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**Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome? : Collective Memory of  
the Vietnam War in Fictional American Cinema Following  
the 1991 Gulf War**

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the concept of the “Vietnam Syndrome” and its continuing manifestation in fictional American films produced after the 1991 Gulf War, with reference to depictions of the Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq Wars. Based on contemporary press reports as source material and critical analysis, it identifies the “Vietnam Syndrome” as a flexible and altering national psychological issue characterised initially as a simple aversion to military engagement, but which grew to include collective feelings of shame, guilt and a desire to rewrite history. The thesis argues that the “Syndrome” was not quashed by the victory of the Gulf War in 1991, as had been speculated at the time. Rather, the thesis argues that it was only temporarily displaced and continues to be an ingrained feature of the collective American psyche in current times. The argument is based on theories of collective memory, according to which social attitudes are expressed in cultural products such as films.

The relationships between memory and history, and between memory and national identity are explored as two highly relevant branches of collective memory research. The first of these combines the theories of Bodnar (1992), Sturken (1997), Winter and Sivan (1999) and Wertsch (2002), among others, to define memory’s relationship with history and position in the present. The discussion of the relationship between memory and national identity describes the process by which memory is adopted into the national collective, based on the research of Schudson (1992) and Hall (1999). Consideration is given to the alternative theories of Comolli and Narboni (1992 [1969]), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Miller (2005) that propose a unified representation from a dominant ideology and of The Popular Memory Group (1982) who argue a counter-hegemonic popular memory. The thesis argues that both are insufficient to account for public memory, establishing a multi-sourced collective memory as the basis for its arguments, as described by Hynes (1999) and Wertsch (2002).

Successive chapters provide a close analysis of films in relation to the “Vietnam Syndrome”. Each of the films shows the different approaches to the conflicts and ways the “Vietnam Syndrome” manifests itself. Chapter 3 provides a summary of Vietnam War films released prior to the main period focused upon in this thesis, in order to contextualise the post-Gulf War texts. Chapter 4 analyses *Heaven and Earth* (1993, Dir. Oliver Stone) as a revolutionary depiction of the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese depiction. Chapter 5 discusses *The War* (1994, Dir. Jon Avnet) as a late revisionist text. The focus of Chapter 6

is *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola), a revision of a vision, in which the additional scenes are analysed for their contribution to this later, more reflective version of the 1970s text *Apocalypse Now*. The last Vietnam film analysed, *We Were Soldiers* (2002, Dir. Randall Wallace), is the subject of Chapter 7 and is discussed with reference to post-September 11 American society and the dormant period of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Chapter 8 brings the previous Vietnam War film analysis chapters together to form intermediate conclusions prior to the progression to Gulf War films.

Chapter 9 provides a break in the film analysis chapters to consider the press coverage of the Gulf War, compared to that of Vietnam, paving the way for the following discussion of Gulf War films. Press coverage of the Gulf War influences the visual depiction of the Gulf War in both *Three Kings* (1999, Dir. David O’Russell) in Chapter 10 and *Jarhead* (2005, Dir. Sam Mendes) in Chapter 11. The reading of *Three Kings* also analyses the narrative as a metaphor for American concerns over the American-led coalition’s conduct during the conflict, while Chapter 11 argues the use of Vietnam War films as media templates (Kitzinger, 2000) in *Jarhead*. Finally, Chapter 13 brings the film analysis to a close by discussing the early representations of the Iraq War that have emerged in recent years, including: *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* (2005, Dir. Sidney J. Furie), *Home of The Brave* (2006, Dir. Irwin Winkler), *Stop-Loss* (2008, Dir. Kimberley Peirce), *Lions For Lambs* (2007, Dir. Robert Redford) *Redacted* (2008, Dir. Brian de Palma) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Dir. Kathryn Bigelow).

The main, but not exclusive, features typifying the “Vietnam Syndrome” expressed through the films include: a reluctance to engage in or support foreign military intervention; use of “good war” and “bad war” discourse; signs of a collective national trauma of defeat; expressions of guilt for the consequences of American actions and failings of policy; attempts to restore the national self-image. This thesis concludes that the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still relevant to American society and that it is expressed through films in a variety of ways. It argues that the Vietnam War and the “Vietnam Syndrome” have become frames of reference for the discussion and representation of conflict and that the American collective psyche suffers a mixture of syndromes, some mutually enforcing and some contradictory, that are triggered by a variety of circumstances. The “Vietnam Syndrome” is identified as the most prolific of these and through its construction and circulation in media products, including cinema, this thesis argues it has become an umbrella term for the remnants of angst over Vietnam and new concerns over other conflicts.

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis embodies the results of my own special work, that it has been composed by myself and that it does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for a degree in this or another university.

Laura Elizabeth Ferguson

31 May 2011



## Introduction

This research focuses on the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s on the collective American psyche as conveyed through fictional war films. Beaten by a third world country and bombarded with horrific images of conflict, the nation arguably spent decades coming to terms with the trauma it underwent. The Gulf War was the first major conflict the United States entered into following this unprecedented defeat and the Bush administration was adamant that this time it would not be another Vietnam. Promoted as a heavily technological war, the United States executed a swift and successful campaign, and in a speech on 1 March 1991 President George Bush declared “By God we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all” (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 1991, p.549). Yet in the following years attitudes displayed within cinema suggest the ghost of Vietnam was not laid to rest with such finality.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the American cinematic representation of both the Vietnam and Gulf conflicts following the successful execution of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, utilising a textual analysis reading within collective memory theory and with particular reference to the “Vietnam Syndrome.” It is intended to provide a thorough case study analysis of films depicting different cinematic reactions to the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the post-Gulf era. By identifying trends and addressing similarities and differences across this group of films, this research is able to argue the nature of the continuing effects of the Vietnam War as reflected in American cinema and the extent to which the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still relevant in American culture.

The term “Vietnam Syndrome” was first used shortly after the conclusion of Vietnam to describe a widespread reluctance among Americans to become involved in foreign disputes following the nation’s crushing defeat in Vietnam, however it became apparent that the effect of the war on the American psyche was causing this “Vietnam Syndrome” to display wider symptoms. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard give a good description of this on which to base further discussion of the subject:

[T]his syndrome reaches far beyond the well-known U.S. reluctance to carry forward a Vietnam-style warfare entailing heavy commitment of ground forces and the inevitable high casualty rates. In fact, the war itself shattered central political narratives about the U.S. role in world politics rooted in long-standing doctrines such as Manifest Destiny, the conventional image of American troops heroically fighting and winning “good wars,” a general recognition of Yankee

noble intentions in spreading the gospel of freedom and democracy around the world (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.89).

America had learned that wars could go against its favour and against the common view of the nation's military as a force for good. Vietnam affected the nation in such a way as for W.D. Ehrhart to describe it in 1995 as "the quintessential American experience of the second half of the twentieth century" and to declare: "To write about the United States in the second half of the twentieth century is to write about Vietnam. It can be avoided only with effort" (Ehrhart, 1995, p.211). This is not to disregard other political, historical and social factors in twentieth century America, from equal rights movements to Watergate. As shall be shown, events can have cumulative effects on each other. Vietnam, however, was one event to have a particularly strong effect on the national identity. The "Vietnam Syndrome's" development will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, following the establishment of the theory behind a collective memory analysis.

Much academic research has surrounded the American cinematic portrayal of Vietnam, however the majority of these studies focus on the early films of the 1970s and 1980s. There is a distinct lack of attention towards the post-Gulf depictions, despite the importance of the Gulf War as the first large-scale conflict to follow Vietnam. This research examines the films following the United States led victory in the Gulf in 1991, providing a post-Gulf War analysis of Vietnam as represented in popular cinema. This is followed by the examination of films dealing directly with the Gulf War itself, discussing such issues as the importance of television portrayal of the war and the influence of both this television footage and Vietnam films on the Gulf War movie. The Gulf War has had less academic treatment in the field of film studies than Vietnam, with most research referring primarily to television news coverage. This research broadens the scope from that area of established research to identify findings derived from fictional depictions of the conflict. The overall aim of the study is to discuss America's cinematic portrayal of the war it lost, Vietnam, and the war it then went on to win, the Gulf, in light of this victory following the country's harrowing defeat in Vietnam. The analysis of the films will result in the formation of arguments regarding the "Vietnam Syndrome" as it is conveyed through texts produced years after the Gulf War. In order to conduct this analysis it is now necessary to explore literature surrounding the theory of collective memory theory and the application of it in this research methodology in the combined literature review and methodology chapter.

## Chapter 1

### Review of Literature and Methodology

#### The Use of Collective Memory in This Research

The reading of the films is conducted within the theoretical framework of collective memory and the formation of a corresponding national identity through it. Collective memory theory has a broad range of applications, being used in research fields such as psychology, sociology, history, cultural studies and foreign affairs, meaning it has become a widely used method by which to examine a range of subjects. The intention of this thesis is to use collective memory theory to provide a reading of the films as indicators of wider social and cultural attitudes and to discover what can be derived from the texts, rather than to use the films to examine collective memory as a concept and practice.

While contemporary debates on collective memory theory are addressed in the literature review, it is not the intention of this research to focus on the theory of collective memory as a historical method for several reasons. Firstly, such an examination would require a whole research project of its own to consider adequately and therefore attempting to do this alongside the examination of the war films would be detrimental to the outcome of both. Such an analysis would also be more strongly connected to studies in the field of history and better suited to researchers specialising in the field of history and historical sources. This project has its foundations in media studies and is more concerned with the information that can be derived from the films than debating the worthiness of them as a means of expressing it. Finally, this is also a subject that has already received a great deal of academic attention, as shall become evident later in this chapter, and I believe more original and relevant conclusions can be observed in the analysis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in war films than in re-circulating the corresponding collective memory debates.

Collective memory theory as a method through which to read cultural texts does have its limitations. It cannot be used to provide a singular perspective of a historical situation as it is comprised of an amalgamation of so many voices. It can only provide what might be referred to as a “collective noise” of widely held opinions. There is also an issue with the overshadowing of minority voices by those from a position with more support. Collective memory, in addition, lacks the objectivity of standard historical analysis. However, it is precisely this lack of objectivity as well as its tendency to display mass opinions that make

collective memory theory an excellent method for social and cultural studies as employed in the forthcoming chapters. The reading of attitudes conveyed through the films that have been influenced by them can provide a description of the popular responses towards the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, and American military action in general, gauging the long-term effects of the Vietnam War on the American national psyche.

Another problem with the application of collective memory theory in the study of cultural texts is that it is also a difficult term to define. There are many different branches of and approaches to the theory, the majority of which are outlined below, and many of these are contested or insufficient in their claims. Nevertheless, in a study of widespread attitudes and general public opinion it is still a very effective approach to follow once an effective working model has been established from the available array of collective memory theory. This theoretical approach towards collective memory that is applied in this research is outlined below as the wide range of theory and debates surrounding it are considered in a review of collective memory literature.

### Collective Memory as a Concept

As was mentioned previously, collective memory is a difficult concept to define. What follows seeks to explain the concept, outline its relationship to traditional approaches to history, demonstrate how collective memory is linked to the idea of a national identity and thereafter to outline a working model of collective memory for use in this research.

Collective memory, unlike documented history founded on facts, can be summarised as a combination of socially and culturally generated commonly-held perceptions of past events. There is a wealth of names under which this type of memory is broadly defined, although it is most commonly referred to as collective memory or public memory.

Through reviewing the extensive literature on the subject, it appears this can be viewed not only as a negative feature, owing to the lack of clarity of the concept, but also simultaneously as a positive element. Geoffrey Cubitt claims “[m]emory owes its current prominence in the scholarly lexicon at least partly to its flexible range of meanings” (Cubitt, 2007, p.5) and it “is not, in the end, a thing to be pinned down, like a moth in a cabinet; it is a term whose usefulness lies in being tested and debated” (Cubitt, 2007, p.7). For the purpose of this research it was found that a number of terms – predominantly “collective memory”, “social memory”, “historical memory,” “public memory” and “cultural memory” – were close in theoretical definition and relevance to the research and

could be included in this analysis as originating from the same thread of memory studies. This conclusion was derived mainly from their usage in the literature reviewed to describe the same social phenomenon of common memories held within communities socially and culturally held together, regardless of whether the theorist was referring to history, sociology, psychology or cultural studies, and through the common reference in these texts to the root of collective memory theory.

Maurice Halbwachs has often been referred to as “the godfather of collective memory.” One of the first theorists within the fields of psychology and sociology to write on the subject, he claims “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, p.38). He also states that any memories reconstructed or recollected in people’s minds are formed “under the pressure of society” (Halbwachs, 1992, p.51), arguing that the outside forces of the culture in which people exist are responsible for the nature of the memories they hold.

Key to Halbwachs’ discussion of collective memory are social frameworks within which all collective memories exist. They are “the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society” (Halbwachs, 1992, p.40) and he argues that for a collective memory to be possible, it must be within the bounds of these commonly-held frameworks. He effectively describes collective memory working in practice:

The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory... But... they most frequently distort that past in the act of reconstructing it. There are surely many facts, and many details of certain facts, that the individual would forget if others did not keep the memory alive for him. But, on the other hand, society can live only if there is a sufficient unity of outlooks among the individuals and groups comprising it (Halbwachs, 1992, p.182).

This last statement regarding society’s need for a group with a unified perspective is echoed by John R. Gillis in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (1994) where he argues that at the centre of any group identity is remembrance. This topic, linking back to Schudson’s concept of national identity, shall be revisited later in this chapter when the relationship between collective memory and identity is explored.

## Memory and History

The issue of differentiating this socially centred memory from scholarly history has been a widely debated one in recent years. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (1999) have clearly separated the formation of a collective memory from what they refer to as professional history. They describe it as the bringing together of a selection of personal experiences and memories in contrast to a written document based on facts:

It is the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The 'public' is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it. What they create is not a cluster of individual memories; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Winter and Sivan, 1999, p.6).

Winter and Sivan view collective memory as rooted in the very structure of society, having an impact on far more people than historical memory, claiming that it goes "beyond the limits of the professionals" (Winter and Sivan, 1999, p.8). This thesis, too, is based on the theory that memory does go beyond the limits of history, however, it remains important its origins in history are not overlooked.

The degree of connection and separation between memory and history is a subject of much debate within memory studies. Some memory theorists go as far as to view them as closely linked, or even interwoven, terms. Joanna Bourke is one who believes the gap between the two is not very wide, and in some cases simply does not exist at all:

Private memory not only contributes to history, but also takes some of its knowledge from history. Memory is not something that 'exists' in some ethereal sphere, beyond culture... History and memory are not detached narrative structures; at no time in the past was memory 'spontaneous' or 'organic'; at no time has history been able to repudiate its debt to memory and its function in moulding that memory (Bourke, 2004, p.484).

Bourke here strongly denies any separation between memory and history. Marita Sturken (1997) likewise believes cultural memory and history are "entangled rather than oppositional" (Sturken, 1997, p.5), and sometimes they cannot be distinguished from one another.

James V. Wertsch is another who has found difficulty in separating the two terms: "For example, official histories produced by the state and unofficial histories produced outside

of its purview both include elements of collective remembering as well as history” (Wertsch, 2002, p.20).

Others who have written on the subject of collective memory do not view its relationship to history as quite so close, choosing to concentrate on the differences between the two. Jay Winter (2006) asserts: “History is not simply memory with footnotes; and memory is not simply history without footnotes” (Winter, 2006, p.6). Winter invented the term “historical remembrance” because he found memory to be about history but not completely involved with it, while at the same time being comprised of so much more as to become “some vague cloud” (Winter, 2006, p.11).

Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone further distance memory studies from history by claiming that although history is a key reference point, “‘memory studies’ itself... is located most firmly in disciplines most accustomed to a concern with representation: literature, film studies, cultural studies” (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003, p.2).

Kerwin Lee Klein (2000) has also argued extensively against the notion of a tight link between memory and history. Viewing memory as merely a buzzword, the popular term of the moment for theorists, Klein attacks theories that history and memory are extremely close as “clichés of our new memory discourse” (Klein, 2000, p.128):

Where history is concerned, memory increasingly functions as an atonym rather than synonym; contrary rather than complement and replacement rather than supplement (Klein, 2000, p.128).

According to Klein, it is the oppressive nature of history that has driven people towards memory as a “therapeutic alternative” (Klein, 2000, p.145). Klein’s medical reference to memory as therapeutic further emphasises the description of negative memories of Vietnam as a syndrome and the replacement of them with positive assertions as the quest for a cure for it.

Pierre Nora (1989) also draws a distinction between the two:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually

actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past (Nora, 1989, p.8).

However, Nora goes on to bring history and memory back together, claiming that memory is in fact history: “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (Nora, 1989, p.13). The issue that Nora is highlighting appears to be that the strongest link between memory and history is the perception of them as synonymous rather than them actually being so in practice.

While memory is undoubtedly inspired by history and often subsequently confused with it to such an extent that to many the two are indistinguishable, this thesis argues against considering the terms as closely linked as Bourke, Sturken and Wertsch suggest. Memory’s creation and its functions are too concerned with the present and, as shall become apparent, even the future, for it not to be viewed as distinct from history, although it is certainly linked to it in practice. It is perhaps better to consider memory a separate branch of historical enquiry. Support for the equation of memory with contemporary conditions is widely available. John Bodnar claims:

The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures (Bodnar, 1992, p.15).

Bodnar considers memory the articulation of present issues in terms of the past. Andreas Huyssen, author of *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995), agrees that: “The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience” (Huyssen, 1995, p.3). Huyssen argued this is what makes memory so “powerfully alive” (Huyssen, 1995, p.2).

Historian Peter Novick (1999) also argues that memory “denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects” (Novick, 1999, p.4) and, furthermore, that significant collective memories “express some eternal or essential truth about the group” (Novick, 1999, p.4). These arguments regarding the focus of memory being in the present are crucial to this thesis which uses cinematic depictions of past events to uncover present attitudes and beliefs.



## Collective Memory and a National Identity

Developing from these theoretical foundations, how are these certain memories and “essential truths” then adopted in the national collective? Michael Schudson illuminates how national identity is affected by collective memory and how this manifests in everyday American life:

This national identity is present only in small ways in everyday life, as in the daily Pledge of Allegiance in schools. It is routinized in national holidays and quadrennial presidential elections. It is powerfully established through military service or through the experience of war for both soldiers and civilians. It is also instituted through people’s shared attention to explosive and traumatic national events judged historically significant. Americans have collectively put everyday life aside to attend the Army-McCarthy hearings, the television quiz-show scandals, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Watergate committee hearings, the *Challenger* disaster, and other such events. These cultural flashpoints generate collective, widely shared experiences through which people establish, and come to care about a relation to public discourse and public action (Schudson, 1992, p.66).

Much of Schudson’s description of events to shape American national identity is inextricably linked to their mediated representation as events are broadcast and circulated within the social network via the mass media. This links national identity to the collective memory that contributes to its formation.

Rodney Bruce Hall provides a collective-based analysis of the process of national identity formation in relation to individual identity in his book *National Collective Identity* (1999):

Through emotive identification (emotional attachment) and the forces of socialization, our individual identity – our ideas about who we regard ourselves to be – are derived in a social context. Individual identity and collective identity are co-constituted. Individuals do possess social agency. Individuals are self-regarding, but constrained by their nature as social organisms to self-identification with social collectives (Hall, 1999, p.36).

This description of the formation of national identity through social and individual processes takes the formation of national identity to a psychological level. Hall’s main theories are based on a social “will to manifest identity” (Hall, 1999, p.6), in contrast to theories of the “will to power” (Hall, 1999, p.6) of the state. He argues that as historical events impact upon individuals in a nation, so too will they impact upon the collective will and the national identity. Hall’s work predominantly seeks to demonstrate the will to manifest identity through its ability to affect major changes in international relations. This

research, on the other hand, aims to employ Hall's theory of a will to manifest identity as part of the theoretical basis from which to analyse the cultural answers to modern conflicts and establish the effects on this national identity, rather than analyse the effects the national identity has on the nation state's behaviour.

As Hall's theories look to account for this presence of a commonly held and widely accepted perspective, so too do Michael Schudson's. However, Schudson theorises from an outward perspective, rather than Hall's inward analysis, to provide a further suggestion to explain the tendency to adopt a broadly unified representation:

Individuals may have personal versions of Watergate, but these will vary from the culturally standard versions most of all in people who participated directly in the affairs of Watergate, and these private versions will grow more rare, and less influential, with passing years. The cultural reservoir of Watergate stories, then, will eventually more adequately map the outlines and suggest the salience of personal understandings of Watergate (Schudson, 1992, p.4).

This effectively describes the process of the formation of a prevailing collective memory through the repetition and integration of an accepted standard version in society. Like Schudson, the research of this thesis intends to follow the development of these culturally standard versions and their effects.

Schudson's approach to Watergate follows a similar thread to this thesis's approach to Vietnam, therefore it is useful here to reproduce his clarification of the direction of his study in collective memory:

Colleagues have raised the question of how I can know what people remember of Watergate. While I have some useful evidence (from surveys, anecdotes and interviews) of what individual Americans remember of Watergate, I do not know, in general, what Americans, person by person, know of Watergate. Even if I did, I would not have the evidence I seek: not what people remember but whether and under what circumstances their memories of Watergate affect their views and actions on contemporary issues (Schudson, 1992, p.4).

Following a similar direction, it is the purpose of this thesis to discuss whether the memories of Vietnam affect collective views on subsequent conflicts and the circumstances and ways in which this manifests in cinema.

## Dominant Ideology and a Unified Representation

Others may seek to explain the manifestation of a common identity through a dominant ideology or Marxist theoretical approach to national identity and collective memory. Also, the view of a collective will to manifest identity, in exactly the same way as with that of a collective memory, is not beyond criticism as presumptuous in assuming members of a society, even when fuelled by the influence of nationalism, will act on this level of unison. The degree to which dominant sectors of society are afforded the opportunity to influence the education system, the recording and distribution of history and the finance and dissemination of cultural texts, has provided foundations to arguments that a society's collective memory of events is generated and managed by such powers for their own benefit. It is necessary, therefore, to consider these oppositional views before adopting the socio-cultural approach.

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue that states “invent” the past in order to maintain social cohesion, legitimise their position and promote certain values and beliefs. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni describe how this might be communicated through film:

[E]very film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing). The cinema is all the more thoroughly and compellingly determined because unlike other arts or ideological systems its very manufacture mobilizes powerful economic forces in a way that the production of literature (which becomes the commodity ‘books’, does not – though once we reach the level of distribution, publicity, and sale, the two are in rather the same position)... Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology (Comolli and Narboni, 1992 [1969], p.684).

The “economic forces” (Comolli and Narboni, 1992 [1969], p.684) on which cinema is dependent form one of the strongest elements of the argument that the visions portrayed on the screen are constructed by those financially and politically in control who have influence over the industry's funding. Marxist film theorist Toby Miller (2005) cites the U.S. film industry's lack of freedom of entry to new starters, governmental financial assistance, that prices are not determined by consumer desire, and its lack of textual diversity. Problems within the industry restricting a broader range of views begin with the economic class control of film production. The majority of widely-distributed films are the product of those with the financial ability to fund their production and distribution.

Political influences can also come into force. Films that support government positions are likely to receive support while those that do not may be hindered or restricted. Certainly, he provides a compelling argument for the existence of government intervention in American film:

After the Second World War, ideological and monetary gains could be made from a clear alignment with anti-Marxism, and the Motion Picture Export Association came to refer to itself as 'the little State Department', so isomorphic were its methods and contexts with Federal policy and ideology. Today, the Department of Commerce produces materials on media globalisation that focus on both economic development and ideological influence, problematising claims that Hollywood is a pure free enterprise and that Washington is interested in blending trade with cultural change. Meanwhile, the Justice Department is authorized to classify all imported films, and has prohibited Canadian documentaries on acid rain and nuclear war as 'political propaganda', and the new hybrid of SiliWood blends Northern Californian technology, Hollywood methods and military funding, clearly evident in the way the film industry sprang into militaristic action in concert with Pentagon preferences after September 11 2001 and even became a consultant on possible attacks (Miller, 2005, p.191).

