physical, emotional, or mental damage played large in those representations. The figure of the unstable and violent veteran, already universal by the late 1970s, was hegemonic after Coming Home."[37]

Coming Home is a critical addition to the Vietnam genre. It contributes to the modern understanding and memory of Vietnam, but it also focuses solely on Americans, much like the

---

[34] Ron Kovic's autobiography Born on the Fourth of July is a bestseller, though it was also seen as controversial book due to his graphic descriptions of the mistreatment of recovering vets and his aggressive anti-war protesting.
[35] Lembcke 76
[36] Lembcke 82
[37] Lembcke 78

other films in the category. The grief of the film comes from healing from a loss that the characters could not fathom. How could the United States lose a war to a de-colonizing nation? The character's search for understanding of things gone wrong shows that Hollywood wants to remember the war as a loss, because the industry had to reflect common opinion. Lembcke describes it as "An exercise in popular culture feeding on popular culture as the making of any other film."[38] *Coming Home* was designed to be a compelling and sympathetic tale of finding love in the face of a war going incredibly wrong. That is how the target audience felt, as the film remains an American classic.

Apocalypse Now, the final movie of the initial trilogy of films that created the modern Vietnam genre, strays a little further away from the reality created in *Coming Home* and closer to the mysticism that haunts *The Deer Hunter*. An adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; *Apocalypse Now* seeks out the disillusioned patriot and follows as one soldier subverts his culture for that of the mystical Kurtz, a re-imagined-for-Vietnam version of the novel's iconic Colonel.[39] Comparisons have been drawn between The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now, as both films focus on the concept of Vietnam, but depart reality as the war itself is subverted to explore bigger themes and ideas. McInerney writes, "One can detect a fraudulent work of art about American consciousness of Vietnam if it proclaims itself a "history" and not a "story"-what Michael Herr in Dispatches calls "straight history" included."[40] *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* both stand accused as being fraudulent films, but they are crucial representations of the Vietnam memory. Films are allowed to be creative in their portrayals of historical events.

---

[38] Lembcke 83
[39] "Apocalypse Now." imdb.com
[40] McInerney 31

Apocalypse Now features crucial elements of the Vietnam genre, including disillusionment and loss of patriotism. The film's protagonist Willard is already lost when he is first introduced. Hellmann describes the man's struggle, writing, "Willard has already been to Vietnam, and upon leaving has found that home "just didn't exist any- more." Further, his return to Vietnam is without clear purpose: 'When I was here I wanted to be there, when I was there all I could think of was getting back into the jungle.'"[41] Not unlike Michael from *The Deer Hunter*, Willard has found that violence sustains him in such a way that he can only achieve it in Vietnam. His morals have shifted, and he is a more violent person who has no qualms about committing atrocities.

Willard fights for himself, and the film's focus on his individual journey is a key element of the Vietnam genre. Putting focus on the individual highlights his journey and his journey alone. There is no room for teamwork in Vietnam, not when the enemy is primarily unseen. Willard's loss of sense of self makes him vicious, and dangerous to anyone putting his life at risk. Hellman also writes, "Both Willard and Kurtz, discovering the inherent weakness and corruption of their society, have turned mentally to the enemy. Willard speaks admiringly during the film of "Charlie's" purity and strength,"[42] In *Apocalypse Now*, understanding only comes when Willard becomes a darker version of himself, or, as Hellmann referred to it, turned mentally to the enemy. The movie is no longer about the war, it is the story of a man who is completely lost trying to reconcile the violence he has committed in the name of something bigger than him, an institution he cannot believe in, but he followed their orders anyway. Willard is left to wrangle his own darkness inside of him.