Miller cites a series of stages within film production and distribution with which the state is involved. The U.S. government's express involvement in the cinematic depiction of the September 11 terrorist attacks is once again cited by Denis McQuail to illustrate his claims of state involvement in the film industry:

There continue to be thinly concealed ideological and implicitly propagandist elements in many popular entertainment films, even in politically 'free' societies. This reflects a mixture of forces: deliberate attempts at social control; unthinking adoption of populist or conservative values; various marketing and PR infiltrations into entertainment; and the pursuit of mass appeal. Despite the dominance of the entertainment function in film history, films have often displayed didactic, propagandist tendencies. Film is certainly more vulnerable than other media to outside interference and may be more subject to conformist pressures because so much capital is at risk. It is a reflection of this situation that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, U.S. government leaders sought a meeting with leaders of the film industry to discuss ways in which film could make a contribution to the newly announced 'war on terror' (McQuail, 2005, p.32).

The dark prophecy of government coercion implied in the instance of the 9/11 meetings may evoke a strong emotional reaction to suggest extensive state involvement in American cinema, but the example of this case (and likewise Miller's instance of Cold War America) is not enough on which to base extensive arguments of strict government control in the creative industries. The Cold War and 9/11 both mark extreme periods in modern

American history, characterised by heightened panic and concern and major social anxiety, yet they are cited as evidence of a sustained level of state intervention which excludes serious consideration of other influences. The dominant ideology theory over-simplifies the complex process of collective memory in modern democratic societies. While theorists such as McQuail, Comolli and Narboni argue convincingly against the notion of cinema being entirely free from influence, difficulty arises when one moves towards considering it little more than a puppet of the state. Cubitt argues in some cases:

[T]he legacy of conflict is less easily summarizable in terms of dominance and suppression; rather the public arena witnesses the unresolved persistence of rival conceptualizations of the nation's character and destiny, each of which retains the backing of imposing social and institutional forces, and each of which stakes its claims through an appeal to different traditions in a past that is essentially contested (Cubitt, 2007, p.229).

This supports the theory of a collective memory created from the combination of many sources within society coming together.

Memories and social perceptions of groups cannot always be attributable to serving the means of a dominant group and people will not necessarily accept in a robotic fashion a given ideology, especially in instances where contrary suggestions have been circulated or opposing views are within remembering or deducing (Schudson, 1997). Upon the entry of such additional or alternative ideology, cinema, like other cultural products, will begin to reflect it back towards the society in which it was produced. Even though dominant groups may try to make their views the sole or main account they cannot stop the force of the public perception and other accounts entirely. It is too often overlooked that while government financing may assist the industry its main support continues to be from society itself which not only provides the industry's profits but also provides its creative labour force and creative ideas. This results in "the incompleteness of th[e] hegemonic process" (Schudson, 1992, p.209).

### Popular Memory Theory

Some of the most influential studies in alternative socially constructed memories were conducted by The Popular Memory Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of a popular memory generated by people of low power in resistance to dominant history. Arguing against a Gramscian hegemonic model, The Popular Memory Group (1982) proposed a dual-sided model in

which a prescribed memory is presented by dominant powers and separate public voices compete and come together in contradiction to it to create and circulate an oppositional memory. This theory of an interaction between dominant and alternative public accounts of the past allows for the acceptance of dominant intervention while accounting for representations and memories of the past that do not conform to the dominant ideology.

Yet the model proposed by The Popular Memory Group fails to acknowledge any synergy between dominant and public narratives. It overlooks the instances in which the dominant and public sources generate similar or concordant views and representations independent of direct conflict with each other. The emphasis remains with the need for the recreation of the past for a purpose beneficial to a dominant group and the subsequent struggle against it. In this way it is shown to break only slightly from the dominant ideology view it is intended to oppose, echoing the notion of a “counter-hegemony” or “alternative hegemony” (Williams, 1977, p.113), features of the hegemonic culture Raymond Williams describes as rendering it “continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own” (Williams, 1977, p.112). These outside influences are in Williams’ view arguably “all or nearly all in practice tied to the hegemonic” (Williams, 1977), reflecting The Popular Memory Group’s concept of alternative public voices.

However, the idea of such a multifaceted memory incorporating counter-narratives begins to move memory theory towards something more complex and intertwined. As shall be argued and illustrated in the forthcoming chapters, collective memory combines a mixture of surrounding sources, often conflicting, in its production and the resultant product is by no means singular or definitive but in constant flux (Wertsch, 2002, p.43). In such a model state-produced narratives are only one of many influences. Schudson describes this arrangement of sources:

In liberal societies, multiple versions of the past can safely co-exist. An all-powerful monolithic version of the past will not triumph in a pluralistic society where conflicting views have a good chance of emerging, finding an audience, and surviving. This is not to say that dominant views do not exist, simply that – again, in a liberal society – they are never invulnerable (Schudson, 1992, p.208).

With this view of a collective memory comprised of sources from different areas of society, memories may come from dominant or non-dominant backgrounds and still be adopted. It is a much more flexible and realistic alternative to models either solely focusing on or entirely refuting the dominance of some sources in possession of power or

financial advantage over others. While the public may in some cases be influenced to adopt a memory presented to them in a way that a more equality-based Popular Memory theory fails to account for, this does not mean a dominant ideology model is sufficient either. The persistence of Vietnam guilt narratives and revisions in cinema demonstrate the property collective memory possesses that allows it to be shaped and formed by society with materials deriving from a number of sources. Utilising the case study of Vietnam, this shall be also be illustrated in this thesis as the influence of the 1991 Gulf War on the collective memory of Vietnam is explored.

### Purpose of Remembering with a Multi-Source Theory

In arguing against both Marxist and Popular Memory, this thesis argues that the active creation and maintenance of such memories must serve another purpose beyond a power struggle. In *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity* (2005) Dana Heller identified the market for the consumption of 9/11 in both commodities and cultural and media products and attributed this to a mass public reaction to the event: “An effective displacement of national vulnerability, fear and demoralization set off a collective compulsion to repeat, to engage in a particular acting out of the trauma through specific practices of consumption that administered to the national hunger for meaning – for images and stories of the attacks.” (Heller, 2005, p.6). This need for meaning itself must have a source within the group. Cubitt (2007), having discussed at length the representation of history in social memory, concludes that three reasons are behind a social group’s need for a memory:

Firstly, even when their core activities are not in themselves mnemonic, they need such knowledge to ensure the satisfactory performance of these activities... Like individuals, groups or communities can scarcely get on with anything without grounding their performance in knowledge derived from past experiences. Secondly, groups need retrospective knowledge in order to maintain and to communicate the sense of corporate or collective identity on which their continuing coherence ultimately depends... Thirdly, groups may need retrospective knowledge in order to maintain and to advance their position in relation to other groups or to broader institutional structures (Cubitt, 2007, p.134).

Identity, once again, features in Cubitt’s analysis twice. Much of the cinematic representation of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars can be read as conveying a significant amount about American society’s identity and the way in which many within it wish to project this identity. Identity’s influence on future activity also comes within the scope of

this research, but the forthcoming analysis is as much about the rejection of past activity – a fourth function of memory I would like to add to Cubitt’s list – as it is about determining future behaviour.

### Sources of Memory with a Multi-Source Theory

Difficulty arises with the concept of the collective within this theory of an interwoven memory derived from the natural and independent outputs of both dominant and other sources to project a group identity and inform group behaviour. In establishing a methodology for examining film texts to evaluate their relationship with and representation of collective memory and use it to indicate social views, a clearer definition of the collective ought to be established in order to ascertain the source of these views and their importance. McQuail has researched extensively the concept of mass communication and has given particular consideration to who “the masses” are. He describes the early definitions of the term, such as when it was negatively applied to uneducated and common people or through socialist or collective movements where it was viewed as a distinctly more positive characteristic of a society, before rejecting these and seeking a contemporary description better corresponding with today’s mass culture. He outlines his argument as below:

The term is now quite dated, partly because class differences are less sharply drawn or clearly acknowledged and they no longer separate an educated professional minority from a large, poor and ill-educated working-class majority. It is also the case that the former hierarchy of ‘cultural taste’ is no longer widely accepted. Even when in fashion, the idea of mass culture as an exclusively ‘lower-class’ phenomenon was not empirically justified, since it referred to the normal cultural experience of almost everyone to some degree (Wilensky, 1964). The expression ‘popular culture’ is now generally preferred because it simply denotes what many or even most people like. It may also have some connotation of what is popular with the young in particular. More recent developments in media and cultural studies (as well as in society) have led to a more positive valuation of popular culture. For some media theorists (e.g. Fiske, 1987) the very fact of popularity is a token of value in political as well as cultural terms (McQuail, 2005, p.59).

In conjunction with a definition of collective memory as the gathering of voices from different areas of a group or society and the conclusions of the discussion on dominant and alternative narratives, McQuail’s definition of mass or popular culture as what many or most like can inform an analysis of whose memory is being interpreted in this research. It is at once no single specific group within American society nor a united voice of the whole



country, but a popular cultural interpretation of the combination and assimilation of many strong voices and ideas. Wertsch (2002) provides further research concerning the source of collective memory in his definition of a distinction between theories of the “strong version of collective memory” and the “distributed version of collective memory.” The strong version assumes that the group behaves in exactly the same way as an individual, that the collective has a mind of its own, and that as part of this collective each member of a group subscribes to an identical memory. This idea has been criticised by theorists such as Frederic Charles Bartlett (1995) who argues that the group or collective as an entity does not have a memory itself, rather it merely “provides either a stimulus or the conditions under which individuals belonging to the group recall the past” (Bartlett, 1995, p.294). Wertsch himself believes pure strong collective memory is unlikely.

The distributed version, on the other hand, does not involve the requirement that the entire group shares the exact same perspective. Within this category he describes three possible sub-categories which can result in it: “homogeneous,” in the rare event where everyone has the same memories and representation of the past, “complementary” where “different members of a group have different perspectives and remember different things, but these exist in a coordinated system of complementary pieces” (Wertsch, 2002, p.23), and “contested distribution,” where there are different memories or views that do not work together in cohesion but are contradictory and work against each other.

Understanding collective memory as the distributed version, rather than the highly restrictive and unrealistic strong version, it is now possible to answer Winter’s criticism that:

National collectives never created a unitary, undifferentiated, and enduring narrative called collective memory. Nations do not remember; groups of people do. Their work is never singular, and it is never fixed (Winter, 2006, p.198).

Taking Wertsch’s definition of a distributed version, there is no need to account for “a unitary, undifferentiated, and enduring narrative.” Winter’s reference to nations not remembering indicates his objection is toward a strong version of collective memory and Wertsch’s research is able to provide a working alternative to it on which further analysis can be constructed.

Samuel Hynes asserts the importance of personal voices over historical evidence in the formation of collective cultural beliefs and myths about wars, describing the sum of these stories as a “compound war story that gives meaning and coherence to the incoherencies of war-in-its-details, which is what each narrative separately tells” (Hynes, 1999, p.220). Though history may be valued for its objectivity, memory is conversely valued precisely for the richness and variation in its patchwork of voices and ideas that emerge from its influences. Through reading their interpretation in films these voices and ideas will be presented as potent evidence of parts of memories shared through significant, although not singular, sectors of American society. As the views expressed in the films are explored in this research, their source within society will also be explored.

It is of importance to this research that the memories are described, as they are by McQuail, as being shared and circulated. In a cyclical process of production and consumption the memories reflected in society and culture further reinforce themselves, as McQuail writes of mass culture:

Today, the various influences are so bound together that neither mass communication nor modern society is conceivable without the other, and each is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the other. From this point of view we have to conclude that the media may equally be considered to mould or to mirror society and social changes (McQuail, 2005, p.80).

Throughout, this research illustrates this moulding and mirroring of media and society, highlighting occurrences of this dual reflection and their effects.

It is a further argument of this thesis that the cinematic texts are intertextual. Filmmakers, often inspired by or wanting to associate with the perspective of other films, imitate images, dialogue or shots from previous popular texts to mimic their meaning or derive a new meaning from their representation. The repetition of these motifs allows them to acquire meanings and significance beyond that of their original use, and recurring features shall be identified and examined in this study as important indicators of continuing American attitudes demonstrated through cinema. This trend shall become particularly important in the examination of Gulf War and then Iraq War texts. Also, it is not solely the viewers of a popular text who are affected by its content:

Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection (Lipsitz, 1990, p.5).

Those who have no direct experience of a film can still, through its influence on the society around them, be indirectly affected, as “by participating in the activities of a textual community, they can have the access to the textual material around which the group is organized” (Wertsch, 2002, p.28). Such arguments provide the basis for a wide-reaching assessment of collective memory’s significance in society beyond the mere requirement for a shared discourse. From this perspective this thesis argues that the depictions of the Vietnam, Gulf War and Iraq War in American fictional films are reflections of and influences on wider American society and it is therefore of value to analyse them as evidence of some significant American attitudes towards conflicts of the past, present and future.

### Changing Memory

One of the key features of collective memory that is extremely important to this study is its fluid and altering nature written about extensively by Marita Sturken in her 1997 publication *Tangled Memories*. The reason memory studies is so useful in social and cultural studies is that changes can be charted in the trails that evolving memories leave – almost as if they have become a history themselves. Lyn Spillman (1998), when conducting her research into collective memory in the United States and Australia, was able to echo this point about the malleability of collective memories, citing dominant ideologies and current matters as agents in its alteration, while Anne Heimo and Ulla-Maija Peltonen (2003) add to this by defining social memory as a “process rather than a fixed object” (Heimo and Peltonen, 2003, p.42). Halbwachs, too, recognises this as a trait in memories, claiming that society obligates people to “touch up” their memories, making them renovated forms of their original construction:

Because these memories are repetitions, because they are successfully engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and appearance they once had. They are not intact vertebrae of fossil animals which would in themselves permit reconstruction of the entities of which they were once a part (Halbwachs, 1992, p.47).

Halbwachs is describing how memory, in contrast to historical fact, changes over time. Unlike the fossilised creatures or other historical sources which show little alteration over

time, cinema is a process that has captured and preserved the changing collective views of the cultural and sociological group in which the films were produced.

One other striking feature Sturken alludes to which shall be returned to later in the film analysis chapters is a “culture of amnesia” (Sturken, 1997, p.2), the forgetting of aspects of an event: “What we remember is highly selective, and how we retrieve it says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance” (Sturken, 1997, p.7). Analysis of aspects of history or memories that are omitted from the texts can convey as much as a study of those that are included.

Spillman (1998) has studied the possible reasons for sustained recognition or lasting popularity of memories of specific events and this loss of others. While she finds the influence of the dominant institution a consideration for the preference of some over others, she does not view this as a possible reason where historical events which occurred a significant period of time ago are concerned. This has led her to the conclusion that another factor is involved, and she considers some memories to be simply more interesting than others and that this is the reason for their prevalence in society. However this could not explain any later amnesia to affect previously popular memories. Spillman plausibly concludes that events that have rich possibilities for enforcing contemporary arguments and attitudes will remain longer in culture than those which do not. This would provide the necessary reasoning behind Sturken’s theory of popularity’s role in cultural amnesia, accounting for the rise and fall of interpretations.

Hynes (1999) supports this theory, arguing that war memories that do not correspond to popular myth are suppressed in collective memory:

Most narratives of any war sit dustily on library shelves, unread partly because they are ill-written and dull, no doubt, but partly because they tell the wrong story, because they don’t conform to the myth (Hynes, 1999, p.207).

Hynes is suggesting that memories are adopted or abandoned depending on the popular opinion and a dependence on widely adopted myths. Likewise, when researching the collective remembrance of the Holocaust, Novick (1999) realised that “when a memory doesn’t reflect our self-understanding (and how we want others to see us), we marginalize it” (Novick, 1999, p.170). The pro-active nature of cultural amnesia provided by Novick, Sturken, Spillman and Hynes stresses the relevance of it in the study of a society’s group

perspective. This also warns against overlooking aspects of history that are conspicuously absent from cultural accounts and collective memory.

Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998) propose that it is not only specific memories that are subject to alteration over time, but also the institution of memory itself. This also is a feature of memory that Halbwachs has already considered, believing the social frameworks to be subject to alteration by society:

Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks or of a part of them, either because our attention is no longer able to focus on them or because it is focused somewhere else... But forgetting, or the deformation of certain recollections, is also explained by the fact that these frameworks change from one period to another. Depending on its circumstances and point in time, society represents the past to itself in different ways: it modifies its conventions (Halbwachs, 1992, p.172).

So the manner in which society chooses to represent itself could be malleable also. A group could choose to remember its past in one way then, over time and with other influences, may adopt another. This argument emphasises the full flexibility of the process of remembering.

John R. Gillis (1994) offers a further reasonable explanation why people seem to overlook or forget that memory and the social identity with which it is identified alters in such a way:

That identities and memories change over time tends to be obscured by the fact that we too often refer to both as if they had the status of material objects – memory as something to be retrieved; identity as something that can be lost as well as found. We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena (Gillis, 1994, p.3).

This further emphasises the flexibility and instability of memories. Describing them as “representations or constructions of reality” (Gillis, 1994, p.3), Gillis also highlights a major similarity between memory and cinema. This perhaps indicates why cinema is such an effective vehicle for the transportation of collective memories.

## Cinema and Collective Memory

It is now appropriate to turn attention to the sources that contribute to collective memory, and, in particular, cinema's place among these. Wertsch (2002) uses the term "textually mediated" to describe collective memory derived from cultural narratives and "based on 'textual resources' provided by others" (Wertsch, 2002, p.5). He describes the texts, such as language and narrative texts, as "cultural tools" (Wertsch, 2002, p.6), which are used and appropriated in the construction of memories of the past, in an effort to create a "useable past" (Wertsch, 2002, p.33) which bears reference to the present.

Cinema has become an important "cultural tool" for society to form and adopt collective memories. Paul Grainge, who brought the concept of collective memory and film theory together, argues that it is central to it. He believes this is due to it being "a technology able to picture and embody the temporality of the past" (Grainge, 2003, p.1). As Chris Healy wrote:

The cinema is, of course, one of the pre-eminent modern cultural spaces that relies on, works with, invokes, constitutes and transforms contemporary politics of remembering. From Georges Melies to George Lucas, film-makers have indulged in the memory-work of 'taking' spectators to other times (Healy, 2003, p.222).

David Puttnam (2004) also sees the medium's effect:

Some people try to persuade us that films and television are a business like any other. They are not. Films and television (like newspapers) shape attitudes and behaviour, and in doing so, reinforce or undermine many of the wider values of society (Puttnam, 2004, p.163).

Grainge, Healey and Puttnam all view cinema as extremely effective in the process of forming, shaping and maintaining memories and attitudes. Films are widely available and easily accessible, highly promoted, popular, entertaining, and responsible for many memorable images. All of these can be contributing factors in its importance in collective memory. Furthermore, as Gillis (2004) highlighted, memory has something very important in common with cinema that also binds the two of them together – both are forms of representation.

Cinema is a particularly significant cultural tool in the production and consumption of images of war and conflict. So great has been its influence on the public that in 1987

David Halberstam believed: “Thirty years from now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*” (Halberstam cited in Taylor, 2003, p.10).

There is evidence Halberstam’s comment appears to have been a reasonably accurate prediction. Vietnam veteran W.D. Erhart wrote of his concern regarding cinema and television’s shaping of society’s perceptions of war:

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked, ‘Was it really like *Platoon* [or *The Deer Hunter*, or *Full Metal Jacket* or whatever]?’ Not long ago a thirteen year old boy asked me, ‘Did you really go on patrols and do stuff like in *Tour of Duty*?’ It was clear from his voice, his posture, his saucer eyes, that he thought it must have been wonderful. Real was what he’d seen on television (Erhart, 1995, p.212).

Thomas Schatz (1999) also feels strongly about the war film’s importance in American society:

No other film formula adheres so closely to “real” historical conditions and events. No other fictional form intermingles so freely with news, documentary, and other non-fiction depictions of those same conditions and events. No other form of popular entertainment is so patently political and ideological, underscoring Hollywood’s role as a “national cinema” in representing the collective consciousness of a people- the tangle of beliefs, values, and attitudes that can compel a nation to wage war... In no other genre, in fact, are the nation’s history and mythology so dynamically fused (Schatz, 1999, p.vii).

As Schatz has demonstrated in this description of a medium intertwined with history and mythology, cinema’s representation of war and conflict, therefore, is greatly influential. Any visions and attitudes projected are easily absorbed and any visions portrayed are likely to have their roots in the society in which they were produced. The goal of the research undertaken in this project is to examine the depictions of the Vietnam and Gulf wars in films subsequent to the victory in the Gulf circulated to form a collective memory of the conflicts they are portraying.

These films may not be historically accurate, which is why historians sometimes view fictional films negatively. This, however, is also why researchers of cultural studies or sociology such as George Lipsitz find them useful:

Hollywood films may get all the details wrong, they may perpetuate misinformation and ignorance about everything from the frontier to the family, yet they still might encourage ways of asking and answering questions conducive to historical investigation (Lipsitz, 1990, p.165).

What is contained within a war film is a way of reading widely held contemporary attitudes. Films most often are created with a view to reflecting what the greatest proportion of the public want to see. It is, after all, only profitable for the industry to promote what is favourable to the public who are responsible for the film's box office success, as Paul Smith explains:

Historians usually are concerned that the self-conscious document is somewhat suspect because it is likely to be a self-serving document. But in Hollywood the self-serving document (i.e. the film) is the one, whether through calculation or instinct, that best reflects popular thinking and values. The film that entertains while it affirms cherished attitudes has an excellent chance to win wide public acceptance, and in the film industry this means wealth and status for the film-maker (Smith, 1976, p.70).

This reflection of widely welcomed attitudes is, of course, what makes American fictional film in particular so interesting when researching collective remembrance of conflicts. The films serve as what Leonard Quart and Albert Auster describe as a "barometer of America's dreams and desires" (Quart and Auster, 1984, p.140) as well as working to promote and circulate these perspectives themselves. As Peter Rollins wrote: "Hollywood's myths and symbols are permanent features of America's historical consciousness" (Rollins, 1998, p.1).

Film can confront the issue of war as well as provide healing for the collective and individual psychological wounds it inflicts: "it is the reenactment, the replaying, the fantasizing of the story that allow the mourning process to proceed and the event to acquire meaning" (Sturken, 1997, p.37). Through the repetition of the war and stories emerging from it the public are able to adopt meaning from the representations.

Such mythical reinterpretations can obscure original memories of war. Sturken points to veterans who are unable to recall whether some of their memories are their own experiences or are from photographs or films (Sturken, 1997, p.20). She makes a useful comparison using the Kennedy assassination as a case study with which most people in Western culture can identify and comprehend: "In a certain sense, it is not possible to imagine the event in the absence of the Zapruder images. The film has become the event"



(Sturken, 1997, p.29). In the same way, it is difficult to think of wars or conflicts without the photographic or filmed images of them that were reproduced and widely publicised across society, or the cinematic recreations of the events that were produced and released to vast audiences. This is especially true of conflicts for which there was intense media coverage and a wealth of visual images available for absorption by the public – the so-called television wars, such as Vietnam and the two wars in the Gulf.

### Outline of the Structure of Chapters

This thesis takes a clear structure. In the following chapters the study progresses to apply the theories outlined in this chapter to American fictional war films set in the Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq conflicts since the Persian Gulf War in 1991. The research is based on the theory that memory is created, acquired and altered in society, reflecting its predominant attitudes, and that the media are particularly important in this process. The concept of collective memory adopted here is one comprised of sources from varied areas of society (from the government, military or business to groups within the general public united by their shared views) and typical of Wertsch's (2002) contested distribution model. The study will also apply the theories regarding memory held within frameworks and the selection of memories perpetuated and forgotten through cultural amnesia (Sturken, 1997).

The next chapter explores the concept of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in detail. This chapter begins with a summary of the background to the public opinion of the Vietnam War that led to a syndrome forming. It then progresses to a detailed analysis of the use of the term "Vietnam Syndrome" not only to display its longevity and prevalence in American society, but also to discuss the development of the concept and establish a definition of it. This chapter utilises many primary newspaper and periodical sources, from news reports to current affairs analysis and editorials, alongside academic discussion of the "Vietnam Syndrome," to build this definition which shall then be used throughout the film chapters to analyse the way in which the "Vietnam Syndrome" is represented in the film texts.

The first film analysis section, "Trying to Find a Way Out of the Jungle," charts the latter stage of development of the Vietnam War film, in the wake of the success of the Persian Gulf Conflict, and how these films contribute to and differ from the established Vietnam-movie canon. One of the most influential conflicts of the twentieth century on the American psyche, the nation was still trying to make sense of this war in which they suffered defeat three decades later and at the forefront of this process has been the cinema

industry, retelling and reworking memories of it, and displaying common features that signify trends in collective memory within the society.

Following the detailed examination of America's post-Gulf treatment of Vietnam, the study moves on to the Gulf War itself – the first major conflict America engaged in subsequent to the nightmare of Vietnam. “Battling the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Gulf” looks at how past war films act as “media templates” (as defined by cultural theorist Jenny Kitzinger, 2000) for the projection of the Gulf War drama. It also involves a study of the incorporation of television images into the cinematic representation and collective remembrance of it. This conflict was often referred to as the “CNN war” owing to the huge amount of television news coverage it received across the United States, leading it also to be dubbed “instant history”. The movies produced about the Gulf were devised and created by filmmakers exposed to this barrage of heavily-censored images and this is reflected in their work, with Gulf War films echoing these images as well as being perceived as movies for the MTV generation through their fast-paced televisual style. This section aims to examine in detail the role of this cinema in the public's perception and memory of the Gulf, including discussion of whether television's images have overtaken those of film at this late stage in the twentieth century in collective memory. It will also continue the primary process of examining representations of the “Vietnam Syndrome” and discussing the legacy of Vietnam.

Finally, “The “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Early Iraq War Films” brings the discussion to the present by closing with an analysis of the early post-Iraq War depictions of conflict that have emerged in recent years and considering the parallels between the representation of this conflict and the heritage of the representations of Vietnam.

### Rationale for Selection of Case Study Texts

These conflicts led to a wealth of fictional films being produced about them. A primary consideration in the methodology for this research is therefore the selection of film texts analysed. Before discussing the choice of films individually, it is necessary to outline fundamental criteria the films must fulfil in order to be included in this study. As dictated in the title of this thesis, the films must have been produced and distributed in the United States, as this is an analysis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in American society. It is also required that, with the exception of those in the contextualising discussion in Chapter 2, the films on which the case study chapters are based were produced and distributed in the

years following the 1991 Gulf War and be fictional in order to avoid any confusing cross-analysis of fictional films against documentaries. In addition, the films must depict the Vietnam, Gulf or Iraq Wars directly, in order to provide a solid reference point from which to make comparisons between the three. Finally, the films should have been widely available in cinemas across the country as this study's underpinning theories of collective memory and the "Vietnam Syndrome" are considered as national concepts.

In establishing the collection of specific case studies, films were selected primarily for their variation in approach to their depictions of post-Gulf War attitudes. This provides the basis for a broader analysis of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in American fictional cinema as it involves representations from different perspectives. In the Vietnam films section, the first film discussed, *Heaven and Earth* (1993, Dir. Oliver Stone), was selected as an example of a revolutionary Vietnam War text. The film, in representing the war from a Vietnamese perspective as opposed to an American one, marks a significant departure for the Vietnam film genre. Following this, *The War* (1994, Dir. Jon Avnet) was selected as representative of the 1990s revisionist text. The action-hero revisionist Vietnam War film occupied a specific period coinciding with the years of the Reagan administration. *The War* reinvents the revisionist film as a social drama. This is a dramatic shift in genre but the basic concepts of the revisionist films of the 1980s remain. The third Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola) has been included for its unique status as a revision of a vision. Francis Ford Coppola re-edited his auteurist vision of the Vietnam War 22 years after the original, providing an excellent opportunity to study the changes in his perception of the conflict. *We Were Soldiers* (2002, Dir. Randall Wallace) was selected as the final Vietnam War film as case study of a post-September 11 representation of Vietnam, a period in which the "Vietnam Syndrome" appears to have lain dormant.

The selection of films in the Gulf War section of this research was from a much smaller pool, which immediately narrowed the scope for choice. Nevertheless, the two films that were selected adopted dramatically different approaches to their representation of the conflict. *Three Kings* (1999, Dir. David O'Russell) was selected as a case study for its metaphorical depiction of the war. It utilised the medium of storytelling to portray the Gulf War through a modern-day fable of four men's quest for gold. The metaphor contained within the tale provides the moral lesson for America from the Gulf War. *Jarhead* (2005, Dir Sam Mendes) is put forward as a case study for the intertextual use of media templates (Kitzinger, 2000). The film recycles a number of Vietnam War film references and motifs as shorthand for representing Gulf War experiences.

The Iraq War films chapter is presented as an epilogue to the study of the post-Gulf Vietnam and Gulf War texts. It is too soon for the availability of a suitably varied output of texts from which to produce a comprehensive analysis of Iraq War films. However, given the scale of the conflict and particularly the strength of comparisons drawn between it and the Vietnam War, this thesis would be incomplete without at least a brief consideration of the Iraq War. As such, this chapter brings together as wide a selection as possible as examples of Iraq War films. The jingoistic dialogue of *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* (2005, Dir. Sidney J. Furie) is presented alongside the regeneration of the coming home theme in *Home of the Brave* (2006, Dir. Irwin Winkler) and *Stop-Loss* (2008, Dir. Kimberly Peirce), the political debate of *Lions for Lambs* (2007, Dir. Robert Redford), the Vietnam analogy of *Redacted* (2008, Dir. Brian de Palma) and the political avoidance of the pseudo-documentary *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Dir. Kathryn Bigelow) in this first wave of films portraying the Iraq War to provide as varied a discussion of the representation of the conflict as is possible at this time.

The film analysis chapters are arranged in a chronological structure in order for any developments in the narrative of the “Vietnam Syndrome” over the passing years to be more easily identified and discussed in the conclusion.

## Chapter 2

### The “Vietnam Syndrome”

If World War II was the “good war” in which a generation pulled together for a common good, Vietnam was the “bad war,” dividing the country and leaving a bitter taste (Schulzinger, 2006, p.153).

#### The Bad War: The Origins of Negative Public Opinion Towards the Vietnam War

America’s military presence in Vietnam dates back to 1949. At this stage it was only in an advisory capacity to assist the French. It was the early 1960s before the United States slowly but steadily started to build up its combat forces in Vietnam. The gradual escalation of the conflict was eventually confirmed by the Kennedy administration in 1962 in a distinct upbeat tone, as *The New York Times* reported:

SAIGON, Feb 24—The United States is involved in a war in Vietnam. American troops will stay until victory.

That is what Attorney General Robert said here last week. He called it “war in a very real sense of the word.” He said that President Kennedy had pledged that the United States would stand by South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem “until we win” (Bigart, 1962, p.11).

This tone was not to continue, however. As U.S. involvement deepened, the Vietnam War became one of the most controversial conflicts in American history. The development of Vietnam into the “bad war” was catalysed by several factors as the years wore on. In an analysis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” it is important first to highlight not what went wrong militarily or politically, significant as these are to an analysis of the war itself, but what went wrong where the opinion of the American public is concerned.

One of the prevailing collective memories surrounding the Vietnam War, and a recurring feature of films depicting the war, was the newspaper and television press reports of various acts of extreme human cruelty. Bernard B. Fall, writing for *The New Republic* in October 1965 criticised the American and South Vietnamese forces, as well as the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong, for lack of adherence to Red Cross and Geneva agreements. The Red Cross themselves had issued an appeal in July 1965. Fall had grave concerns over unethical conduct in the war:

To me, the real moral problem which arises in Vietnam is that of torture and needless brutality to combatants and civilians alike. The issue has been sidestepped in the United States; or worse, simply ignored as not being an “American” problem. When the famous newsreel was shot showing Marines burning down houses with lighters, the reaction among officialdom in Saigon was not so much one of distress that the incident had happened as one of furor at the reporters for seeing and reporting it. And then to see the Secretary of the Navy trying to explain the act by dubbing the village of Camne a “facility developed by the Viet Cong” hardly raises the moral stature of the whole operation (Fall, 1965, p.113).

The worst single incident was to follow three years later. In March 1968 a company of U.S. soldiers entered a Vietnamese village, murdered everyone they found there and destroyed all buildings and possessions. The death toll stood at around 500, including many women, children and elderly people. This excerpt is from *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in November 1969 when the atrocity became known to the public:

The Army had photographs purported to be of the incident, although these have not been introduced as evidence in the case, and may not be.

“The simply shot up this village and (Calley) was the leader of it,” said one Washington source. “When one guy refused to do it, Calley took the rifle away and did the shooting himself.”

Asked about this, Calley refused to comment.

One Pentagon officer discussing the case tapped his knee with his hand and remarked, “some of those kids he shot were this high. I don’t think they were Viet Cong. Do you?”

None of the men interviewed about the incident denied that women and children were shot (Hersh, 1969, p.416).

One of the men in the unit, who witnessed the attack, described it as “point-blank murder” (Hersh, 1969a, p.418). *Time Magazine* reported it as “the most serious atrocity yet attributed to American troops in a war that is already well known for its particular savagery” (Anon., 1969). Colour photographs of piles of dead and mutilated bodies filtered through the newspapers and repeatedly appeared on television news bulletins.

While the initial reaction to this news was one of horror, it is not necessarily the case that this event marked the turning point in the press. Even in its initial report of the incident, *Time Magazine* ended with the suggestion that the soldiers were driven to these acts by the stress of the war:

It sears the generous and humane image, more often deserved than not, of the U.S. as a people. Whatever else may come to light about Pinkville in the weeks ahead, the tragedy shows that the American soldier carries no immunity against the cruelty and inhumanity of prolonged combat (Anon., 1969).

Likewise, *The Economist* claimed that when a country is involved in war “it is statistically almost inevitable that some of its men will do something atrocious” (quoted in Anon., 1968b). By December 5 *Time* was referring to the incident as “an American tragedy,” (Anon. 1968a) rather than a Vietnamese one. The publication’s letters pages revealed a mixed reaction to the uncovering of the My Lai story. Many were outraged by it. Reader Donald S. Metz wrote:

Sir: I just watched the television coverage of the Pinkville atrocity, and for the first time I am bitterly ashamed to be an American. All I could do was mutter helplessly, “God damn them! God damn them! (Metz, 1968).

Many others, however, wrote in outrage at the charges brought against the men of Charlie Company responsible for the killings. Charles G. Michael wrote:

Sir: Just what the hell is this country coming to? What kind of America is it that sends its men into foreign countries to help uphold the doctrines of freedom, yet will not back these men when they wage war as they have been ordered? (Michael, 1968).

Of the twenty-six soldiers charged in connection with the My Lai massacre, only William Calley, named by witnesses as the instigator of the killing spree, was convicted. In 1971 he was found guilty of the premeditated murder of 22 Vietnamese civilians. At the time, there was considerable support for Calley, with 79% of Americans disagreeing with the guilty verdict (Frum, 2000, p.84). There was also considerable official support from as high up the chain of command as President Richard Nixon. Despite being given a life sentence, Calley served only three years and all but one day of those three years were in house arrest, sparing him from prison.

Perhaps more so than the seemingly endless stream of stories about unsavoury American behaviour in Vietnam, the public and the men fighting were growing tired of the length of the war, the lack of progress and the ever increasing number of American casualties. The press reported a severe decline in morale among the American troops in the later war years. CBS news broadcast footage of soldiers in untidy uniforms, with long hair and wearing beads and peace symbols, sitting in the jungle taking drugs. Writing for *The New*

*York Times Magazine* in 1971, Donald Kirk reported the war as “a limbo between victory and defeat.” He claimed that for the men fighting “the war is not so much a test of strength under pressure, as it often was a few years ago, as a daily hassle to avoid patrols, avoid the enemy, avoid contact” (Kirk, 1971, p.523). The men he interviewed spoke with a complete lack of motivation. “The whole thing’s pointless. We’ll never win,” (Kirk, 1971, p.523) one rifleman said. Similar sentiments were echoed by the forward observer, a Captain, who asked “what does it accomplish – what does it gain” (Kirk, 1971, p.523) as he called in an artillery strike on three Vietnamese carrying a suspected shell.

By this time civil unrest in the United States over the continuing involvement in Vietnam was already underway. Rallies organised by anti-war protesters were attended by thousands. They contributed to the strength of negative imagery associated the Vietnam era as “politics came dancing with a loony phosphorescence” (Anon., 1985). In particular the tragedy of four deaths and nine wounded at the infamous Kent State protest in May 1970 gave the appearance that the Vietnam War had come home to American soil.

Yet these demonstrations alone do not build a complete description of public opinion towards the war. John E. Mueller (1973) conducted an extensive study of the opinion poll statistics from the Vietnam War in comparison with those from the Korean War before it. He found that, contrary to popular myth, the war in Vietnam was not supported any less by the public until casualties began to increase more sharply. Indeed, his research uncovered trends showing that opposition did not outweigh support until shortly before the Tet Offensive of 1968, and did not decline below the levels observed at the least popular point in the Korean War until 1969. Even then the figures maintained relatively steady trends of decrease in support and increase in opposition with only minor shifts in the statistics at key events such as the Tet Offensive, the revelation of the My Lai massacre and the invasion of Cambodia. Mueller explains his findings:

[T]he amount of vocal opposition to the war in Vietnam was vastly greater than that for the war in Korea. Yet it has now been found that support for the wars among the general public followed a pattern of decline that was remarkably similar. Although support for the war in Vietnam did finally drop below those levels found during Korea, it did so only after the war had gone on considerably longer and only after American casualties had far surpassed those of the earlier war (Mueller, 1973, p.65).

The Vietnam War was opposed by the majority of the American population. By the time Mueller was composing his research in 1971, 61 percent of those polled opposed it, while



only 28 percent supported it (Mueller, 1973, p.55). This compares with statistics from the Korean War showing 49 percent opposed and 39 percent in support at the war's least popular time in December 1950 (Mueller, 1973, p.45). Mueller's statistics do not reflect a large swing in opinion towards opposition during the conflict in Vietnam. They show the change in public opinion was a far more gradual and less extensive one than media images and rhetoric from protestors had led to believe. Protestors during the Vietnam War were more vocal, and the media culture of repeatedly publicising this, particularly through television, amplified those voices and resulted in distortion of the collective memory of opposition to the war Mueller sought to counter with his research.

Having seen the atrocities committed by U.S. troops and endured more than a decade of war with tens of thousands of American casualties, the public witnessed television coverage of their nation's eventual defeat in 1975 as the last remaining Americans scrambled out of Saigon on helicopters in a frenzied evacuation from the U.S. Embassy. The images of the helicopters taking off from the Embassy roof and their chaotic unloading in the South China Sea, which saw groups of evacuees pushing the helicopters that brought them to the carrier into the sea to make way for the next one to land, are iconic symbols of the United States running away from the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as they marched into Saigon. Vietnam came to symbolise a humiliating defeat whose name would be repeated with frustrating regularity in the media:

For many years *Vietnam* is less a territorial expanse or a political entity, more a warning, a rebuke, a shibboleth or a metaphor. Thus Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Argentinian revolutionary, wanted to create '*two, three or more Vietnams*'; Afghanistan became '*Russia's Vietnam*'; the Lebanon became '*Israel's Vietnam*'; and on 10 August 1996 the influential Moslem cleric Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah warned the United States of a '*new Vietnam*' if it attacked Iran (Simons, 1998, p.xvii).

It is this use of Vietnam as a metaphor that has caused the "Vietnam Syndrome" to endure so long. The comparison of almost every engagement of U.S. Military forces since has its strongest roots in the outcome of the war. The fact that Vietnam resulted in defeat as opposed to victory was crucial:

The horrors brought to Vietnam by American power had little influence in shaping the Vietnam Syndrome – sired as it principally was by *American* defeat, *American* pain, *American* anguish. If the United States had committed all the horrors and more, and won the war, there would have been no Vietnam Syndrome. It was born of nothing more than the humiliation of a massive ego (Simons, 1998, p.xx).

The evidence from the coverage of and public reaction to My Lai supports Simons' argument. While the war shocked and appalled people, there was also a considerable measure of support for the members of the platoon who participated in the violence, and also reported hate mail for the soldiers of the same platoon who revealed the story. Simons is certainly correct in identifying the "Vietnam Syndrome" as a specifically American issue, as *Time Magazine* reflected in 1985:

Charles de Gaulle called Viet Nam "rotten country," and he was right in a psychic as well as a physical sense. Rotten, certainly for Americans. Viet Nam took America's energy and comparative innocence – a dangerous innocence, perhaps – and bent it around so that the muzzle fired back in the nation's face. The war became America vs. America (Anon., 1985).

Simons is also arguably correct in stating that the "Vietnam Syndrome" was borne of America's humiliation, although other factors seem to have contributed over the years. This is substantiated by early press references to the "Vietnam Syndrome." In its early years, the primary concern associated with the "Vietnam Syndrome" was the danger of the country becoming involved in another protracted war and facing another defeat. It was not until later years and later interpretations of Vietnam that any moral reflection of events such as My Lai received serious consideration and became synonymous with the war. The mood in the United States was one of determination to avoid conflict wherever possible. Georgie Anne Geyer, a correspondent in Vietnam on four occasions, looked back on her interpretation of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in 1995:

We talked a lot after the war about a "Vietnam Syndrome," but what was that really supposed to be? For me it came to signify a profound reluctance to get involved in just about any military endeavour that was not a clear win, that did not have 1,000 percent support of the American people, and that was not 10,000 percent in our national interest (Geyer, 1995).

Geyer's definition effectively summarised the "Vietnam Syndrome" in articles referring to it in the early years following the war. As the following press analysis of the development of the "Vietnam Syndrome" will illustrate, the definition changes and grows as over the years as the different effects of the American experience in Vietnam seep through society.

## The Development of the “Vietnam Syndrome”

Early references mainly refer to the “Vietnam Syndrome” in a military context. The use of the term “Vietnam Syndrome” appears to have arisen through the Carter administration’s great reluctance to use American force in any way:

When Jimmy Carter ran for President in 1976 he explained that one of the lessons of Vietnam was that the United States needed to avoid unnecessary foreign interventions. Carter supported the American participation in the war during the Johnson administration, but, like many Americans, had changed his mind about the wisdom of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s and now expressed regret for his earlier hawkish views (Schulzinger, 2006,p.185).

In 1978 journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak accused the Carter administration of suffering from a “post-Vietnam Syndrome” which manifested itself as a “fear of American power” (Evans and Novak, 1978). Schulzinger also wrote of neoconservatives making accusations of a “Vietnam Syndrome” overtaking the Carter administration around this time.

There was evidence of a “Vietnam Syndrome” among the American public also. In 1979 *The Washington Post* published the results of a poll on opinion towards American involvement in establishing equal rights in South Africa. The poll indicated Americans wanted the U.S. to support efforts for equal rights in South Africa but not at the cost of US military involvement, even if the Soviet Union and Cuba were to intervene militarily there. A “post-Vietnam Syndrome” was held responsible for this:

Essentially, they indicate that the majority of Americans want their government to pursue policies promoting world peace, democracy and equality for all people. But that this support emphatically does not include any policies or actions that could result in foreign military involvement by the United States (Goshko, 1979).

Soon after the concept of the “Vietnam Syndrome” began to grip the nation, the first of the many proclamations of its demise was heard. Speaking of the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979, Benjamin Rosenthal, senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee was quoted in a news article in *The Boston Globe* enthusiastically declaring:

The Vietnam Syndrome of America withdrawing inwardly from the world is now over. Time had to eliminate that. This is different. This is a very precise

emotional situation with 50 lives at stake for all the world to see. The public is willing to do almost anything to see that situation resolved honorably and to see the hostages home safely. I think the people wanted some cause to rally around. I think they wanted to show national unity after all those years. I'll tell you something, it's the only topic of discussion in Queens (Rosenthal quoted in Anon., 1979).

As the decades of references to the “Vietnam Syndrome” show, Benjamin Rosenthal was a little optimistic in thinking that the small-scale operation of rescuing 50 hostages would expunge the memory of a war that ended in the defeat of the American Military and the deaths of 58,000 of its men. This quote, however, is early evidence of the desire to eradicate the “Vietnam Syndrome” that would be expressed by politicians at various deployments of military force.

The next incident in which American action abroad would be considered was in the small Central American country El Salvador. The United States declared support for the government of El Salvador who were facing a violent uprising. In February 1981 President Ronald Reagan wanted to increase financial aid to the country and add to the 20 military advisors currently stationed there. The announcement was immediately met with Vietnam comparisons:

Asked whether the United States risked becoming involved in a conflict from which it would be difficult to extricate itself, the President replied that such questions represented “part of the Vietnam Syndrome.” He added: “We have no intention of that kind of involvement” (Associated Press, 1981).

Don Oberdorfer claimed, “it is undeniable that the ghost of Vietnam past falls across the El Salvador issue today” (Oberdorfer, 1981), even going so far as describing it as “the frame of reference” (Oberdorfer, 1981) for national debate on American involvement there. He provided good reason to believe Vietnam was on the mind of politicians:

Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., in a recent confidential briefing for foreign diplomats, gave a solid clue to his line of thinking. Haig twice volunteered the Vietnam analogy, according to a transcript that later was leaked, but in a way that few of envoys could have anticipated. “Off the record, I wish to assure you we do not intend to have another Vietnam in El Salvador” – and before the envoys could exhale, he added, “and engage ourselves in another bloody conflict where the source [Cuba] rests outside the target area” (Oberdorfer, 1981).

There is also evidence to believe Vietnam was on the minds of the public. The Associated Press published news that letters to The White House were against the decision to send

military aid at a ratio of ten to one. The report substantiates this sign of public opinion with further evidence:

The trepid support for Reagan's Salvadorian policies is also reflected in recent polls showing less than one-third of those questioned backing the President's decision to send more military aid and American advisers to help the ruling Salvadorian junta.

Congressional offices are reporting similar trends. Capitol Hill aides say the flow of letters on El Salvador is "very heavy," with 85 percent or more of the mail opposed to Reagan's policies and many letters expressing fear of "another Vietnam" (Associated Press, 1981).

Until this point the "Vietnam Syndrome" had largely been defined as an American reluctance over entering into foreign conflicts. With the situation in El Salvador came an argument that the "Vietnam Syndrome" could have other symptoms. Writing about El Salvador, journalist Stephen S. Rosenfeld identified "another, less visible Vietnam Syndrome – a reluctance to get involved in messy Third World negotiating situations that might lead to peace" (Rosenfeld, 1981). Rosenfeld argued the "Vietnam Syndrome" was preventing attempts at peace negotiating in El Salvador because the "quest for peace came to be seen as a sellout of an ally flowing from weakness and from the illusion that we could salvage at the table what we had not gained at the battlefield" (Rosenfeld, 1981). Now the press was beginning to notice Reagan's desire to fight America's way out of the "Vietnam Syndrome." An eagerness to re-fight Vietnam and produce a more favourable result for the United States became another facet of the "Vietnam Syndrome," and one that was particularly displayed by those favouring right-wing politics.

During the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, there was a fresh and powerful political and cultural push to overcome the "Vietnam Syndrome." Jon Roper (1995) describes the condition of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in the 1980s:

Rather than a self-imposed caution against the pursuit of an expansionist foreign policy, now it was a barrier to business as usual; to 'empire as a way of life'. No longer a restraint, it became a constraint: an obstacle that had to be confirmed if popular support was to be re-engaged for the projection of American military power abroad (Roper, 1995, p.25).