---

[41] Hellmann 432
[42] Hellmann 437

While *Apocalypse Now* is a Vietnam film that highlights the genre's negative view on the war, it is also an adaptation of a classic novel, and the script was written to match the themes of the novel, with Vietnam serving as the backdrop to the plot. *Apocalypse Now* does not need to be about Vietnam to be about one's inner darkness. Vietnam merely suited the themes of the narrative, and in making *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola chose to broaden his imagination in portraying man's inner darkness. McInerney writes about the genre, "All works about Vietnam are about what Vietnam was "like," about "somethin' else." Those which capably aspire to represent it accept the imperative that fictions must be used to tell the truth, though they are untrustworthy."[43] *Apocalypse Now* is a perfect representation of McInerney's argument that the film is not just about Vietnam. Like *The Deer Hunter*, the two less realistic films in discussion of the Vietnam trio use fiction to deny their reality and project their guilt into the American conscious. *Coming Home* does this as well, but is significantly more upfront about it as the characters openly talk about their trauma in an attempt to heal. The audience is not granted an opportunity to see Willard heal, as the film ends before he gets that far.

There is a question, however, of whether or not Apocalypse Now is a true Vietnam film. Fiedler argues, "Willard simply turns tail and goes home… both fulfilled his assignment and disassociated himself from the evil military bureaucracy which made it. In any case, Coppola fails to create a new heroic myth capable of assuaging the psychic wounds of Vietnam, contenting himself with interpreting an old one"[44] Coppola's decision to stay faithful to the end of the source material indicates that there will never be a new interpretation of what the war means for America. The film is too deeply shrouded in allegory for that. However, the film

[43] McInerney 31
[44] Fiedler 397

makes an anti-war message that is set against the backdrop of Vietnam. In the Vietnam genre, the war itself is often a backdrop to the major themes of dissent against the majority. Setting the film in Vietnam allowed Coppola to explore the sentiment created in Heart of Darkness by using the same feelings people had about the war to channel the major themes of the novel. Vietnam is an appropriate metaphor for the anti-colonialism message of the novel and allows for a modern interpretation of an older text.

Apocalypse Now was a part of the first wave of Vietnam films, and has remained a part of the genre ever since. While the film does not necessarily contribute a solution to the problem of Vietnam that it presents, it does remain faithful to the narrative on which it is based. Based on the comparisons to *The Deer Hunter*, which is cemented as a Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now* is too faithful to the Vietnam genre to be excluded from it. The Vietnam genre is a quest for understanding, which is hard to find in such a complex situation as the Vietnam war. In film, Vietnam takes a forcefully American look at things, and tries to find understanding to justify the actions taken during the war. Hellmann describes it as, "Each of these two films takes a hero who is a version of the national archetype, thus embodying the essential longings and anxieties of the American psyche, and sends him on a quest conveying the aberrant, fragmented, hallucinatory Vietnam experience while giving it a familiar, meaningful structure."[45] Vietnam is considered a great American failure, the inability to act as an imperial force a dark spot in the country's decorated history. That failure is portrayed faithfully on the screen by Hollywood.

To conclude, the legacy of the Vietnam war is complicated. Hollywood's Vietnam genre does not contribute one simple idea to the collective memory of the war. A war that is

[45] Hellmann 439

remembered less than fondly is represented on screen as a failure, leading to loss of patriotism and sense of self, because the memory of previous wars did not properly equip men to fight in Vietnam. Hollywood, in order to turn a profit, has chosen to highlight stereotypes that do not reflect truthful events, and events portrayed in historical films are heightened or changed to raise the dramatic stakes rather than tell the truth. Hellmann's view on the war succinctly illustrates the lasting legacy of the war, writing, "Vietnam is viewed as the self-projected historical nightmare through which America can awaken from its dream of innocence into a mature consciousness."[46] Vietnam is a turning point in American culture, and the media of the era reflects that. Film is an art through which people are allowed to see humanity and try to reconcile their beliefs with the collective memory of history. Looking at Vietnam in film allows those who did not experience the war form their own opinions on it, while also questioning the decisions that were made. Hollywood has had a say in how the war is presented, and therefore influences how the war is remembered. American society looks back on the Vietnam era with regret at how the war was handled, and film adheres to that narrative. Hollywood wants Americans to feel uneasy about the war, and has used its power to help build the memory that lasts to the modern day.

.

[46] Hellmann 429