Fighting, and winning, another conflict was only one part of the push to overcome the "Vietnam Syndrome." Reagan accompanied this with new myths to make American conduct and the American defeat in Vietnam more palatable. In a speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in August 1980 Reagan said:

It is time we recognised that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self defense against a totalitarian neighbour bent on conquest (Reagan, 1980).

Reagan laid much to the blame for the “Vietnam Syndrome” on the North Vietnamese who sought “to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the battlefield in Vietnam” (Reagan, 1980). He claimed their propaganda led to the belief that America was the aggressor, when it was the North Vietnamese who were the imperialists of Southeast Asia. He also blamed the American politicians for not letting the troops win.

Over the coming years there were further assertions that America could have won but the troops were prevented from doing so by higher powers. It carried through the Reagan presidency and into the Bush vocabulary as President George Bush declared the next time they would not be made to “fight with one hand tied behind their back” (President Bush quoted in Taylor, 1992, p.1).

Reagan’s explanations, promoted to a public to restore the national self-confidence, were reinforced by Hollywood productions such as *First Blood Part II* (1985, Dir. George Cosmatos) in which Rambo asks “Do we get to win this time?” as he goes to re-fight, and this time win, the war in Vietnam. However, there were many to refute this explanation, or as they saw it “excuse,” for the defeat in Vietnam:

If seven-and-a-half million tons of bombs dropped on a peasant land and two-and-a-half million people killed is the result of such constraint, the prospect of both hands free ought to bring pause to those who believe the end justifies the means (Pilger quoted in Roper, 1995, p.36).

Marilyn Young agrees, claiming: “Short of obliterating the country, it is difficult to see what more could have been done” (Young, 1991, p.22).

In addition to refighting the Vietnam War in other conflicts and rewriting it in a more pro-American way, Reagan followed up with a third tactic of basic, repeated assertions that the “Vietnam Syndrome” had been defeated. On one occasion, at a speech to the Military Academy at West Point on May 27, 1981 he said: “The American people have recovered from what can only be called a temporary aberration. There is a spiritual revival going on in this country.... The era of self-doubt is over” (Reagan quoted in Kraft, 1981).

Unfortunately for the President, his Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, speaking to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs on the same day, was less convinced of the fleeting nature of the “Vietnam Syndrome” and of its destruction:

If we are perceived as wasteful or unreceptive to new ideas of strategy or tactics, or if we do anything to lose the people’s confidence, we might destroy the fragile national consensus so recently formed for stronger defenses, and the new national resolve to fight if necessary for the future (Weinberg quoted in Kraft, 1981).

Author of the report, Joseph Kraft, views Weinberger’s analysis to be closest to public opinion:

The attitudes associated with Vietnam were not, like a plague, something foreign that came and went, and is now gone forever. Far from being an abnormality the so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” was a logical response to a misbegotten war in which many, including many military men and at least one commander in chief, behaved ignobly (Kraft, 1981).

Kraft’s argument was supported later that year by Philip Geyelin, after attending a World Without War Council conference in Washington about the Vietnam War on the topic of “Vietnam and the Opinion Makers.” His main conclusion from the event regarded the “Vietnam Syndrome:”

It exists – but not as an absolute rejection of anything in American foreign policy that remotely embraces the impulses and purposes that gradually ensnared this country, increment by creeping increment, in the Vietnam tragedy. It is not blindly anti-defense, or anti-military intervention, or anti-deterrence of communism.

But neither does it take the form of dogged refusal to confront head-on the excesses, failures, misjudgements and misrepresentations that contributed to the failure of the Vietnam mission.

The real Vietnam Syndrome is more complicated, more questioning – and a lot more constructive than that. And for just that reason, its impact on public attitudes toward this country’s future role in the world is likely to be all the more profound (Geyelin, 1981).

By the early 1980s there had been a shift in focus of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” The trauma of the military defeat, while still significant, was rivalled in magnitude by the moral defeat. The “Vietnam Syndrome” had become less of a political issue and more of a cultural one that affected America’s national self-image. On the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon an article in *Time Magazine* reflected that “the loss itself was not as

traumatic (for Americans, anyway) as the way that the war was fought, the way it was perceived, and peculiarly hated” (Anon., 1985). The article raised the difficulty of “whether to judge the Viet Nam era in historical terms or in psychiatric terms” because, even to those who never fought in it, the war “comes back and back and back” (Anon., 1985). The article then identifies this shift in the “Vietnam Syndrome” precisely:

The war had always been refracted rather strangely in the American mind. If time has moved on, it has also receded, in a psychological sense. Seven years ago, the war seemed much further away than it does now. During a long period in the ‘70s, the nation indulged in a remarkable exercise of recoil and denial and amnesia about Viet Nam. Americans did not want to hear about it, to think about it (Anon., 1985).

Reagan’s tactics of refighting, rewriting and denial were all predominantly pitched at addressing the basic military aversion aspect of the “Vietnam Syndrome” that was described in the earlier reports of it and the increasing feelings of shame about the defeat. While his statement rewriting the conflict as a moral cause was an attempt to curb the nation’s moral ambivalence towards their military’s actions in Vietnam, it did not go far enough to answer all of questions reflection on the war had brought regarding the disparity between their country’s conduct and their national self-image: was it moral to kill 2 million Vietnamese for the sake of this cause? If America was so honourable, why were there so acts of brutality committed and covered-up? What of the continuing affects of the defoliant known as Agent Orange? Why was so much invested in the war, based on the discredited domino theory, when it proved to be of so little national concern to America?

The reflective *Time Magazine* article posed a series of questions in its conclusion also. These were a different set of questions, based on arguments made throughout the article. These questions convincingly attempted to denounce the need for the “Vietnam Syndrome” as a psychological burden. At the very least they should have been able to raise serious doubts. “Were the Americans acting as idealists, honoring a treaty commitment to an ally and defending freedom against communist aggression?” the article asks. “Or were they anti-communist crusaders who committed atrocities against a land of peasants?” (Anon., 1985). Most of the questions the author poses here have already been answered throughout the article. There had already been plenty of reference to America losing its innocence through Vietnam, implying ignorance in going into the conflict, and the author has also already argued that the Vietnamese were not the simple peasants the left portrayed them as. More of the questions refer to crucial issues concerning the American self-image: “Were the Americans a collection of baby killers, or basically honourable men doing their duty when the nation called? Were the soldiers of the peace



movement representatives of a uniquely virtuous generation, the most idealistic in history? (The antiwar protests died away when the draft ended in 1973.)” (Anon., 1985). The article has displayed a pro-Vietnam veteran perspective throughout, and the statement that the antiwar protests ended when the draft did leaves little doubt over the author’s answer to the peace protestors.

Yet the arguments and questions posed in this analysis were not reverberated in the mainstream newspapers in writing of Vietnam or the latest American military operation. They were not reflected in subsequent Hollywood blockbusters. They did not sweep away the psychological torment or moral doubts the nation expressed over the war. This indicates the “Vietnam Syndrome” was thriving by a means other than a constant analysis of the Vietnam War. The historical and military aspect had indeed given way to the cultural. The “Vietnam Syndrome” was becoming more closely linked to the mass media.

However, the basic aversion to military action still remained among the American public and politicians, even though the rationale behind it may have been departing somewhat from its roots in military concerns and historical reflection. As Philip Geyelin wrote: “The president has only to send a modest detachment of U.S. marines to Lebanon as part of a multicultural peacekeeping force and senators from Kennedy to Goldwater insist they can stay there only if they are not shot at” (Geyelin, 1983). From both the political and the public arenas there seemed to be a fear of becoming involved in “another Vietnam.” An August 1983 Washington Post/CBS News opinion poll on the President’s policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua found 62 percent of people polled disapproved of U.S. involvement in overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. Even more telling was the 4 in 10 who believed the U.S. was becoming involved in a new Vietnam in Central America through its policies towards El Salvador and Nicaragua (Sussman, 1983).

There was much controversy surrounding supporting the Contras in Nicaragua. There were reports of torture and murder of civilians and many questioned whether the Contras were freedom fighters or terrorists. Antony Lewis, writing for *The San Francisco Chronicle* claims the Reagan policy on Nicaragua to be driven by ideology: “He came to office determined to overcome what conservatives call the “Vietnam Syndrome,” an unwillingness by this country to use its military power. To do that he must have an opportunity to use American muscle. Nicaragua is the chosen place” (Lewis, 1985).

In mid-1985, *The San Francisco Chronicle* published a lot of letters expressing fear that Nicaragua would be another Vietnam. Some questioned the ethics of the intervention. Others simply feared another “bad war.” One of these, written by Marge and Howard Costello and published in April 1985, makes their point clearly and simply:

Editor – Ronald Reagan repeatedly warns that Nicaragua is about to become a second Cuba. We feel that it will be much easier to live with Nicaragua as a second Cuba than to live with Nicaragua as a second Vietnam. The latter seems to be Reagan’s goal (Costello and Costello, 1985).

When the House voted against Reagan’s proposal to send either military or financial aid to Nicaragua in April 1985, the “Vietnam Syndrome” was cited by House Speaker Thomas P. O’Neill Jr. as the reason for the opposition to the policy.

In a comment regarding House debate on reconsideration of aid to Nicaragua, a year later Reagan again commented “I think America is leaving the Vietnam Syndrome behind” (Reagan quoted in Weinraub, 1986). Perhaps where limited military action is concerned, the President’s oft-repeated claim was actually beginning to gain credibility. Despite continuing echoes of Vietnam in the debate, the President’s request for aid was granted.

The following President of the United States, George H.W. Bush carried forth Reagan’s determination to push the “Vietnam Syndrome” out of society. In his inaugural address he stated that the Vietnam War “cleaves us still” and pleaded with the American public to forget and move on:

But, friends, that war began in earnest a quarter of a century ago; and surely the statute of limitations has been reached. This is a fact: the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by memory (Bush quoted in Roper, 1995, p.27).

In December 1989 the United States intervened in Panama in Operation Just Cause. This deployment was not met with the same public outcry against it or with anything close to the level of comparison to Vietnam. While the United Nations condemned the invasion as an act of aggression, a New York Times/CBS News Poll on the day President George Bush announced the dispatch of troops to Panama showed 53% of respondents in favour of sending them, and only 34 percent against (Clymer, 1989). The operation was completed swiftly and successfully. The United States was beginning to gain confidence in not only executing these brief limited conflicts, but also in accepting them. The conflict lasted just

15 days and only 23 Americans were killed in action. Afterwards, Bush achieved 80% approval in the opinion ratings (Robinson, 1990).

Despite the country's success of the series of short military campaigns in the years following Vietnam, there remained a level of restraint in American military deployment. Reagan had avoided full-scale commitment in Nicaragua and withdrew troops from the Lebanon when it seemed there could be heavy losses:

America seemed caught between the desire for a decisive military victory overseas to purge the revisionist feeling that its own failings had led it to lose in the Vietnam War, and the nagging fear that a wholehearted commitment to another adventure, on the scale of that undertaken in South-East Asia, might lead once again to defeat. In these terms, Grenada, Libya and even Panama were sideshows: sparring matches before the main event (Roper, 1995, p.34).

Roper suggests that the antidote to the "Vietnam Syndrome" would always have to be a conflict on a scale of the 1991 Gulf War. Grenada, Libya and Panama he considered to be merely testing the public will to commit to another major overseas military operation.

The Gulf War was proclaimed the ultimate antidote to the "Vietnam Syndrome." From the outset the public were assured that this would not be another Vietnam. Vice President Quale guaranteed "Operation Desert Storm will not be another Vietnam. [U.S. forces] will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their backs" (Quale quoted in Wicker, 1991).

It was evident that as the bombs fell in Baghdad and ground troops rolled into action the "Vietnam Syndrome" was still in need of addressing. As George C. Herring wrote: "Such was the lingering impact of the Vietnam War that the Persian Gulf conflict appeared at times as much a struggle with its ghosts as with Saddam Hussein's Iraq" (Herring, 1991, p.104). In February 1991 Rowland Evans of *The Washington Post* went further to suggest that the defeat of the "Vietnam Syndrome" was the primary motivation behind the Bush administration's actions in the Gulf:

Fear of a peace deal at the Bush White House had less to do with oil, Israel and Iraqi expansionism than with the bitter legacy of a lost war. "This is the chance to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome," one senior aide told us. "We can show that we are capable of winning a war" (Evans, 1991).

It was imperative to the President that the Gulf War would be brief, coming to a swift, clear conclusion – and that the conclusion was a successful one for the United States. When victory came in the Gulf the “Vietnam Syndrome” was declared dead. President Bush proudly proclaimed that the “Vietnam Syndrome” had been “kicked” and in a radio address to U.S. troops in the Gulf three days after the war ended, said: “The spectre of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula” (President Bush quoted in Isaacs, 1997, p.65).

The popular press was also quick to restore national pride by highlighting the contemporary success in the Gulf over the past in Vietnam, as Thomas Oliphant wrote for *The Boston Globe*:

Bush’s leadership has transformed the Vietnam Syndrome into a Gulf Syndrome, where “Out now!” is a slogan directed at aggressors, not at ourselves. We should be proud that from the ashes of a failed policy he built one based on the worthy and demanding standard that aggression must be opposed, in exceptional cases by force. It has cost lives, not one of them in vain (Oliphant, 1991).

Comparing the imagery of the conclusions of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, E. J. Dionne wrote in *The Washington Post*:

There was no more powerful symbol of the transformation than the helicopters landing Marines on the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait. The last collective memory of helicopters hovering above an embassy involved the chaotic evacuation of Americans and their local allies from Saigon as North Vietnamese troops closed in on the city (Dionne, 1991).

*The San Francisco Chronicle* published a poignant reminder that the “Vietnam Syndrome” concerned more than American defeat on the battlefield:

After a victory over Iraq that exceeded all expectations, America’s fighting men and women are coming home as heroes to a country that – because of them – is no longer tormented by the humiliating memory of Vietnam.” “For Specialist 4 Brannon Lamar of North Augusta, S.C., it was summed up in a single event: “When we took all those POWs and didn’t mistreat them or gun them down, I wanted to cry,” he said. “I was so proud to be a U.S. soldier. Maybe we are the good guys this time (Chen and Richter, 1991).

However, some reports called for caution with America’s new confidence. Headlines of reports and analysis of the war in the major national newspapers several days later on March 6 included “Victory Not Withstanding, The Lessons of Vietnam Still Apply” (Ryan,

1991) in *The Boston Globe*, and “In the Flush of Victory, We Need to Remember Our Limits” (Akeman, 1991) and being “Top Gun Is Useful, But Beware the Pitfalls” (Fain, 1991) in *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution*.

George C. Herring suggested that Bush was premature in proclaiming the “Vietnam Syndrome” dead, arguing:

It seems doubtful that military victory over a nation with a population less than one-third of Vietnam in a conflict fought under the most favourable circumstances could expunge deeply encrusted and still painful memories of an earlier and very different kind of war (Herring, 1991, p.104).

Herring identified the differences between the Vietnam and Gulf Wars. The Gulf War, with its heavy reliance on air strikes and the greater advantage over the Iraqi Army, was from the outset a far easier project than Vietnam.

This is certainly substantiated by press reports published after the initial euphoria of victory. Many condemned the scale of the American attack:

Some of the national elation has been embarrassing. The mismatch between the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces resembled a professional team against a junior high school. To draw any satisfaction from the piling on of the 100,000-sortie air war or the cutting off and bombing of a fleeing convoy on a al-Mutlaa ridge (a scene one A-10 pilot described as “the road to Daytona Beach at spring break”) would be obscene (Ryan, 1991).

Criticism of the execution of the war was often irrespective of the writer’s opinion of the morality of the cause for it, with *The Boston Globe* editorial stating that “the justness of the war against Saddam Hussein” cannot “confer retrospective legitimacy on the American war in Vietnam” (Anon., 1991). An article by Robert Scheer employs some particularly strong terms:

Tell me again why more than a month of bombing a civilian population, surgical or not, does not qualify as terrorism. Too harsh? The recent United Nations survey of civilian damage in Iraq terms it “near-apocalyptic,” with the country reduced “to a pre-industrial age” ... The goal might be noble, but the means were the same as in hijacking a commercial aircraft – treating civilians as combatants (Scheer, 1991).

Others have cited another factor that detracted from the America’s success in the Gulf. Bush refused to continue the Gulf War to remove Saddam, ending the conflict with the

liberation of Kuwait, which resulted in what critics referred to as “stop-short victory” (Safire, 1992). The *Chicago Tribune* reported “American Euphoria Disappears Under a Cloud of Pessimism:”

The adrenaline wore off. Americans found the world looking a larger mess than when the U.S. set out to free Kuwait. The “lesson of Iraq” is proving to be one of frustrated good intentions and the futility of things – which is the last subject on which the United States needs another lesson. That was the lesson of Vietnam (Pfaff, 1991).

Foreign affairs journalist Strobe Talbott claims that the decision not to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq was the result of a fear of “becoming bogged down in a Vietnam quagmire” (Talbott, 1992, p.59), suggesting that the “Vietnam Syndrome” was still very much alive:

The simple restraint remained. The President was unwilling to risk his military success by committing forces to an open-ended conflict against Iraq. In doing so, he called into question the principle upon which he insisted that the Gulf War had been fought... Saddam Hussein’s continuing survival exposed Bush’s ‘credibility gap’. The ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ still existed as a constraint that counselled caution (Roper, 1995, p.44).

The Gulf War not only continued references to the “Vietnam Syndrome,” it sparked the introduction of a flurry of others. There was speculation of an “Iraq Syndrome” that was basically an inverted “Vietnam Syndrome” where the success of the Gulf War made America too eager to enter conflicts. In addition to the references to an “Iraq Syndrome,” *The New York Times* published an article about a similar “Peru Syndrome” that encompassed “the idea that U.S. forces are required, and can prevail, anywhere U.S. interests appear to be threatened” (Wicker, 1991a). This came upon the news that 50 U.S. servicemen would be sent to Peru to train combat troops, repair helicopters and create a river patrol force to fight the Shining Path guerrillas and stop trafficking of drugs.

Talk of an “Iraq Syndrome” prompted Richard A. Brody, in an article for *The Washington Post* to deny the existence not only of the “Iraq Syndrome,” but also of the original military aversion associated with the “Vietnam Syndrome.” His argument reminds readers of the reluctance of the United States to get involved in the Second World War, or fight Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1963. He convincingly argued that America has a “historical reluctance to commit American troops to foreign wars” (Brody, 1991) that simply re-emerged during the Vietnam War:

America does not like to put its youth in harm's way. Not surprisingly, Vietnam did nothing to change that preference. Nor has Iraq produced huge majorities eager to volunteer America for duty as the world's cop (Brody, 1991).

Brody was referring to *The Washington Post's* own opinion poll that indicated the majority of Americans, 60% of those polled, were not in favour of the U.S. taking a more active role in world affairs. The same poll found fewer than a third of respondents would support American military involvement in the event of invasion of countries such as South Korea, Taiwan or the Baltic States by their more powerful neighbours. Even within a month of the victory celebrations for the Gulf War, the climate of military restraint remained. Some may consider this to be evidence that the "Vietnam Syndrome" remained, but Brody's argument raises the possibility that the conflict aversion feature of the "Vietnam Syndrome" was rooted in the nation before the war in Vietnam had even begun.

This leads to the implication that the "Vietnam Syndrome" was constructed in society, and the military aversion attributed to it as source rather than just a source of aggravation. The media and the public then utilised it as an example on all the subsequent occasions. This may not only help explain the source of the concept of the "Vietnam Syndrome," but also its continued relevance and its ability to prevail in discourse surrounding military deployment from the Iran hostage crisis in late 1970s to the war in Afghanistan in 2010. If Vietnam is not the source but a cultural reference point, then regardless of the successes after it, it will remain that reference point. The Vietnam War has come to symbolise a protracted conflict, American defeat, immoral conduct in war and the psychological torment of soldiers and the nation. When these issues arise there is a cultural link back to the collective memory built up of Vietnam.

References to a "Syndrome" resulting from the victory in the Gulf War also continued. Like the "Vietnam Syndrome," it became a more complex concept than a basic consideration of America's ability to secure victory in foreign conflicts:

This new syndrome has two features, both in sharp contrast to the syndrome it replaced. One is the belief that it is, after all, America's destiny to right the world's wrongs... The second feature of the Gulf War syndrome is the belief that America Can Do It. This is the military version of the old Apollo syndrome. You remember: If America can go to the moon, why can't we cure poverty or cancer or air pollution? Well, if America can whip Saddam Hussein, why can't we whip Slobodon Milosevic? (Kinsley, 1992).

The possibility of military action in the Balkans suggested the “Gulf War Syndrome” had not so much replaced the “Vietnam Syndrome” as appeared alongside it. The voices Kinsley referred to who were calling for action in Bosnia were accompanied by others, including many in the government and military, expressing reluctance and severe doubts. In July 1992 President Bush rejected a personal plea from Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic for military intervention. President Izetbegovic remarked: “I had the impression from the remarks that he made that Vietnam was very much on his mind” (Walker, 1992). Secretary of State James Baker III strengthened the Vietnam connection in saying the Bosnia-Herzegovina situation had “quagmire potential” (Walker, *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 1992). The quagmire analogy had been a defining feature of the Vietnam War, and the avoidance of another quagmire had been a feature of the “Vietnam Syndrome” since discussions of its existence had begun. The word was being repeated extremely often in political commentary in the 1990s.

President Bill Clinton eventually sent U.S. forces into Bosnia in November 1995. In total 20,000 personnel were deployed. *The Dallas Morning News* reported Texan and national polls, in a reflection of views expressed in national polls, showed a majority of 55% (Timms, 1995) of Texans were against this. The analogy of Vietnam was reflected in the minds of American citizens at this time also, as one of the comments they published illustrates: “I figure it will be like another Vietnam,” said Ms. Juarez, a 38-year-old resident of Brackettville. She continued, “I feel like we’re getting in too deep in something that is none of our business” (Timms, 1995).

As if the Bosnia comparisons were not enough, Georgie Anne Geyer (1995) also compared the Haiti intervention in 1995 to Vietnam. The United States, in conjunction with the United Nations, intervened in Haiti to install a democratic government and perform peacekeeping duties. Despite the obvious success of the operation in putting the government in place, Geyer still considers the situation left unfinished because of the reluctance to become too heavily involved.

There was obviously no longer an absolute barrier to America entering conflicts. Involvement in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, the Gulf, Bosnia and Haiti are evidence of that. Yet there was a distinct reluctance to deploy troops in operations when a clear victory not guaranteed. This is accountable for the reluctance in Bosnia and Haiti over fears of a quagmire situation, despite the successful execution of a military deployment on



the scale of the Gulf War. This is how the military aversion aspect of the post-Gulf War “Vietnam Syndrome” was manifest.

In 1995 former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara published *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. It was a lengthy essay on his mistakes made concerning the conflict. In it he wrote of his doubts about being able to win the war and doubts over the domino theory used to rationalise the U.S. involvement. McNamara spoke of terrible personal guilt over many aspects of the Vietnam War. The publication of these, surrounded by television, radio, and newspaper and magazine articles reinforced not only McNamara’s defeat and guilt, but also the public’s:

President Bush said the Gulf War finally put paid to the “Vietnam Syndrome.” The reaction to Robert McNamara’s memoirs shows what a forlorn hope that was. The Gulf War has all but vanished from the American psyche, yet Vietnam has lost little of its corrosive force. It is time, many say, to treat Vietnam as a country, not a war. But for a generation, Vietnam will always be a war (Anon., 1995).

The next time America went to war, however, it was with strong majorities in the polls, even under the suggestion of high volumes of casualties. In 2001 President George W. Bush prepared the American public for a conflict he described as “a struggle of uncertain duration” (Bush quoted in Young and Milbank, 2001). In 2001, following the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks, the United States went to war with Afghanistan to seek out those responsible and remove the Taliban government who supported them and offered them sanctuary from power. Support for the war was rooted in the high degree of national interest associated with it. Afghanistan was not simply an act of revenge for the terrorist attacks – it was a matter of defence. The attacks shocked the country into the view that if America was not prepared to go to war, the war would come to American soil. The war in Afghanistan was a pre-emptive strike to prevent further such engagement in the United States.

The conflict also had the clarity of purpose that had proved necessary for public support. Echoes of Pearl Harbour reverberated and, as in the 1940s when America faced Hitler and the Japanese, there was no moral uncertainty about this enemy. Bush also emphasised this resemblance and utilised the public memory of the Second World War, pleading for the same public patience when the casualties start coming home. There was little reason to fear getting involved for fear of casualties anyway. 5000 American civilians were already casualties. Without its prior consent, America was already involved. This “abruptly

changed the American psyche on questions of war and its costs” (Young and Milbank, 2001). There was little mention of a “Vietnam Syndrome” in 2001 where Afghanistan was concerned.

However, use of the concept of the “Vietnam Syndrome” is beginning to come from the ongoing war in Afghanistan, where several strong Vietnam comparisons can now be made. The Taliban, supported militarily and financially from the large international terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and the international trade of drugs, is fighting a war based on deep-rooted ideology for which they are prepared to fight indefinitely. Insurgents are recruited from all backgrounds and communities, making the task of identifying the enemy from civilians almost impossible. The United States, along with its allies, is yet again involved in a protracted war in which there seems little sign of progress and as recently as June 27, 2010 *The Washington Post* published an article by Eliot A. Cohen entitled “The Afghanistan Syndrome.”

Iraq has already undergone such comparison. The Iraq War began in 2003 when, having successfully removed the Taliban from government in Afghanistan, the Bush administration turned its attention to Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. Through accusations of terrorist links and a dossier, that has since been discredited, outlining Iraq’s reserves of weapons of mass destruction powerful enough to reach the United States, the President laid forth his rationale for regime change. Despite achieving its objective of removing Saddam Hussein from power, when the invasion of Iraq by American and coalition forces failed to lead to uncovering any weapons of mass destruction people and the press questioned the motives for the war. The following is an excerpt from reader’s letter from Charles E. Haddock to *The Washington Post* that is typical of the argument made:

North Korea actually possesses weapons of mass destruction and the capacity to launch them at the U.S. today. Why has the U.S. military not waged pre-emptive war against North Korea?

It’s apparent this war was not really about removing a dictator or weapons of mass destruction since several other countries meet the same criteria used to justify the occupation of Iraq.

This war was clearly about oil and most Americans were duped by the Bush administration (Haddock, 2003).

Iraq was known to have the world’s second-largest oil reserves. Suspicion over the government’s interest in the region was amplified when records reluctantly released by the

Bush administration under court order revealed Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force had in-depth discussions about Iraq's oil prior to the war. Accusations of false pretexts to the war in Iraq were reminiscent of Vietnam, the invasion of which was sparked by the supposed attack on American ships in the Tonkin Gulf. There have even been damaging press reports of abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib to mull over. To make matters worse, the initial victory that culminated in citizens of Iraq pulling down a statue of Saddam in central Baghdad, a mirror image of scenes in Saigon in 1975 as the North Vietnamese Army pulled down a statue of a South Vietnamese soldier, did not mark the end of the conflict which was to wage on for another seven years, evoking further memories of Vietnam:

The glib comparison one reads and hears everywhere these days is between the mess in Iraq today and America's disastrous war in Vietnam. There are so many reasons why the wars are not equational, yet the trauma of that long-ago conflict still haunts the American psyche. George Bush Senior declared the Vietnam Syndrome dead after the first Iraq War more than a decade ago, and according to Bob Woodward, Donald Rumsfeld got a laugh after the fall of Kabul by mocking the Cassandras. "All together now – quagmire!" (Greenway, 2004).

Iraq did have several large strategic differences from Vietnam that reduced the initial likelihood of it becoming a quagmire for the same reasons. There was no separate state of North Iraq for the insurgents to base themselves, nor was there an abundant supply of Soviet weapons or a Ho Chi Minh trail in neighbouring countries. The war was also being waged in empty desert as opposed to dense forest. Unfortunately for the United States, the war was also showing similarities that were leading to it increasingly becoming a quagmire situation. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the conflict was no longer a straightforward matter of fighting Saddam's army, but of fighting a guerrilla war against the terrorists and insurgents who opposed the occupation of Iraq by American and coalition forces. Journalist H.D.S. Greenway, who covered the Vietnam War, wrote of a photograph of Marines fighting urban warfare in Fallujah evoking a "vivid memory" (Greenway, 2004) of witnessing the battle for Hue in 1968. As with the Viet Cong, the insurgents were not easily identifiable either, making it hard for the coalition forces to distinguish them from civilians.

The comparison with Vietnam was written of earlier and more frequently with reference to the Iraq War than the Afghanistan War, even though the conflict in Afghanistan had begun more than a year earlier. The crucial difference was the continued belief that Afghanistan was a just war against the emerging belief that Iraq was unethical in concept and in

execution. As was established earlier in this discussion, military failure was what launched the “Vietnam Syndrome” initially, but it appears it was prolonged feelings of guilt that sustained it. In addition to accusations of profiteering through Iraq’s oil and post-war reconstruction contracts, the conflict was creating a catalogue of atrocities that led Derrick Z. Jackson to write: “The syndrome is kicking Junior all the way back to My Lai” (Jackson, 2006). He was principally referring to the alleged cover-up of the massacre of 24 Iraqi civilians in Haditha by U.S. marines but he listed several other incidents that led to him reaching this conclusion. There was also the story of U.S. soldiers shooting a pregnant Iraqi woman and her mother at a checkpoint as they were being driven to the hospital as she was in labour. The Military claimed the driver ignored the fact the road was closed in his hurry to get to the hospital. Shortly after, the BBC obtained and broadcast worldwide some footage of 11 civilians killed, including five children, one of whom was only 6 months old, and an elderly woman aged 75. It was alleged a U.S. Military cover-up was instigated here also. The Military said the roof collapsed due to heavy fire in a fight at a suspected Al Qaeda safe house. Eyewitnesses said an Al Qaeda member was visiting relatives there and the U.S. soldiers rounded up the entire family and executed them in cold blood. The BBC broadcast that the bodies had bullet wounds but no injuries from being crushed by a roof. The military exonerated the troops involved. Jackson had no shortage of material from which to draw evidence:

This comes on top of other news reports of individuals killed here and there by U.S. soldiers, and on top of long-forgotten wipeouts of weddings and families in vans. No one incident adds up to the single atrocity of My Lai, where U.S. soldiers killed up to 500 Vietnamese civilians. But the mentality appears identical. American soldiers are again in an aimless war, aiming in the end at innocent targets (Jackson, 2006).

The Iraq War had spoiled any notion that the “good war” in Afghanistan had purged the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

The irony is that for three decades, American interventionists like those surrounding Rumsfeld have been laboring to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome and its reluctance to get involved in overseas wars. And now, in their hour of seeing triumph, having waged a war that was largely supported by Americans, despite the perils, these interventionists have much to fear. That’s because whenever Rumsfeld finally packs up his office at the Pentagon, he will leave behind an even more burdensome Iraq Syndrome – the renewed, nagging and sometimes paralysing belief that any large-scale U.S. military intervention abroad is doomed to practical failure and moral iniquity. Whenever the possible use of force is raised again, assurances will be sought that this will not

be “another Iraq.” And future interventionists will worry about how to shake off the Iraq Syndrome (Freedman, 2005).

Some journalists followed the familiar pattern of refuting any “Syndrome” in operation. David Brooks, writing in *The New York Times*, wrote of “no generalised loss of faith in the American systems or in American goodness.” (Brooks, 2007):

Forget about it. Americans are having a debate about how to proceed in Iraq, but we’re not having a strategic debate about retracting American power and influence. What’s more important about this debate is what doesn’t need to be said. No major American leader doubts that America must remain, as Dean Acheson put it, the locomotive of the world (Brooks, 2007).

A number of experts in foreign policy and national strategy disagreed and argued Iraq could cause America even more damage than Vietnam. Erin M. Simpson, a counterinsurgency expert at Harvard University, commented: “I think the hangover from this war will be at least as bad as Vietnam and wouldn’t be surprised by a growing movement toward retrenchment and isolationism. (Simpson quoted in Ricks, 2007). John Mueller, who made the comparisons between public opinion data from the Korean and Vietnam Wars exhibited surprise at the rate at which American support for the Iraq War dropped, leading him also to predict a potent “Iraq Syndrome” that would involve the demise of the Bush doctrine of preemptive war:

No matter how the war in Iraq turns out, an Iraq Syndrome seems likely. A poll in relatively war-approving Alabama earlier this year, for example, asked whether the United States should be prepared to send troops back to Iraq to establish order there in the event a full-scale civil war erupted after a U.S. withdrawal. Only a third of the respondents favored doing so (Mueller, 2005).

Some experts even believed the Iraq War would bring greater guilt than Vietnam: “Vietnam had an ongoing civil war when the U.S. intervened, while Iraq’s civil war did not begin until after the U.S. intervention,” stressed a State Department official who served in Iraq but is not permitted to speak to the media (quoted in Ricks, 2007). The “Iraq Syndrome” described here appears to be a re-informed extension of the “Vietnam Syndrome” with reference to the Iraq conflict.

In the end, the U.S. did manage to make a more dignified, if rather humble, withdrawal from Iraq over a period of 18 months from February 2009, placing a fragile democratic government in control, training Iraqi forces to fight the insurgency themselves, and more importantly avoiding the shame of defeat on the battlefield. There was no scrambled

helicopter evacuation from the rooftop as the enemy marched on the city, but after more than seven long years, the deaths of more than four thousand Americans and more than a hundred thousand Iraqis – mainly civilians – widespread destruction and civil unrest, it was neither glorified a military victory or a moral one and contributed to the continuing relevance of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Iraq War context.

### Conclusion: Defining the “Vietnam Syndrome”

The preceding discussion of the concept of the “Vietnam Syndrome” as reflected by media reports, public opinion and academic analysis serves two functions. First, it provides a timeline of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in American society. Significant events which promoted the use of the term have been identified and placed in context. Significant events to affect the “Vietnam Syndrome” have been discussed. The second function of this section is to provide a basis for composing a definition of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Throughout the discussion I have made arguments regarding the nature of the “Vietnam Syndrome” at certain different points in time. These shall now be brought together in this conclusion to provide a summary of the definition of the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

The first conclusion that has to be drawn is that the “Vietnam Syndrome” is not fixed. The symptoms of it reflected in the contemporary media suggest several transitions in the definition of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” These shall now be summarised in turn.

In the early post-Vietnam years, between 1975 and 1980, the “Vietnam Syndrome” is portrayed as a simple avoidance of any military deployment. Aside from the Iran hostage crisis in 1979, which practically forced the government to take action, the United States took a step back from global affairs and adopted an isolationist approach.

In 1981 El Salvador was judged within a Vietnam frame of reference. It became evident the “Vietnam Syndrome” was too disruptive to American foreign policy and President Reagan expressed a desire to overcome it through refighting Vietnam, rewriting Vietnam and announcing the “Vietnam Syndrome’s” defeat. The “Vietnam Syndrome” was now exhibiting a wider range of symptoms through a need to refight – and most importantly, win – the war, and attempts to mythologize the defeat through claims the American troops could have won but were prevented from doing so by politicians. This ideology was reflected in cultural products of the time, including revisionist films which shall be introduced in the next chapter.

By the mid-1980s there had been a distinct shift in focus of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” It was less an aversion to military action triggered by the defeat in Vietnam, and more a psychological condition brought on by the shame of defeat and shame over the ethical consequences of the war. There was an increasingly closer link to the mass media, and a move towards emotional representation and away from historical analysis. However, the basic aversion to military action remained also. There was strong opposition to involvement in Nicaragua in public opinion polls and in politics. It was not until 1986 that the President managed to get his request for limited aid to Nicaragua voted through.

Limited involvement became the model for U.S. Military action in the late 1980s. The operation in Panama was swift, successful and retained public support and the United States avoided full-scale commitment. However, this was not regarded as a model to overcome the “Vietnam Syndrome” and in 1991 President Bush entered the Gulf War with the intention that it would achieve this. In the euphoria of victory he famously proclaimed the “Vietnam Syndrome” to have been “kicked”, only for post-victory analysis to reflect a continuing restraint on opinion towards war and doubts as to the motive for the Gulf War and American conduct in it – all suggesting the “Vietnam Syndrome” to be still in existence. This was echoed in the Vietnam comparisons raised in debates about American involvement in the Balkans. Speculation over an “Iraq Syndrome” or “Gulf Syndrome,” characterised by over-confidence in America’s Military, replacing the “Vietnam Syndrome” seemed to be unfounded. It is far more likely that this new “Syndrome,” though opposing in ideology, was in existence alongside the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the years between the Gulf War and the degeneration of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attacks pushed the “Vietnam Syndrome” out of public thought more than anything else before or since, including any analysis of the Gulf War. The shock and emotion of having attacks on American soil, combined with clarity of purpose and Second World War rhetoric allowed the war on Afghanistan to begin with great public support and unhindered by thoughts and memories of Vietnam. The “Vietnam Syndrome” was not gone forever, though, as a combination of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq becoming protracted and costly in both lives and economic terms, and the moral confusion surrounding the Iraq War provided ample comparison with the war in Vietnam and room for the “Vietnam Syndrome” to reappear. The period between the terrorist attacks and the effects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq leading to renewed Vietnam references can be referred to the “Vietnam Syndrome’s” dormant period. It had not been removed from American society but was merely overshadowed by the wave of patriotism

and Second World War analogy triggered by the terrorist attacks. Chapter 7 shall discuss this dormant period in more detail.

The press and academics have since made references to an “Iraq Syndrome” and an “Afghanistan Syndrome,” which some experts speculate may be even more severe than the “Vietnam Syndrome.” The symptoms, however, seem to be remarkably similar and arguably originating from the same “Syndrome:” the multi-faceted “Vietnam Syndrome” that emerged through decades of comparison between the Vietnam War and subsequent conflicts. On the basis of the research on this chapter, this thesis argues that the American collective psyche suffers a mixture of “Syndromes” that are triggered by a variety of such circumstances but that the “Vietnam Syndrome” provides a reference point and the best useable term for them. Theorists such as Brody (1991) may be correct in saying that the United States has a long history of reluctance to engage in military action, but this is not a complete definition of the “Vietnam Syndrome” – which, at the very least, heightened any previous aversions dramatically. The psychological trauma of defeat and its associated shame, along with feelings of guilt surrounding actions in Vietnam, are unmistakable symptoms of the “Vietnam Syndrome” and clear reference points of it in cultural texts.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the “Vietnam Syndrome” is a flexible feature of American culture that is characterised by a reluctance to engage in or support military conflict, feelings of loss, shame or anger at the defeat, sometimes denial of the defeat, and acute psychological distress and guilt at acts committed by Americans in conflict. This conclusion also leads to the “Vietnam Syndrome” being an increasingly media-constructed and media-sustained concept. The circulation of the “Vietnam Syndrome” through the mass media and various cultural texts are amplifying the “Vietnam Syndrome” for the public and perpetuating its existence in their collective memory. Increasingly, it is the media that is identifying the comparisons with the war in Vietnam and therefore is contributing to the definition of it. Once in the public sphere these are then reflected back into culture and new texts and the “Vietnam Syndrome” reverberates like an echo.

The remainder of this thesis analyses the “Vietnam Syndrome” as it is communicated through popular fictional American cinema. During this process a number of important questions will form the basis of the discussion: Are there sufficient references to Vietnam in post-Gulf War films to confirm that the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still found in cultural products? In what way and how strongly are these references evident? What form does the



post-Gulf War “Vietnam Syndrome” take? And is Vietnam now the definitive template for war and has it come to symbolise all “bad wars” for America?

## **Section I: Trying to Find a Way Out of the Jungle**

## Chapter 3

### Cinematic Representations of Vietnam Prior to the Gulf War

Before beginning an analysis of Vietnam films produced after the Gulf War, it is necessary to contextualise the discussion with a summary of the themes and styles of American cinema's treatment of the conflict.

#### During and Shortly After the War

The first film to portray the Vietnam War was produced during the early years of the conflict itself. *The Green Berets* (1968, Dir. John Wayne, Ray Kellogg) features John Wayne as Colonel Mike Kirby leading two groups of Green Berets on a mission to retake a camp overrun by North Vietnamese and to capture a North Vietnamese General. The American troops are accompanied by anti-war journalist George Beckworth who changes his opinion towards the conflict after seeing U.S. humanitarian efforts and experiencing a North Vietnamese attack on the camp. The film has a bitter-sweet ending which sees the success of the American mission to capture the General at the expense of many U.S. soldiers' lives, but with the reassurance that their deaths serve a noble purpose in helping the South Vietnamese. *The Green Berets* proved a box office success, making over nine million dollars in the U.S. and Canadian cinemas alone, but was branded propaganda by both soldiers and critics alike. In a review for *The New York Times*, Renata Adler scathingly attacked the film, describing it as:

[A] film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false that it passes through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve not so much for our soldiers or Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do greater disservice to them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus of this country (Adler quoted in Taylor, 2003, p.49).

Peter Rollins attributes this negative attitude to the film's "pastiche of clichés from westerns and World War II films" along with John Wayne's "smugness" (Rollins, 1984, p.426), particularly ill received in light of the Tet Offensive.

Deeply patriotic, *The Green Berets* portrays the Americans as heroes, reaffirming traditional Hollywood values, while the South Vietnamese greatly admire their efforts. The American media covering the war are portrayed as unpatriotic and ignorant of the realities of the conflict.

*The Green Berets* differs from Vietnam movies produced after the war, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as shall become evident in the discussion of them. Ron Briley (1990) who studied the representation of American history on film, offers the entirely acceptable explanation that the industry found the protracted fighting and unsavoury news stories from the conflict difficult to deal with at the time.

They also seem to have found the defeat and negative representation of American conduct in Vietnam difficult to deal with in the years immediately following the war. In the early years after the war the American film industry tried to avoid making any direct references to it, as Rick Berg describes:

After 1973, Vietnam faded from the screen. The living-room war was gone. The major networks took it off the air. It was as if TV cancelled the war, and then the president recalled the actors. Between 1973 and 1977, a respectful silence seemed to reign. At this time, journalists wrote a number of articles about the forgotten war (Berg, 1991, p.118).

However, the effects of the conflict on cinema had managed to spread far beyond the war film genre and earlier, more indirect, references are to be found elsewhere. These allusions to the war have been studied by a number of film theorists. Cynthia J. Fuchs, for example, wrote of *Taxi Driver* (1976, Dir. Martin Scorsese) showing “the disordering effects and the disordering foundations of Vietnam, representing not the war, but its dispersion” (Fuchs, 1991, p.34). *Taxi Driver* is the story of Vietnam veteran Travis Bickle who works as a taxi driver at night in New York and is romantically obsessed with Betsy, a volunteer for Senator Palantine’s campaign to run for President and enact social change. After a disastrous date with Betsy and having witnessed a lot of crime in the course of his job, Travis decides to take vigilante action to improve the city. First he shoots a man who is attempting to rob a grocery store, then he becomes obsessed with trying to save a child prostitute named Iris. He sends Iris money to escape with and, after a brief digression to make an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Senator Palantine, drives to the brothel and shoots Iris’s pimp, guard and customer. Unable to shoot himself as he has run out of bullets, Travis lives to be portrayed a hero for saving Iris and returns to his job as a taxi driver.

Travis Bickle is the characterisation of the mental turmoil undergone by veterans as a result of their time in Vietnam. The film is a visual representation of his mental state, as Colin L. Westerbeck Jr. describes:

The close-up detail of the cab and the long shot of the streets float over each other without being in visible contact. We can see no relationship between them, and what the physical disconnection begins to imply is some profound emotional disconnection, some state of alienation, in Travis himself. In effect, Scorsese's film is becoming a documentary of that alienation (Westerbeck, 1976, p.137).

In saving Iris from her life of prostitution Travis "has gained authority in the eyes of the world" (Westerbeck, 1976, p.138). Even in these early cinematic allusions to Vietnam the veteran is seen compensating for the war and regaining respect in his actions after it.

*Taxi Driver* was by no means an isolated occurrence. Robin Wood described *Cruising* (1980, Dir. William Friedkin) and *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* (1977, Dir. Richard Brooks) as exhibiting a covert Vietnam influence, and films about other wars, such as *Catch-22* (1970, Dir. Mike Nichols), about World War II, and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1969, Dir. Robert Altman), set in the Korean War, also revealed Vietnam attitudes of despondency or negativity towards the conflict through black comedy.

The late 1970s, however, saw the industry confront Vietnam directly again, with what Marita Sturken refers to as "the first wave of Vietnam films" (Sturken, 1997, p.88). This flurry of films released included *The Deer Hunter* (1978, Dir. Michael Cimino), *The Boys in Company C* (1978, Dir. Sidney Furie), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978, Dir. Ted Post), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola) which as well as being the first to offer any kind of analysis of the war were also the first to express desires to remember Vietnam differently from the historical narrative.

### Late 1970s Vietnam War Films

The Vietnam War films of the late 1970s were broadly anti-war. Some of the earliest, like *Go Tell the Spartans* and *The Boys in Company C* are overtly critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. *Go Tell the Spartans* is set in 1964, before the large-scale deployment of American troops in Vietnam. Major Barker is put in command of a strategically unimportant post in Central Vietnam with insufficient American soldiers and a group of inadequate South Vietnamese troops. The Viet Cong attack the camp and Barker requests that his men be removed from there, only to be ordered to stay. He defies this order by sending most of his troops away and remaining to defend the position with the South Vietnamese and Courcey, formerly one of the most enthusiastic of his men. Only Courcey

survives the next attack to tell of his disillusionment towards the conflict. *The Boys in Company C* follows a group of Marines in their training and subsequent tour of Vietnam. The men become disillusioned with the war as they struggle with incompetent command, corruption among their South Vietnamese allies and failure to understand the benefit of the war. The men learn that they can escape front line duty by defeating a soccer team but the soccer soon emerges to be a metaphor for America's war in Vietnam.

In *The Boys in Company C* those in high command are criticised the most, with corrupt officers manipulating the ordinary "grunts" who are portrayed as good men doing their duty. *Go Tell the Spartans* focuses on the war's poor organisation and failure of strategy and tactics. Political film theorists Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner make a valid criticism of these movies for not dealing with the wider issues regarding the war:

The traditional liberal focus on individuals implies a personalistic account that easily permits larger geographical issues to be displaced. And the sorts of self-replicating identifications that such an account invites usually evokes sentimental reactions to individual suffering rather than outrage at national policies of genocide (Ryan and Kellner, 1988, p.199).

The limitations in terms of Vietnam War criticism in *Go Tell the Spartans* and *The Boys in Company C* are clear. The films are largely restricted to the individual platoons. They also limit the scope that criticism can reach. *The Boys in Company C* blames everyone in Vietnam except the ordinary soldiers, from the incompetent Army leaders to the corrupt South Vietnamese, but does not take the criticism out of Vietnam and back to America, or up to the policy-makers' level. This displays Samuel Hynes' argument that narratives of war that don't conform to the myth, in other words that don't conform to popular opinion or desires, are left behind. There was not enough popular support to pursue the issue any further, showing that, even through the early representations, the collective memory of the war was shaped to present a more acceptable portrayal of it.

*Go Tell the Spartans*, meanwhile, depicts the irrelevance of the American presence and the pointlessness of operations. It also makes clear that Vietnam is "their war", distancing the Americans from the Vietnamese – their methods involve savage cruelty and killing, while the Americans' involves kindness and winning hearts and minds. But these overt anti-war expressions were not the only way Vietnam was expressed cinematically in the late 1970s.

*The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, which were two of the biggest early Vietnam releases, typify the psychodrama approach to depicting the war that thrived at this time. Using imagery and symbolism, they both attempt to convey the psychologically disturbing effects the war had on those who fought in it.

*Apocalypse Now* is the story of Captain Willard and his crew's boat journey up a river into Cambodia in search of Colonel Kurtz. Willard has been ordered to assassinate Kurtz, a highly decorated soldier, because he has broken away from the Army and his methods of fighting the war have become unsound. On their journey the men encounter a series of surreal episodes, including an Air Cavalry Colonel with a surfing obsession, coming face-to-face with a tiger and a haunting night battle for a bridge, that are intended to reflect the insanity and horror of the war. Eventually the three surviving crew members reach Kurtz's compound where Willard has an audience with him. Despite having grown to understand and agree with Kurtz's methods himself, Willard obeys the Army's orders and brutally assassinates him.

*Apocalypse Now* focuses on the horror and absurdity of Vietnam, conveyed through striking imagery that depicts "a man-made hell" (Lev, 2000, p.124) in which the characters find themselves. Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh describe the film as "a collective retreat into metaphysics, the view that the war is to be seen as a darkness of the soul, an ordeal of the fallen, a vision of hell, an apocalypse" (Louvre and Walsh, 1988, p.12). The use of the word "retreat" by Louvre and Walsh is an excellent and accurate way of describing the psychological Vietnam drama. In drawing the war back into the realm of the psyche the memory is focused on the idea of the war as exceptionally difficult for those involved. The myth of Vietnam as a shockingly different war from its predecessors can be used to avoid contemplating other possible aspects of its memory and help weaken their representation in the memory cycle. This allows society to avoid pursuing or unearthing issues that may contradict established views of the nation's self identity as a beacon of morality that only engages in "good wars."

One scene where psychological expressionism is especially prominent is the Do Lung Bridge scene. The PBR (Patrol Boat, River) arrives at the bridge during a night battle. As well as the psychotropic visual imagery, this scene also makes use of interesting sound techniques, where the usual battle sounds are distorted to emphasise the surreal nature of the situation. The men who are fighting play music during the battle, only switching it off to hear exactly where the screams of a VC fighter caught on the wire are coming from. As

a GI prepares to shoot the man all sounds other than the screams and the noises within the trench disappear although the light of the flares and the battle continue in the background. This distortion continues even after the VC has been shot. It is the sudden loud crash of a mortar round hitting a section of the bridge which brings the viewers back to reality, back to the battle surrounding that trench. The techniques employed here are part of Coppola's endeavours at "recreating and vividly presenting, whatever the cost, the visceral, disorienting experience of the Vietnam War" (Horne, 2001, p.12).

The human embodiment of the darkness in the *Apocalypse Now* interpretation of the war in Vietnam is Kurtz, an ex-Green Beret who has deviated from standard procedures and "gone native," adopting his own philosophy over Army guidelines. Kurtz is a mythic type of character. As Conrad described in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the novel on which *Apocalypse Now* is based, he is a "shadow darker than the shadow of night" (Conrad, 1899, p.101). This is developed further in the film with the substantial use of shadows and the building of the myth with the dossier Willard and the audience are privileged to have access to, as well as Willard's speculation through which an image of the figure of Kurtz is formed during the journey up-river.

As Willard travels the same path as Kurtz he begins to understand and identify more with him and the darkness. The difference is that Willard steps back from it and leaves Kurtz and the compound behind, as Vietnam film theorist John Hellmann elaborates: "Willard at last sees, like Marlow, that the only possible response to the utter dissolution of his moral assumptions is to preserve innocence and the false ideal" (Hellmann, 1982, p.438). Thus the film ends with a grand existential comment about war and the human condition – the prevailing theme throughout it.

*The Deer Hunter* takes a similar approach, using metaphor and imagery to explain a supposedly greater truth about the Vietnam War and the men who served there. The film begins in Clairton, Pennsylvania, by introducing the three main characters, Steven, Mike and Nick in their home lives. The men are shown going hunting before they are sent to Vietnam and Mike kills a deer with one shot. The scene then changes to Vietnam where there is a brutal battle in a village and the three friends are captured by the North Vietnamese Army and forced to play Russian roulette. They all escape but only Nick is successfully airlifted out of the area. Mike carries injured Stephen to safety. Nick begins playing Russian roulette for money in Saigon where Mike sees him but is unable to catch him to speak to him. On his return home Mike is unable to face his friends and finds he



can no longer kill a deer while out hunting as the war has changed him. He locates Stephen, who has lost both legs, in a veteran's hospital. Stephen tells Michael about money that arrives for him from Saigon. Mike goes back to Vietnam to find Nick, who is psychologically scarred and on drugs. Nick does not remember him and Mike ends up facing him in a game of Russian roulette in a bid to convince him to come home. Eventually Nick remembers his friend, just before pulling the trigger and killing himself with one shot.

*The Deer Hunter* centres on the metaphor of "one shot," beginning with the deer hunt in America which is then inverted in the Viet Cong camp and in the Saigon gambling den where Nick eventually falls victim to that "one shot." At the end of the film the metaphor concludes with Mike on another deer hunt, choosing not to shoot the deer this time, showing how his experiences in Vietnam have changed him. The metaphor depicts the difference between life in America, with the obsession with one clean, controlled shot, and the unpredictable and uncontrollable revolver of the Vietnamese roulette game. Mike has abandoned the ideal of "one shot" and the ideals of America having experienced the struggle and madness of survival in Vietnam.

John Hellmann (1982) describes *The Deer Hunter* as an inversion of the traditional western stories, a theory also proposed by Wood (1986) and Fiedler (1980). In *The Deer Hunter* the Viet Cong assume the role of the Indians, Mike is the hero and there is "even a 'shoot out' across a table in a crowded gambling room" (Hellmann, 1982, p.420):

*The Deer Hunter*, through the western formula, presents Vietnam as yet another historic projection of a struggle of white American consciousness, but one where the dream of mastery over nature and the unconscious, or alternatively benign communion with them, is turned upside down into a nightmare of captivity (Hellmann, 1982, p.421).

*Apocalypse Now* is also a film that has been identified by Leslie A. Fiedler (1990) and John Hellmann (1982) as being based on a traditional American myth, in this case the hard-boiled detective quest. Willard is the detective, given the case (or mission) of "terminating" Kurtz. His investigation is narrated through voiceover, a convention of classic noir. *Apocalypse Now* distorts the standard detective model by having Willard increasingly resemble Kurtz as the journey progresses, blurring the distinction between the "right" of the detective and the "wrong" of the criminal. It also broadens the investigation of the self into the psyche, in order to explore Vietnam on a deeper level.

*Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* have been described by Ryan and Kellner as a “reactionary way of dealing with the Vietnam War” (Ryan and Kellner, 1988, p.205), dealing with America’s ideas of itself. Both films make use of what Peter McInerney (1979) refers to as “poetic functions,” metaphors and images such as the one shot/Russian roulette of *The Deer Hunter* and the darkness and the fire, earth, air and water recurring images in *Apocalypse Now*.

These type of films, particularly prominent in the late 1970s, attempt to present an all-encompassing view of the nature of the conflict and its effects on the minds of those Americans involved in it. Cinematic representations such as these contribute to the commonly held perspective of the Vietnam War as a surreal nightmare. Milton J. Bates (1996) also believes these films to be heavily responsible for increased public sympathy for Vietnam veterans. Though criticised for their lack of realism and appropriation of mythic conventions in interpreting the war, this method of projecting and recording the experience of Vietnam adds different dimensions to the cultural perception and remembrance of the conflict than if solely realist interpretations were created and indicates a desire to express the war through a psychological framework and confront it internally.

### Re-fighting and Re-writing the War

The early 1980s saw the arrival of a different kind of Vietnam film. In these movies the Vietnam War was re-fought by veterans. The idea of re-fighting the war gave Americans the chance to “restore military self-respect” (Paris, 1987, p.26), something lost in the humiliation of their defeat to a Third World country.

At the beginning of this genre Americans watched as John Rambo fought the civilians who showed no respect towards him and his comrades for all they sacrificed, in the enormously successful film *First Blood* (1982, Dir. Ted Kotcheff). In *First Blood* John Rambo is searching for a friend from his unit in Vietnam, only to learn he has died of cancer from Agent Orange and he is now the last one alive from his unit. When Rambo enters the town of Hope, Sheriff Teasle arrests him for looking like a vagrant. Rambo has flashbacks to his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and escapes to the hills surrounding the town. He kills the Deputy Sheriff who pursues him in a helicopter and the Sheriff sends a team of men after him, all of whom Rambo wounds but doesn’t kill. Colonel Trautman, the man who trained Rambo, is called out and advises Teasle no to pursue Rambo any further. Undeterred, Teasle has Rambo’s cave in the hills bombed. Rambo escapes and goes back

into the town to kill Sheriff Teasle but Trautman stops him and Rambo gives himself in to the police, claiming to be misunderstood. This was a one-man re-match of the war as the highly skilled muscular hero ran amok around the town of Hope.

Shortly after *First Blood* heralded the start of attempts to re-fight the Vietnam War, the right-wing “Missing in Action” theme arose, fuelling the myth that American prisoners of war were still being held captive by the Vietnamese. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, in studying *Rambo*’s rewriting of the war, explain how the MIA myth contributed to the American psyche’s healing process:

The need to believe in the MIAs gives credence to the view that the Vietnamese are now and *therefore always have been* an inhuman and cruel enemy. Vietnam’s alleged accusations in *presently* holding American prisoners serves as an index of our essential rightness in fighting such an enemy *in the past* (Studlar and Desser, 1988, p.12).

A portrayal such as this of the Vietnamese as invariably cruel and ruthless alters the collective memory of the conflict by turning Americans, in particular the mythical remaining POWs, into the victims. In doing so, this also allows society to gloss over American atrocities committed during the war and allows for the establishment of a more favourable American identity involved in Vietnam.

The MIA movies created new myths, overwriting prevailing anti-war attitudes, and illustrating Sturken’s (1997) theory of cultural amnesia. In these films veterans are allowed to re-fight their war but this time with the possibility of winning. Studlar and Desser (1988) believe these films can also be read as displaying America’s ambivalence towards the Vietnam War and, given a Freudian interpretation, as a reaction to feelings of guilt and the repression of the trauma of the war. This need to repress trauma and guilt would concur with an assessment of the films reflecting the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

The cycle began with *Uncommon Valor* (1983, Dir. Ted Kotcheff) in which a retired Army Colonel tries to rescue his MIA son from Vietnam – against the government’s wishes – along with a rich businessman whose son is also a POW. A group of Vietnam veterans retrain to face their enemy once again and bring back Americans held captive by them. The theme is then continued in *Missing in Action* (1984, Dir. Joseph Zito) and its prequel *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning* (1985, Dir. Lance Hool), as well as *Behind Enemy Lines* (1986, Dir. Gideon Amir). However, by far and away the most popular MIA movie

was *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985, Dir. George Cosmatos). On its release in 1985, critics often wrote unfavourably of “one of the most grotesquely violent pictures of the year” (Blowen, 1985) and its “extremely unlikely” (Canby, 1985) plot but almost always would concede it would be hugely popular with audiences and a very profitable film. In a review for *The Chicago Tribune*, Gene Siskel wrote of *First Blood Part II* as “pure action fantasy” and a “flaw riddled movie,” but nevertheless one that was “quite likely to arouse applause and cheers and at least one “Right on!” in theatres where it plays” (Siskel, 1985).

In this instalment of the *Rambo* series, John Rambo is invited by Colonel Trautman to go into Vietnam and search for captive American soldiers. It is Rambo’s chance to re-fight the war in Vietnam. Before he agrees to the mission, he asks “Do we get to win this time?” and Trautman replies “That’s up to you.” This statement supports the popular notion that the government were to blame for the troops having to “fight with one hand tied behind their back” (President Bush cited in Taylor, 1992, p.1). As Rambo says: “I did what I had to to win – but somebody wouldn’t let us win.” President Bush exploited this notion to gain public support for action against Saddam Hussein in the prelude to the First Gulf War by implying that America’s defeat in Vietnam was not due to inadequacy, but merely unreasonable restrictions. This helped in restoring national pride and confidence in American military capabilities. Hellmann suggests that this belief is at the centre of the *Rambo* films:

The Rambo films are indisputably revenge fantasies, and both the superhuman masculine power conferred upon Rambo and the cathartic violence characterizing his responses to wrongs are a transparent, and disturbing strategy of compensation for postdefeat feelings of frustration and inadequacy (Hellmann, 1991, p.140).

The effect of the Hollywood myth machine at work in these movies ran through American culture. In 1993 a *Wall Street Journal* poll found that two thirds of Americans questioned really believed that American POWs were still being held captive. In the years which shortly followed this poll, the views of these two thirds of Americans were undermined when U.S. and Vietnamese search teams combed the land and Hanoi revealed to America its secret records of those captured, yet no Missing in Action POWs were discovered.

There were other cinematic depictions of Vietnam veterans fighting – but not always winning – their own personal wars after the defeat of Vietnam. These films portray the psychologically traumatised veteran, once again firmly reflecting Vietnam as a

psychological hell on earth. Notable examples of this sub-genre include *Birdy* (1984, Dir. Alan Parker) in which a Vietnam veteran in an Army hospital is so disturbed that he believes himself to be a bird like those he kept in the carefree days of his youth, the Oliver Stone film *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989, Dir. Oliver Stone) which sees Vietnam Ron Kovic becoming an anti-war activist, and *Jacob's Ladder* (1990, Dir. Adrian Lyne) depicting Jacob Singer's fight against the military for the truth about them poisoning his platoon with drugs in an experiment to find a substance which would make men more aggressive fighters. It would seem that though the veteran may return from Vietnam, his fight must continue. As Vietnam film theorist Gilbert Adair wrote of Rambo: "As long as he is alive, the Vietnam War is alive" (Adair, 1989, p.135).

### The Realist Vietnam War Film

Following the metaphysical journeys of films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, the mythological re-writing of films to perpetuate a more easily acceptable version of the Vietnam War in collective memory, such as *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action* and the *Rambo* movies, as well as depictions of veterans fighting their war again back home, a number of Vietnam films arose which attempted to create a more realistic portrayal of life on the ground with the troops. They took the war out of America and the psyche, and away from criticism of higher military powers, going right back down to the jungle floor. This type of depiction is far more tightly focused on individual platoons' everyday experiences of Vietnam as opposed to an attempt to make a huge definitive statement about the war.

Billed as "the first real movie about Vietnam," the realism of *Platoon* (1986, Dir. Oliver Stone) was heavily promoted, both through its cinematic style and marketing techniques. *Platoon* depicts new recruit Chris Taylor's fight against the enemy, fighting within his platoon and a psychological war within himself. Chris struggles to cope with the unpleasant conditions in the jungle and with what he witnesses in the war. The opposing forces of good and evil in the conflict are played by Chris's two Sergeants, Barnes and Elias. When searching for Viet Cong in a village, Sergeant Barnes murders a man, the platoon burn down a Vietnamese village, and Chris ends up trying to stop the men raping a girl. When Sergeant Elias reports Barnes, Barnes takes his revenge by shooting at him, reporting him dead in the jungle and leaving him to be killed by the enemy in view of the rest of the platoon as they are air-lifted out. Chris tries to kill Barnes for what he did to Elias but does not succeed. That night in the middle of a battle Barnes tries to kill Chris

but a napalm strike renders them both unconscious. Both men are wounded. Chris finds Barnes and shoots him. Having been wounded for a second time, Chris will now be sent back to America. The war is over for him.

The fact that Oliver Stone is a Vietnam veteran and *Platoon* partly autobiographical reinforces this notion of realism and adds a perceived authenticity to the portrayal. However, it is important to note the difference between using a realistic style of representation and attempting to bring to the screen real historical “truth.” Stone was adamant that he was not claiming to have made an accurate historical account:

As close as I came to Charlie Sheen, he would never be me and *Platoon* would never be what I saw in my mind when I wrote it and which was just a fragment, really, of what happened years ago (Stone cited in Riordan, 1996, p.210).

Taylor (2003) also raises the issue put forward by combatants that it is impossible to explain the exact truth about combat. There is no single definitive Vietnam film that faithfully depicts the war for everyone who served there – different veterans have cited different films as being closest to their experience of Vietnam. There are only a multitude of different cinematic styles and filmic visions used to promote different interpretations of the war, of which the realism of *Platoon* is one.

*Platoon* gave little importance to grand statements about the war or to the big historical or political questions, instead taking viewers down into the mud and jungles of Vietnam, highlighting a “move away from the divisive political arguments” (Devine, 1999, p.xvii). The soldiers are solely concerned with fighting for their survival and getting out alive. The scale and gravity of death is conveyed from the very outset of the film through the emotive opening sequence where Chris is greeted by the body bags being flown back home as soon as he sets foot in Vietnam. The audience shares this concern for survival with them in the closeness of the cinematography. The shots are so close and action so focused as to make the viewer feel as if they are actually there among the men. Auster and Quart agree that:

[T]he film’s greatest strength lies in its social realism – its feeling of verisimilitude for the discomfort, ants, heat, and mud – of the jungle and brush: the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release of base camp, the terror of the ambushes, and the chaos and cacophony of night firefights. Filmed in tight closeup and medium shots, this powerfully evokes the murderous immediacy of the world into which the GIs were thrust (Auster and Quart, 1988, p.132).

This “grunt’s-eye view” heightens the tension and puts the audience emotionally closer to the men out there fighting than a film with wide shots or sweeping aerial shots. Gilbert Adair describes how the audience’s field of vision is restricted:

When darkness falls, we are prevented from seeing any more than the soldiers themselves do; our own perception of the action is never privileged in relation to theirs. Which means that if, for instance, they have not yet sighted the presence of an enemy, then neither have we. The camera is always *inside* the setting, inside the jungle (Adair, 1989, p.148).

Yet, despite the wide praise for its realistic depiction of fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, the film has been criticised for its blatant portrayal of a grunt’s inner struggle between the classic Hollywood forces of good and evil, as Andrew Martin, for example, expresses:

Certainly *Platoon* aspires to engage its audience in the painful reality of the war. But it would be wrong to see it as simply a “realistic” version of the war, as so many commentators have claimed, particularly given its melodramatic polarization of good and evil in the characters of Sergeant Elias and Sergeant Barnes (Martin, 1993, p.128).

The film’s central character, Chris, claims “We did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves – and the enemy was in us.” The two dove and hawk figures of the “good” Elias and “bad” Barnes represent the struggle within Chris as he tries to cope with his personal Vietnam experience. Elias’s death even has a metaphor of Jesus attached to it. As he is shot he falls to his knees, arms outstretched as if in crucifixion. *Platoon* does not then allow evil to prevail. Barnes is also injured and Chris shoots him dead, coming out of Vietnam with neither good nor evil winning – symbolic of the struggle within him. *Hamburger Hill* (1987, Dir. John Irvin) takes a similar approach to *Platoon*, depicting the real 1969 battle for Hill 937 and focusing closely on the intense action surrounding a group of men fighting for the position. It is a nihilistic vision of the Vietnam War, showing troops repeatedly trying to take the hill while being driven back down by the enemy and suffering heavy losses.

Another film that followed the realism trend takes the approach a step further. *84 Charlie MoPic* (1989, Dir. Patrick Sheane Duncan) is a low budget independent American film. Like Oliver Stone, Duncan was himself a Vietnam veteran. Unlike Stone, he chose not to portray the conflict through the conventional Hollywood style and narrative with multiple shots and camera angles, well-framed images, and steady camerawork. *84 Charlie MoPic* follows a platoon on everyday operations in the jungle of Vietnam through the camera of a

journalist, depicting their encounters with the enemy and capturing interviews with some of the men.

The film is heavily influenced by actual Vietnam news coverage and 1960s in-country documentary films such as *The Anderson Platoon* (1966, Dir. Pierre Schondoerffer), in which a U.S. Army platoon was filmed for six weeks and their daily lives and the reality of war recorded, and *A Face of War* (1967, Dir. Eugene Jones), for which Jones spent 97 days among a company of U.S. Marines. These films in which the filmmaker was embedded within a group of troops brought the viewer into the same position as the cameraman and the men fighting in Vietnam. To a degree, the audience became participant observers (Slater, 1991). Therefore when *84 Charlie MoPic* adopted this “actuality” style it added a measure of authenticity to the picture.

So well conveyed is this tone of authenticity that it negates the need for a realistic location. Owing to its limited budget, *84 Charlie MoPic* was filmed in a garden in California. The film is designed to give the impression of reality and convince that it is a genuine account of what it was like to be serving as a GI in Vietnam. The lack of any real plot or ideological message and the absence of well-known actors help to retain this sense of verisimilitude. Most crucially, *84 Charlie MoPic* utilises the filmmaking style known as pseudo-documentary, a genre which Sturken describes as “a mimetic interpretation of the past” (Sturken, 1997, p.85). It adopts the style of imperfect documentary footage with some shots badly framed or out of focus and shaky hand-held camerawork. When MoPic himself falls over while filming, the viewer falls with him and the camera. This is also an important moment in the film because the audience get to see MoPic’s face for the first time, reminding them that he is real and is there as well as the other men that they have been watching throughout the film – he is not just an omniscient camera providing them with a view.

The identification with the main group of characters is facilitated by their direct interaction with the camera. They are aware of its presence and have the opportunity to tell people their back-stories through it, contextualising their characters. They also show the camera things, such as a grenade, and explain about them. This is something the audience would not necessarily be privileged with in films made in the traditional Hollywood style. A close relationship with the characters is also developed through the frequent use of extreme close-ups and the witnessing of emotions such as fear and grief, for example when Pretty Boy and Cracker are killed. Here, instead of simply showing them being killed and then



moving on to something else, the audience is forced to watch with the others as the camera lingers over the ritual of putting the men in body bags. With the focus of the film closely on one small isolated unit, these deaths have a more intense effect on the viewer.

As well as a lack of other Americans, there is also very little of the enemy in the film – mostly just their gunfire. *MoPic* captures only glimpses of them, like wild animals spotted through the trees. This is reminiscent of *A Face of War* in which very little of the Vietnamese were observed. The only close-up of an enemy fighter in *84 Charlie MoPic* is when LT has to kill an injured one. This is LT's first kill and the viewers have to see what the men see as he fails to kill him at the first attempt.

At the end of the film viewers receive a shock reminding them that in Vietnam nobody is guaranteed to get out alive – not even the cameraman who has acted as their eyes throughout. *MoPic* is shot several times and killed by the Vietnamese. The camera is still where he placed it in the helicopter so the audience see the whole episode happening. As the helicopter takes off the camera begins to lift viewers out with it just before it runs out of film and the footage being projected comes to an abrupt stop. The audience's time in 'Nam ends with *MoPic*'s.

Having experienced the guilt, healing and the search for the "real" Vietnam in cinema, Sturken (1997) describes America as having finally come to terms with the war by the late 1980s and start of the 1990s. The forthcoming chapters shall challenge this and explore the representation of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in the aftermath of the success of the Gulf War.

## Chapter 4

### *Heaven and Earth*

*Heaven and Earth* brought the Vietnam War to American cinemas from a very different perspective to films before it, and as such is presented as a case study for being a revolutionary Vietnam War film to have emerged in the post-Gulf War years. It is based on the autobiographical story of Phung Thi Le Ly Hayslip, a peasant girl from the rice-farming village of Ky La in the Danang region of Vietnam, and charts the war locally known as the “American War” as it affected her and those around her. The film shows the nation’s fight through Le Ly’s personal struggle for survival, her life being “a microcosm of the horrible war and of the human capacity to endure and go on” (Desser, (1995) 1999, p.364). Le Ly’s story is taken from the early 1950s when she was a young child and the village still part of France’s colonial empire. Providing an insight into Vietnam’s historical and political context, the film is an unprecedented attempt at the depiction of the Vietnam War through Vietnamese eyes. The study of this shall contribute to the overall analysis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” through consideration of the portrayal of the Vietnamese people and American responsibility for actions in the region.

*Heaven and Earth* is the story of Le Ly’s suffering and endurance. When the war comes to her village she is tortured by South Vietnamese troops for being a suspected Communist and then raped by the Viet Cong who think she betrayed them to the South Vietnamese. No longer able to stay in her village, she is forced to move to Saigon where she and her mother find work in the service of a wealthy family. Le Ly becomes involved with the head of the household and falls pregnant. They are forced to leave and Le Ly struggles to provide for her child. Le Ly then meets Steve and falls in love with him. When Saigon falls to North Vietnamese forces she moves to the United States with Steve where she struggles to understand the decadent society. Steve, suffering from post-traumatic stress following his experiences in Vietnam, becomes violent towards her. The couple separate and eventually Steve commits suicide. Le Ly builds a successful life for herself in the United States and the film ends with her returning to visit Vietnam with her sons for a happy reunion with her family.

Several previous Vietnam War films featured representations, albeit often limited, of South Vietnamese civilians as well as the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong fighters, and this chapter shall first examine how *Heaven and Earth* differs from these. Chapter 2 considered some of the many variations, at times conflicting, in cinematic depictions of the

Vietnam War across the decades, however until *Heaven and Earth* all of these films had something in common – they presented the conflict from a distinctly American perspective. In David Desser’s words, the war was shown to be “a problem within American culture” (Desser, 1991, p.81) rather than a Vietnamese concern. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard explain:

The Vietnam War is depicted as a primarily American experience, the horrors, suffering, and angst largely visited upon U.S troops in the nightmarish field of battle or veterans as they return home. The narratives are told almost exclusively from a provincial, ethnocentric view-point, with Vietnam often little more than a dramatic backdrop for action/adventure scenes (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.90).

However sympathetic to the plight of Vietnamese citizens or critical of U.S. policy and operations in Vietnam some films may have been, until *Heaven and Earth* the main concern was always how the war affected Americans. There was no major effort to view the situation as the Vietnamese may have experienced it. It should also not be forgotten that a number of American dramatic Vietnam War films adopted a considerably derogatory, even racist, portrayal of the Vietnamese. To contextualize the discussion of the film *Heaven and Earth*, with its Vietnamese protagonist, these previous representations ought to be established.

The racist representation of the Viet Cong in *The Deer Hunter* has most notably received criticism. It alienates the Vietnamese in three main ways. The first is their exclusion from the majority of the film, privileging the American viewpoint as outlined by Boggs and Pollard above. Despite its promotion as a Vietnam War film, the film is set mostly in Clairton, Pennsylvania, with only a middle section actually taking place in Vietnam. The home and culture of the three working-class Americans is shown in great detail and the viewer becomes significantly involved in their daily lives, while, by contrast, the Vietnamese are represented scantily in distinctly one-dimensional character templates. Within this representation we see the second and third strands of unfair depiction of Asians in the film – the portrayal of the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese.

The Viet Cong are strongly depicted as violent, ruthless, cruel and vicious. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong expresses a view of this as blatantly unfair, stating: “In light of the disproportionate amount of violence Americans inflicted on Vietnamese during the war, Cimino’s focus on Vietnamese violence against American soldiers seemed perversely counterfactual” (Chong, 2005, p.92). The Viet Cong are seen to be unfeeling expert

torturers, in opposition to the values of the Americans they have captured who value life and each other. Americans are not depicted in the film as committing any such acts of torture on Vietnamese. It can be argued that the terrible treatment of the Americans by their captors is a conscious effort to justify U.S. acts of violence that were known to have occurred in Vietnam by indicating that they had no choice but to respond harshly to such sadistic and uncivilised opponents.

Even the South Vietnamese citizens do not escape the blanket criticism of their race as they are shown to have an equally cruel disregard for life in their use of Russian roulette in the Saigon gambling dens. They are in addition depicted as greedy, privileging money over the lives of either Americans or their own people in encouraging the deadly game for profit.

Such depictions are by no means purely the product of the Vietnam War. They are more deep-rooted in Western cinema, having persisted from the earliest days of the medium. In *Discussing Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental Between 1919 and 1950* Richard A. Oehling writes of films like *The Yellow Menace* (1916, Dir. William Steiner) in which evil Japanese and Mexicans plot against the United States in such ways as targeting trains or factories and destroying them:

Persistent from the earliest films was the idea of the *diabolical* Orientals. They continually plotted and connived the destruction of America in general and white women in particular. The Orientals were never what they seemed to be. Ruthless and clever – one is tempted to conclude, more so than white men – they serve with great subtlety and infinite patience the goal of the eventual mastery by the yellow race (Oehling, 1978, p.33).

The “diabolical Oriental” can clearly be seen to have translated into the Vietnam War film genre in a number of works such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Hamburger Hill*.

*Apocalypse Now* is another Vietnam film that has been described by Saul Steier as “profoundly racist” (Steier, 1980, p.120). Here Asians are not only portrayed as ruthless savages, but also as a backward, uncivilized race:

In *Apocalypse Now*, all Asians are represented as incapable of rational thought. There are no exceptions to this. The film is a quest, a journey which began in a Saigon hotel and ends in the midst of a Cambodian jungle. But it is also a journey from the world of civilization to the world of the tribe. A journey from the known to the unknown, from the world of veneer and politicians to the

world of ritual slaughter. During that voyage, Willard, who begins as representative of the former world, ends up learning to live by the values of the latter (Steier, 1980, p.120).

Once again, this film acts to justify American actions by arguing not only that the enemy's ways corrupt the minds of American soldiers, lowering them to their opponents' level, but also that in face of the savagery unbound by morals they had no choice but to become like them and "make friends with horror and terror" (Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*). The savage enemy is also not restricted to Vietnam War films and has been a staple of previous American war films, as Boggs and Pollard highlight:

Enemy forces are routinely shown as primitive and barbaric – Nazis and Japs in World War II, gooks in Korea and Vietnam, ragheads in the Gulf War – a cinematic portrait often infused with strong elements of racism and national chauvinism... In the form of demons, moreover, such figures are easily dehumanized, making them easy fodder for mass extermination (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.13).

These people are in addition denied a voice, thus further dehumanizing them. It is only the Americans who are permitted to speak, and it is only the Americans who are shown to be affected by the psychological implications of the horror of the war.

Many other American Vietnam War films promote similar views of Orientals as either shadowy, faceless dangers stalking the jungle, such as in *Platoon*, or as vicious and cruel fighters, seen in *Hamburger Hill*, but the more interesting cases, as well as the most relevant to a discussion of the impact of *Heaven and Earth*, are those that are considered to have taken a more fair or sympathetic view of the Vietnamese, such as *Go Tell The Spartans* and *Casualties of War*. In considering these now, the analysis moves closer to being able to properly contextualise the content of *Heaven and Earth*.

Ted Post's 1978 film *Go Tell The Spartans* is a significant step away from the representations described above, although it is still far removed from that offered in *Heaven and Earth*. The plight of a small group of South Vietnamese refugees is portrayed, however they mainly feature as a tool to promote the good intentions of the Americans. The American troops are shown trying to "win hearts and minds" by helping these people. On discovering them Corporal Courcay offers them chocolate and takes them back to the camp. When their South Vietnamese translator Cowboy maintains they are Communists Courcay simply replies: "Who cares, they're hungry," and Courcay is later referred to as "a hero" by the Major because he won't leave them behind when troops are being evacuated

from the area. The Vietnamese, however, in the end are shown to be Communists, conveying the message that the Americans were innocents in Vietnam simply striving to help people who did not wish it and who ultimately betrayed them – a hopeless case. The image of the cruel Oriental prevails in *Go Tell The Spartans* through Cowboy. The very first lines in the film display his ruthless nature as he is displayed as efficient at torturing but in need of boundaries and control:

[Cowboy is supervising a man's head being held down in a barrel of water]

Major: Cowboy! Get that man's head out of the jug!

Cowboy: He say he not Cong. We make him say he Cong.

Major: He can't say anything if you drown him. Now get him out  
(*Go Tell The Spartans*).

Cowboy then starts hitting him instead and the Major has to stop him again. He immediately comes across as different to the Americans in his attitude and procedures, a difference that is reinforced throughout the film by the Americans' repeated use of the racist term "gooks" and assertions that "it's their war".

*Casualties of War* depicts the true story of the rape and murder of a young Vietnamese woman by a members of a platoon of American soldiers on patrol and the successful efforts of one of the men who did not participate, Max Eriksson, to have the perpetrators punished for their crime. This film, which appears to show a greater softening of attitudes towards the South Vietnamese and certainly contains a degree of sympathy for them, upon analysis actually treats the matter in a remarkably similar way to *Go Tell The Spartans*. This suggests Americans were still having trouble coming to terms with their guilt for what happened to the South Vietnamese people during the war. While admitting that the actions taken by the United States had lead to suffering, once again the film appears preoccupied with offering explanations for unsavoury behaviour on the part of the United States military. This is woven throughout the film. When Eriksson is struggling to escape the enemy tunnel he has fallen into, the Viet Cong fighter who slowly creeps towards him from below with a knife in his mouth embodies the traditional evil Oriental stereotype. The warm yellow and red tones of the lighting within the tunnel, along with the ominous music, add to the tone of this portrayal. This subtly ensures that the brutal slaughter of the Viet Cong fighters in the battle is more acceptable, if not entirely justifiable, to U.S. eyes.

Like Corporal Courcay in *Go Tell The Spartans*, Eriksson tries to interact with the local villagers and learn of their culture, but his friendliness and compassion are interrupted by an attack in which Brownie is fatally wounded. As the camera focuses on Eriksson's face as he realises his friend has been shot, he is positioned in the right of the screen while in the left can clearly be seen some of the villagers assisting Viet Cong fighters into a hidden tunnel in the background, covering the entrance and running away. As the unit are leaving one of the troops suggests torching the village, and in this context it would not be difficult for the audience to agree with him. Meserve's subsequent suggestion that the men "requisition ourselves a girl – a little portable R and R" may still prove shocking and disgusting to the audience, but they have been privileged to a clear view of events leading to the mental state that permits this unacceptable action. This reduces audience anger and promotes a feeling of understanding towards the men. Furthermore, through Eriksson's disapproval it is suggested that this cruel behaviour is not typical of the U.S. Army but is committed by a few rogue soldiers. When the Sergeant asks Eriksson if he likes the Army he replies, "This ain't the Army," distancing them from the incident and the responsibility for it. The men's treatment of the girl is depicted as cruel and wrong, and they are punished for it, but in its condemnation of this behaviour, *Casualties of War* also makes significant attempts to excuse it throughout the film – from Brownie being killed to Eriksson waking up in an Army hospital surrounded by people severely wounded and terrible pain from Viet Cong attacks and mines.

These films and their portrayal of the Vietnamese are important in an analysis of *Heaven and Earth* as they make it clear how great the difference is between them and also show how Stone's final Vietnam film attempted to alter the American perception of the conflict. Something they all have in common, to varying degrees, which *Heaven and Earth* attempts to redress, is the dehumanization of Vietnamese people who were repeatedly portrayed as extremely cruel, untrustworthy and unbeatable within the boundaries of civilized warfare – in the words of John Kleinen, "the invincible troops who could take on the mighty American war machine" (Kleinen, 2003, p.439). This partly stems from an unwillingness to believe that the United States could have been beaten by a small third-world country. This is an attitude with similar origins to the belief behind the *Rambo* films that America could have won if its men had been permitted to fight to their full ability. As Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh argue:

Although new films such as *Full Metal Jacket* or *Platoon* are often admired for their realism, such 'realism' does not so far extend to allowing credence or recognition to the fact that the world's greatest superpower was defeated by a poor but resolutely organised small nation fighting for self-determination (Louvre and Walsh, 1988, p.17).

After so many American films of the 1980s had been defensive about U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Oliver Stone was prepared to confront the issue of the Vietnamese as the primary victims of the conflict. With Tiana Thi Thanh Nga's documentary *From Hollywood to Hanoi* released in the same year, it would seem that American filmmakers were attempting another development in the way the war was perceived in American culture by Vietnamizing the Vietnam War film.

Oliver Stone took many steps in *Heaven and Earth* to remove the appearance of the film away from the American Vietnam War film and towards a more Oriental cinematography. In the opening shots depicting ordinary village life in Ky La the landscape dominates the screen, with people often no more than tiny figures within it and the skyline high in the frame so the land fills the picture, emphasising its importance to people's lives. This is strikingly similar to the composition of many traditional Chinese landscape paintings, and is in opposition to many American war films where the focus remains predominantly with the main characters – for example in *Platoon* and *84 Charlie MoPic* where the camera never strays far from the troops and most of the shots are close ups. In contrast the opening montage of *Heaven and Earth* is full of wide shots showing a beautiful open landscape rich in life and bountiful to the people inhabiting it. It is no longer an enclosed sweaty jungle full of danger as it was when seen from an American perspective in other films, but is now seen through Vietnamese eyes as "the most beautiful village in the world" (Le Ly in *Heaven and Earth*), defying the stereotypical representation of the Vietnamese landscape as well as the Vietnamese people. The far more common representation of Vietnam in films depicting the war is particularly well described by Matthew A. Killmeier and Gloria Kwok as follows:

Representations of Vietnam are drawn from a circumscribed category: the dense jungle – dark, foreboding, insect, and leech infected – a dangerous nature that the Vietcong guerrillas usually controlled; U.S. camps, bases or improvised outposts where the soldiers rested; aerial topography as seen from the perspective of a targeting plane or helicopter, usually accompanied by gunfire, bombs, or napalm; an occupied urban center, such as Saigon, a mix of dense urban living, street commerce, and GI debauchery, characterized by booze and prostitutes (Killmeier and Kwok, 2005, p.258).



From the perspective presented in *Heaven and Earth* it is a completely different Vietnam and a completely different war.

*Heaven and Earth* also breaks from convention in depicting some of Vietnam's political and historical events as it attempts to generate a better understanding of the country, its people and the war itself. At the beginning the French are shown invading Le Ly's village in their tanks, killing people and burning the village including Le Ly's family home. Then the story moves forward a decade. The village has been rebuilt and Le Ly, now a young woman, is shown working on the land and playing in the fields. Her strong connection to the land of her country is promoted through such images and this adds an emotional dimension to an American viewing of the film as they associate harm to the land, for example through bombing or burning, with harm to the main character.

It is at this point that the Viet Cong first appear and they are shown preaching their ideology and explaining their war against the Americans – the latest in a long history of colonists who have taken over their land. They are portrayed as intelligent, articulate freedom fighters rather than ruthless savages or evil torturers. Instead of simply vilifying the enemy, this works to promote a greater understanding of why they fought and why people such as Le Ly and her family fought with them or supported them in the wake of generations of occupation by the Chinese, Japanese and French. This puts the South Vietnamese people themselves in an active role in the politics of their country, allowing them their own opinions and their own decisions, as well as displacing America from the centre of the war where cinema had for so many years firmly placed it. As Desser wrote of Vietnam films in 1991:

That the war had any kind of integrity, so to speak, of its own, that it was part of *Vietnam's* history of resisting colonialism and imperialism, that Vietnam had a class structure and class warfare of its own was never considered seriously (Desser, 1991, p.85).

In *Heaven and Earth* the war is depicted as a Vietnamese consideration and the Americans another invading force.

The film introduces the American Army in a far less favourable way than they feature in other American Vietnam War films. The first signs of U.S. military arrival are shown in their effect on nature. The rice is blown by the wind from helicopter blades, dogs bark, birds flee the trees, livestock bolts, Le Ly's hat is blown away and water is swept up as she

stands in a field. Fleets of jeeps enter the village and another occupier is shown to have moved in as an American flag is raised. Stone is ensuring here that the U.S. Army is not represented from a preferential viewpoint simply because this is an American film. They are portrayed as much as colonial occupiers as any previous forces. Le Ly says: “The soldiers ate our food, slept with our women and they searched our homes just as the soldiers of the warlords had centuries before.” While *Go Tell The Spartans* insisted “it’s their war” *Heaven and Earth*, through showing ordinary village people as innocent victims, asserts that it is not their war but America’s war in which they have become embroiled. Later the Americans are shown as being involved in Le Ly’s interrogation and torture over her association with the Viet Cong. A representative of the U.S. military overlooks the procedure with a distinct air of authority, implying the actions are at his control and presenting an image not simply of the “diabolical Oriental” but also the diabolical American. There are no excuses made or implied for the American involvement in this cruelty, as was such a strong feature in *Casualties of War*. It is simply depicted as an aspect of an event that took place in Le Ly’s life and in the Vietnam War.

However, *Heaven and Earth* does not merely criticise American military actions in Vietnam while justifying Viet Cong support. The Viet Cong return to the village. They shoot a teacher for teaching Republican politics and more houses are burned as their flag is raised in place of the American one. The village and its people are portrayed as being caught up in the conflict as two opposing forces fight over them. Later Le Ly is threatened with death, raped and driven out of her village by Viet Cong activists. The Republican South Vietnamese do not escape criticism either. In their torture of Le Ly during her interrogation she is beaten, dragged by her hair, kicked, electrocuted, kept in cramped conditions, tied to a post with honey on her legs to attract biting ants, and has a snake put in her clothes. Unlike other films which select one of the parties involved, support its troops and demonize the others, *Heaven and Earth* looks critically at all those involved through an innocent bystander who simply gets caught up in events and politics.

It is especially interesting that the film should promote a female protagonist as prior Vietnam films denied women a major role in them, limiting the available cinematic perspectives of the war. American women were for the most part one-dimensional characters who remained at home and could not understand the nightmarish conditions the men were enduring. Vietnamese women were represented as either prostitutes, sneaky Viet Cong aides or simple village girls, and all were silent or spoke little or no English – rendering them incapable of effectively communicating to the audience. Le Ly, however,

has both a voice and a story to tell, offering countermyths of Vietnam (Killmer and Kwok, 2005, p.264):

In contrast to many Hollywood films where the Vietnamese Other is relegated to roles drawn from a limited racist and imperialist repertory, *Le Ly* is depicted in myriad roles: daughter, Vietcong cadre girl, rape victim, survivor, maid, black marketeer, bar girl, mother, wife, immigrant, businesswoman and humanitarian (Killmer and Kwok, 2005, p.264).

*Heaven and Earth* contains a number of strong women – *Le Ly*, her mother, Madame Lien – and through their characters and the family units they fight to protect humanizes the South Vietnamese struggle and hardships during the conflict, in marked contrast to films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* where the Vietnamese were “absent as people” (Pursell, 1988, p.222) or *Go Tell the Spartans* and *Casualties of War* where they were tools to show the good intentions of Americans.

While the film has received much recognition for this rare promotion of a Vietnamese viewpoint and for attempting to come to terms with an aspect of America’s past the nation has struggled to accept, there is a significant sub-plot within the film that realigns it with conventional American Vietnam War movies. Through Steve’s psychological torment resulting from what he had seen and done during the war *Heaven and Earth* ensures that *Le Ly*’s story is depicted alongside the comparable suffering of her GI husband, keeping the film partially within the traditional Vietnam movie template of the American soldier as the victim and continuing the cinematic tendency of pushing aside the Vietnamese in depicting an American nightmare, burying “the actual history of U.S. warfare in Vietnam ... under layer after layer of falsification, fabrication, illusion and myth” (Franklin, 2000, p.31).

So common are such cinematic depictions of American troops as victims of the Vietnam War, as those who suffered most in the conflict, that they appear to have influenced the American public’s perception of the war. Greg Philo and Maureen Gilmour conducted a survey amongst American students to examine public understanding of the war. When asked about the number of casualties there were on each side 37 per cent of the American students responded either that there were more American casualties or that the number of casualties on each side was approximately equal, with the same percentage replying that there were more Vietnamese. Similar figures were also obtained when British and German students were questioned. In reality American deaths were around 58,000 while it was

estimated that there were over 2 million Vietnamese dead. Philo and Gilmour explain their results:

In our popular culture, U.S. films have portrayed their forces as involved in heroic and bloody action against a deadly enemy. They do not typically discuss the millions of mostly civilians who were killed or injured. When the British students were told of the actual casualties, an audible gasp came from them. What is clear is that many of these young people including the Americans, had no idea of the scale of death which had been imposed on Vietnam (Philo and Gilmour, 2004, p.235).

The tendency to equate South Vietnamese and American trauma, here through the strong portrayal of Steve's psychological problems, reinforces the attitude of Americans as prominent victims of the Vietnam War and promotes a sense of the "universality of the suffering" (Devine, (1995) 1991, p.361) in the conflict – that it devastated both American and Vietnamese lives. The desire to show both sides almost equally as victims belittles the film's attempt to illustrate, understand and provide a focus on the Vietnamese experience, as well as promoting the kind of beliefs held by more than a third of the respondents in Philo and Gilmour's research. These beliefs certainly do not correspond with the casualty statistics and facts concerned with the conflict. Here we view evidence of the facts having not been concealed but conveniently forgotten through popular culture. As Schudson (1992) suggested, the accounts informed by these statistics have been diluted. This issue is effectively quantified in context here by Andrew Martin:

If it were true that the United States and Vietnam were equal victims of the war, then the populations of Los Angeles and New York would have been wiped out and those cities would have been reduced to ruins. Not only would major sections of the farming and industrial areas be, respectively, poisoned and destroyed, but the United States would also be isolated from world trade and international affairs. And the long term effects of such defoliants as Agent Orange would not be a matter of isolated tragedies reserved for veterans and their families, but would be a significant and debilitating factor among the general population (Martin, 1993, p.xviii).

The unwillingness to accept that America was the cause of rather than the recipient of most of the devastation and destruction in Vietnam is a symptom of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in its role in remythologizing the war and acting as a psychological barrier to coming to terms with both the country's collective guilt for the suffering endured by civilians at the hands of its military as well as its loss of national pride through defeat by a small, technologically inferior country. Accepting that the NVA and Viet Cong simply drove out the American troops despite the military's best efforts was still not possible as the "Vietnam Syndrome"

continued to act as a restraint on an analysis of the military defeat. This resulted in the continuing representation in *Heaven and Earth* of the conflict as so vast and terrible, and having such an unprecedented effect on the men who experienced it that the defeat could be explained as an isolated incident in American military history.

Despite the concession to Americans that they too suffered undeservingly in Vietnam, the film still proved far less profitable than many other Hollywood Vietnam War movies, including both of Stone's previous features in his Vietnam trilogy. A box-office failure with a total domestic gross of just \$5,864,949 compared to figures of \$138,530,565 for *Platoon* and \$70,001,698 for *Born On The Fourth of July*, and largely overlooked at the Academy Awards, *Heaven and Earth* did not capture the American imagination.

Contemporary critics viewed the film as either risky or revolutionary. For example, while Jay Carr in *The Boston Globe* proclaimed it a "revisionist look at Vietnam" that "could only have been made with the passage of time and the purging of the anger" (Carr, 1993), Gene Siskel in *The Chicago Tribune* branded it "hastily conceived" and a "disappointing concluding chapter to [Stone's] Vietnam War trilogy" (Siskek, 1993). There was little, if any, favourable comparison to Stone's earlier Vietnam films *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*.

The lack of wide public acceptance of these images allowed them to be marginalised in the public's collective memory, for not conforming to American myths. Always in the shadow of Stone's earlier and more popular works, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, along with other famous Vietnam films, *Heaven and Earth* could not supplant the more common cinematic perspective of Vietnam as an American nightmare, rather than Vietnamese. Displaying a counter-image to that of fighting "the good war" for "a noble cause" or at least the belief of a noble cause – the backbone of classic American war films and traditional American ideology with respect to going to war. It may also have proved uncomfortable to see the enemy humanized. As such in this case it was perhaps easier to forget than to remember, through "selectively using, and often distorting or deleting, pieces of information that do not conform to the overall picture they are reconstructing" (Wertsch, 2002, p.8), preserving the culturally established depiction and the desired national identity. Thus Hall's (1999) "will to manifest identity" could be extended to a "will to manifest a positive or at the very least acceptable identity," one with which members of the group could identify in a way that enriched, not degraded, their lives.

*Heaven and Earth* failed to fit adequately within the commonly-held framework for the memory of Vietnam in which it was much more acceptable to omit Vietnamese suffering, rendering it a predominantly American tragedy. The film ultimately failed to reclaim Vietnam as a Vietnamese event in U.S. culture and minds as Hollywood continued with its American-centred representations in its subsequent portrayals of the Vietnam War in such films as *The War*, *Forrest Gump* (1994, Dir. Robert Zemeckis), *Apocalypse Now Redux* and *We Were Soldiers*. Furthermore, as Desser has commented, the failure to acknowledge the enemy “is indicative of a larger failure to examine the foray in the first place and a continued failure to come to terms with it” (Desser, 1991, p.88).

Were it not for the continued production and consumption of American Vietnam War movies such as these it would be tempting to argue that the box office failure of *Heaven and Earth* had less to do with the rejection of a representation than the theme having simply gone out of fashion or become “old news” in the wake of the victory in the Gulf. Had this been the case it would certainly support Bush’s claim that the “Vietnam Syndrome” had been “kicked.” However, their prevalence and popularity continued throughout the post-Gulf years. This suggests that *Heaven and Earth*’s lack of success in attracting movie-going audiences was not about Vietnam being an old war that was no longer a strong feature in the collective consciousness, and, furthermore, that the subject of the Vietnam War was still being addressed and examined in cinema and relevant to society.

Stone’s ambitious portrayal of the conflict from an unpopular perspective in *Heaven and Earth* may not have broken or even effectively tackled the American public’s dependency on myths surrounding U.S. involvement in Vietnam but there is a clue it could have served as the beginning of a new trend in the representation of the other side in war films. While *We Were Soldiers* clearly portrays Vietnam from a distinctly American vantage point replete with an intense dose of patriotism, there is also evident within this a more sympathetic attitude towards the enemy in the images of dying Viet Cong and grieving Vietnamese widows alongside a representation of Communist Commander Nguyen Huu An as “for the first time a genuine person” (Kleinen, 2003, p.434) rather than demonizing him. It may be a long time, if ever, however, before a large proportion of the American public shows a desire to accept cinematic depictions of conflicts offering a compassionate portrayal of their enemies on a larger scale than these features in *We Were Soldiers*. The recent critically acclaimed World War Two film *Letters From Iwo Jima* (2006, Dir. Clint Eastwood) also reflected a war from the opposite side of the battlefield from the United

States, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970, Dir. Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukasaku, Toshio Masuda) had attempted a similar approach decades before. Like *Heaven and Earth* though, they both resulted in disappointing box office returns in the U.S. Despite its critical support and success at award ceremonies, *Letters From Iwo Jima* grossed only \$13,756,082 on the domestic market, compared to the \$33,602,376 taken for its companion film *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006, Dir. Clint Eastwood) depicting the same battle from the American side. As it happens, *Letters From Iwo Jima* had received a far more favourable critical reception in the press. While *Flags of Our Fathers* got predominantly mixed reviews and was considered by some to be another “mass-audience Greatest Generation tale” (Phillips, 2006) and “as painstaking as a documentary but without the satisfaction of a documentary or the impact of a drama” (LaSalle, 2006), *Letters From Iwo Jima* was hailed “the peak achievement in Eastwood’s hallowed career” (Phillips, 2007) and “very much the sort of thing Clint Eastwood does best” (Burr, 2007). The box office figures indicate that in general the American public has a collective dislike and rejection of war films that are set in the opposing side to Americans.

*Heaven and Earth* is nevertheless a film that simply through being made marks a stage in the development of the acceptance and perception of Vietnam through its unprecedented privileging of the Vietnamese viewpoint in an American film. In its attempt to come to terms with the wider issues, beyond the concerns of individual or small groups of American soldiers, and promote a better understanding of another culture and the effects of the conflict on it, the film is another step in efforts to come to terms with Vietnam in the years following the victory in the Gulf. Upon deeper analysis the limits and failures of this depiction have been exposed in this chapter. The analysis of *Heaven and Earth* also reveals that despite some strong portrayals of America as a cause of much suffering and destruction and the suggestion of the colonial nature of their behaviour in Vietnam, there remained a psychological barrier to allowing the Vietnamese experience to be the main focus throughout the entire film, as Le Ly’s story is supplanted by that of Steve and his mental problems resulting from his involvement in the war. The film reverts back to the character trope of the war-tortured American. America as a whole was still suffering from the scars of Vietnam caused by the shock and humiliation of their unprecedented defeat and the decade of traumatic battle experiences that had been reflected in the conflict’s extensive media coverage prior to it. The limited success of the Gulf War had not had a great enough impact to make Americans ready to deal with the people they had long considered a “diabolical” enemy as victims themselves. The film failed to make a groundbreaking impression as society rejected the image of a Vietnamized Vietnam War

and filtered out the elements of the cultural memory of the conflict that did not conform to previously held perceptions. *Heaven and Earth* seems to reflect that the layers of myth America surrounded Vietnam in to ease the pain of defeat were still strongly defended by a nation which could no more come to terms with the psychological implications of it after the Gulf War than they could before it.

The next chapter shall examine how the 1994 film *The War* as a 1990s revisionist Vietnam War film employs one of the strongest cinematic techniques used to form and maintain these layers of myth in refighting the Vietnam War.



## Chapter 5

### *The War*

*The War* presents one of America's primary desires surrounding Vietnam – to go back and refight the war again in a different way – through the story of a social drama set in America's deep south. With the conflict itself in the past and no physical means to return to it, cinematic regenerations of Vietnam have provided audiences with an alternative means of doing so. This chapter shall begin by examining the necessity to return to Vietnam and recreate the story, before discussing *The War*'s departure from previous revisionist depictions of Vietnam and how it conveys the continuation of the “Vietnam Syndrome” as it attempts to alleviate its symptoms.

*The War* begins by introducing the Simmons family. Lidia has failed the last year at school and is forced to go to summer school where one of her assignments is to write her memoirs. Through these memoirs she tells her family's story of that summer. Her father, Stephen, is a Vietnam veteran who has recently returned from treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, having been haunted by a battle in which he was forced to leave his heavily-wounded friend on the battlefield to die in order to preserve his own life. His wife, Lois, struggles to provide for their two children, Lidia and her brother Stu. When Stephen befriends quarry worker Moe he helps him get a well-paid job clearing water out of caves. Meanwhile, the children have built a tree house with their friends and furnished it with items from the Lipnicki family scrap yard. At the quarry one day the roof of a cave collapses on top of Stephen and Moe. Moe's legs are trapped under rubble and he tells Stephen to leave and save himself, but Stephen refuses to. Stephen frees Moe but there is another collapse and he is crushed under the rubble himself, sustaining fatal wounds. The Lipnickis discover the tree house. Despite Stu winning a dare to keep the tree house and its contents, the Lipnickis still move into it. Stu, Lidia and their friends start a war to get the Lipnickis out, involving such weapons as a beehive, fireworks and apples launched like grenades. In the end, the tree house is destroyed in the fighting and the youngest Lipnicki almost dies in an accident. The children learn that war does not achieve anything.

Following the success of writer Kathy McWorter and director Jon Avnet's previous dramatic collaboration *Fried Green Tomatoes At The Whistle Stop Cafe* (1991, Dir. Jon Avnet), *The War* failed to impress the critics. Rita Kempley described it as “sticky on homilies and thin on grit” (Kempley, 1994) in her review for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, while Philip Wuntch from *The Dallas Morning News* criticised its “heavy-

handed” metaphor (Wuntch, 1994), and Steve Murray in *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution* simply considered it “big-hearted boredom” (Murray, 1994). The dual metaphors of the children’s fight for the tree house and Steven’s catharsis are unrelenting. It is easily arguable that *The War* over-states the case for its version of the Vietnam War.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the nation was still in the grip of a collective depression and guilt from Vietnam by the 1980s when the Reagan-era push to overcome the “Vietnam Syndrome” swept through popular culture. Revisionism sought to alter the narrative of the Vietnam War and revisionist films were vehicles of this. The movement took the form of simply rewriting history and refighting the war to make it more acceptable to the American public, distorting the past through reconstruction and shaping the malleable collective memory to promote national self-esteem. The revisionist Vietnam films of this period, which were summarised in Chapter 3, were usually of the action adventure genre and based on a quest, often a mission, involving a Vietnam veteran being returned to the war. *The War* is still about a Vietnam veteran purging his and the nation’s unresolved issues but the backdrop of the high-adrenaline action movie has been replaced by the thoughtful musings of a simple family drama. The film opens with serene music played over lingering shots of a forest. The open, empty forest floor is a contrast to the jungle of Vietnam film combat scenes. Wide shots of the children running and their car coming along the dusty road provide further contrast with the close up shots and the claustrophobia and humidity of depictions of Vietnam, particularly those of the late 1980s. The opening of *The War* provides idealistic images of a wholesome America. This alternative form of revisionist text is even further removed ideologically from those before it. John Rambo fought the war, whereas Stephen and Lidia Simmons philosophise about it. The 1980s revisionist films promoted new war as redemption for the war in Vietnam. *The War* promotes change in one’s actions and is strongly anti-war, avoiding any suggestion of benefit to be found in refighting the Vietnam War.

Two main features are to be found in films made during the Reaganite revisionism period that broke through the issue of Vietnam to permit America to reclaim the moral high ground. The first came in the surge of “Missing in Action” movies that obscured the issue of any NVA, Viet Cong or South Vietnamese civilian suffering by raising the American troops to prime victim status. They justified all American actions in the region by establishing the Vietnamese as extremely cruel and inhumane, therefore vindicating any punishment they received and allowing America “to return to Vietnam and wage war on its

enemy as a legitimate pursuit” (Melling, 1995, p.69). The second claim, most notably and strongly promoted through the *Rambo* films, was that America had failed through lack of resolve and its troops held back by political and military figures forcing them to curtail their efforts. A shift like this in responsibility could have a positive effect on public views of the conflict, as Jon Roper explains: “Such an interpretation of the nation’s experience in Vietnam invited Americans to confront their failure rather than their defeat.” (Roper, 1995, p.30).

In cloaking Vietnam in myth and redirecting responsibility away from the others involved, history is rewritten and the story of the war is retold in a way that “smooths over the ruptures of history, simplifying its narrative and providing a site for healing and redemption” (Sturken, 1997, p.89). Vietnam was swiftly rewritten as a military mistake that could have been avoided and those who fought in it recast as innocent and betrayed.

The figure of the innocent soldier had a considerable degree of exposure across the spectrum of Vietnam War films produced during the 1980s, often where the young, naïve man is visibly transformed over the course of the film by the horrors of war into a battle-hardened veteran, for example Taylor in *Platoon* and Eriksson in *Casualties of War*, as Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard discuss:

Typically, U.S military forces in Vietnam – fighting some ten thousand miles from their own soil – are portrayed as noble grunts, innocent and often illiterate kids just struggling for survival in the hot, dense, menacing jungles of an alien country, a place, moreover, that does not want them. This is far from the image of marauding, destructive imperial forces equipped with advanced military technology and prepared to destroy anything in their path, which of course was much closer to the truth (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.90).

*The War* goes beyond the myth of innocence in these portrayals to replay the Vietnam War through children and their struggle for a tree house, depicting the conflict in the actions of true innocents.

Stephen preaches non-violence and tolerance to his children, raising them with good American values, in the way he had been raised. When the children’s war over the tree house erupts and their behaviour degenerates, the American troops who served in Vietnam are then judged in the same light as these innocent children, depicted as having been good Americans who simply lost their way in exceptional circumstances.

The war over the tree house is a metaphoric representation and revision of Vietnam, with Lidia's younger brother Stu in the role of their father Stephen, who, by the point of the film where the fighting commences, has died. This strand of the film differs from the Stephen storyline as well as from the majority of classic Vietnam War revision texts in that it is not so much a case of distorting the past as supplementing it. The additional insight to the experience of war is intended to account for any perceived wrongdoing in Vietnam rather than rewrite it, in a similar way to films such as *Go Tell the Spartans* and *Casualties of War*. To begin with Stu applies the lessons learned from his father and refuses to fight the Lipnickis. Instead he tries to reason with them by returning the items from their yard that Lidia took to furnish the tree house and offering to let them visit whenever they want, but his efforts at diplomacy fail. Even after genuinely winning a dare for the possession of the tree house, Stu is betrayed by the rival gang as they invade it and begin setting off fireworks in it. This is when Stu decides there must be war – as a last resort – implying America is a nation that would only engage in conflict when its enemy was so unjust that it had little choice.

Stu finds smoke bombs, uniforms, camouflage paint and other military accessories among his father's possessions and puts on his dog tags, becoming him. These props give the fighting scenes a Vietnam appearance – despite this mock war obviously being less dangerous and less graphically violent than any real war. The Rolling Stones track *Gimme Shelter* further enhances the Vietnam-era connection and encourages the audience to feel that, like the young men of the generation before them, these children really did experience their own Vietnam. Apples are fired from a grenade launcher, fireworks are lit and petrol and smoke bombs are thrown. The visual result of the smoke and explosions acts as further Vietnam iconography. The image of the scene appears in stark contrast to the opening shots of the peaceful forest. As the fighting intensifies, the very thing they are fighting for, the tree house, is destroyed and Lidia explains their thoughts on the war in a way intended to parallel and explain the Vietnam Conflict in terms of reasonable intentions and human failings:

We thought if we hit them hard the first time they would surrender and the fighting would end. But it didn't. It just got worse and worse. And I guess somewhere along the way, we all sort of lost our minds (Lidia in *The War*).

Through this explanation of the Vietnam War, blame is even further shifted from American shoulders than in the *Rambo* films. *Rambo* placed the responsibility for America's failure in South-East Asia with those in charge of orchestrating the U.S. forces'

military operations. *The War* claims it is the fault of human nature, not America or any Americans. As Lidia concludes in her memoirs:

What I learned this summer is that no matter how much people think they understand war, war will never understand people. It's like a big machine that don't nobody really know how to work. Once it gets outta hand, winds up wrecking all the things you thought you was fighting for, and a whole bunch of other things you sorta forgot you had (Lidia in *The War*).

The process of this failing of human nature and degeneration to uncivilised behaviour is shown in the film through the separate tree house incident rather than purely told as a feature of the Vietnam story. This explanatory method is more effective in convincing the viewer of the argument. The audience are perceiving the tree house war for the first time, with no pre-conceptions and as an immediate and simple event, rather than looking back and analysing or interpreting the complex aspects of Vietnam directly as a past event.

Through Stu's eyes they suddenly become aware of how bad the situation has developed as three of his friends are shown in slow-motion cornering a Lipnicki and beating him in the back with a stick until he falls to the ground. Then Stu looks in another direction and three Lipnickis are beating one of his friends, and he turns again to see Lidia and Elvedene holding down and torturing a young Lipnicki. The overlying sound of helicopter blades, battle sounds and Stephen and Dodge's shouting brings back the Vietnam connection in this scene with force and emotional intensity. When viewers witness the youngsters beating each other or behaving in other such ways with extreme cruelty, they are made to believe they understand why such things happened during the conflict and why in such chaos as they "all sort of lost our minds" (Lidia in *The War*) the war became virtually unwinnable and essentially indefinable.

In addition to this understanding and excusing – prominent features in films attempting to address the "Vietnam Syndrome" – *The War* also promotes the notion of America having learned from its experiences in combat in Vietnam and knowing how to behave in future so that the same outcome is avoided. Will Wright identifies this as an active function of the type of myths circulated by revisionist texts, saying:

[H]istory is not enough: it can explain the present in terms of the past, but it cannot provide an indication of how to act in the present based on the past, since by definition the past is categorically different from the present. Myths use the past to tell us how to act in the present (Wright, 1975, p.187).

George Lipsitz echoes this “need to understand the past in order to make informed moral choices about the future” (Lipsitz, 1990, p.21), and in *The War* such a desire to make these moral choices indicates not only the act of teaching described by Wright but also a reassurance that the lessons have been identified and therefore any subsequent similar situations will not result in the same behaviour. The understanding is that next time America will recognise how war effects those involved in it and will act in the correct, moral way rather than let circumstances get out of control.

The children in the film learn how far their behaviour has become removed from how they were brought up and are depicted as regaining control of their senses when the fighting leads to the youngest Lipnicki, Billy, climbing the water tower that had been the site of the earlier dangerous dare for possession of the tree house and falls through the rotten wood into the rushing water as the tower empties. The rival factions are forced to abandon their quarrel and work together to save him. As Stu and Lidia revive their enemy they realise what they have done, what the fighting has led to and why it was wrong. Stu says their father does not need to watch over them any more. They have learned their lesson, as Stephen and, by implication, America as a nation did in Vietnam, and a battle fought like that will not happen again.

As well as promoting such reflection in the aftermath of the war, the film *The War* also takes the establishment of Vietnam as a “noble cause” (Roper, 1995, p.30) a step further than the *MIA* and *Rambo* films of the 1980s. The film focuses less on the combating the country’s actual physical loss of the war and more on its mental losses – “the collective post-traumatic stress of a nation” (Roper, 1995, p.31) – particularly in the field of the “good war” and American values. For the re-establishment of American moral values within the context of the Vietnam War, the re-establishment of the American troops as innocents is a primary condition:

The cinematic portrayal of the noble grunt is contingent on the establishment of prior innocence. The grunt soldier, who could take it, bears the burden of the past because he doesn’t know any better, because he believes in the myth of America as the rescuing force. The United States is scripted through these characters as losing its innocence – an innocence apparently regained after having been lost in the Kennedy assassination, an innocence to be mourned again with Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Oklahoma City bombing (Sturken, 1997, p.104).

Thus the myth of innocence is continually established in American culture to fuel the myth of American morality and values and is an important component of *The War's* revision and redemption of the Vietnam War.

Following the defeat in Vietnam, the publication of an unprecedented number of photographs and filmed images of intense combat and destruction, and the uncovering of stories of mass murder and other atrocities committed by American soldiers serving in Vietnam, the American military action in South-East Asia appears to have been entirely divorced from America's self-imposed values. Running contrary to established beliefs of fighting for the "noble cause," this dealt "a great blow to the collective American psyche" (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.29) resulting in the identity crisis on a mass scale. In such a situation Robert Burgoyne specifically identifies a "pervasive cultural desire to revivify the past through technologies and narratives of memory" (Burgoyne, 1997, p.106), claiming:

At a moment of sweeping national redefinition such as the present, social memory and its technological variants may take on increased importance in the management of national identification, particularly when the national past harbors traumatic social experiences that have not been assimilated or integrated into the overall narrative of the nation (Burgoyne, 1997, p.106).

As was discussed in Chapter 1, the link between collective memory and national identity – identified by Schudson (1992), Gillis (1994), Hall (1999) – is facilitated by its mediated response to events, whether negative or positive. Burgoyne here identifies a national desire to adopt the revisionist approach offered and counteract the negative elements of Vietnam's reflection on identity with the positive representation derived from rewriting.

The American identity issue that arose in the aftermath of the Vietnam War was identified in Chapter 2 as one of the main psychological elements of the "Vietnam Syndrome." The suggestion that in the mid-1990s the war in Vietnam had still not been "assimilated or integrated into the overall narrative of the nation," (Burgoyne, 1997, p.106) is evident in *The War's* continuing effort at cinematic definition, or redefinition, of the conflict as a new form of the revisionist of Vietnam movie:

Revisionist arguments about the mechanics of failure also needed to be able to address such feelings, which were not accommodated by simple pragmatic assessments of the inadequacies in America's approach to the Vietnam War (Roper, 1995, p.31).

*Rambo* and other such revisionist movies from the 1980s inspired by the Reagan administration's denial of a straightforward defeat may have tackled the issue of America's military failure but they did not go far enough beyond the "inadequacies in America's approach to the Vietnam War" to combat the defeat of the American ideal of fighting the "good war" which occupies a prominent position in the American psychological identity, as Boggs and Pollard describe:

The good-war discourse has been central to the culture of militarism since just after Pearl Harbour, keeping alive public memories of those dramatic history-altering victories over the Nazis and fascists while going even further, glorifying the entire legacy of patriotism and warfare, which remains firmly embedded within the American national psyche (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.70).

In order to ease the pain of Vietnam, perceived as an unjust war, and stabilize the national psyche, there emerged a cinematic struggle for closure where "American victim status is combined with the triumphal militarism and patriotism of the good war" (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.91). Adopting this form of representation, *The War* works to reinforce the dominant cultural myths that have grown up to surround Vietnam. Its cinematic perpetuation of the myths of the "good war" and the good Americans involved in it allow America to resume its position as "a moral and spiritual leader of the planet" (Melling, 1995, p.63). This impulse manifests itself in *The War* in a bid to counter the negative effects on the national identity caused by the "Vietnam Syndrome." Part of this was enforced in the use of the children to promote the belief of the American soldiers as innocents when they blindly stumbled into the war with the best intentions. Another part was to forgive those men for what then transpired.

The notion of the "good war" cannot be re-established without the film encountering the "Vietnam Syndrome's" symptom of guilt surrounding the Vietnam Conflict. This is first eased by emphasising the victim status of the Americans who fought in the war, achieved through similar methods of depiction as in generations of Vietnam films. *The War* opens with a strong statement of the devastating effects of the war on ordinary Americans and their families who were so far removed from Vietnam as to know little, if anything, of the people or cause for which all the fighting was taking place – as Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh commented, "no member of the National Liberation Front (NFL) threatened Wayland, Massachusetts" (Louvre and Walsh, 1988, p.1). Lidia and Stu's father has just returned home from an unexplained disappearance that the children only comprehend as being motivated in some way by the war. Lidia watches him standing at the ruins of their



old house: “Looks lonely. Looks more lonely than anybody I’ve ever seen. Mom says that war destroyed our lives. It’s how come he couldn’t find work. It’s why he’s been gone all this time.” (Lidia in *The War*). The main source of Stephen’s problems are the horrific nightmares he has been experiencing – a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. They are the reason he was away from his family so long as he was in a mental hospital, and they continue to dominate his everyday life. He explains to Stu:

I landed three jobs after the war. And I lost every one of them ’cause of them dreams. It wasn’t because I couldn’t do the work, son. They’re finding out a lot of men who go off to war, they just don’t come back the same – a *lot* of them (Stephen in *The War*).

Watching a man explain to his young son why he was gone from home and why their family is so poor makes an emotional appeal to viewers to perceive the Vietnam War as a curse on American lives. Indeed, the possibility that anyone other than Americans were harmed is never fully considered. Stephen is shown in a flashback killing a North Vietnamese troop but the soldier appears only briefly without being characterised as a human being and is a member of the North Vietnamese Army unit responsible for the fatal injury of Dodge and the death of the rest of Stephen’s company, therefore legitimizing Stephen’s attack. It is also apparent that the soldier features mainly, if not entirely, as a cinematic tool – as with the South Vietnamese people in *Go Tell The Spartans*, *Casualties of War* and *Heaven and Earth* – in the depiction of the effect of the chaos of the war on Stephen as it provoked him to lose his self-control and beat the man to death for what he did to Dodge.

The dreams that affect Stephen are symbolic of the nightmares that besieged the wider American consciousness in the wake of Vietnam and in the shadow of the terrible events that transpired over there. This demonstrates the link between individual and collective identity (as identified by Hall, 1999). Private memory contributes to the public memory. A fictional memory can become interwoven in exactly as truthful accounts would be. Born out of a desire within the collective to rewrite the war, Stephen’s story becomes written in. Stephen’s struggle for closure is the nation’s struggle for closure. In offering forgiveness to the veteran under the belief in his noble intentions, the guilt of going to war can be relieved and from this national catharsis over Vietnam is promoted. There are two key moments in *The War* when this happens – the first when Stu openly offers forgiveness, and the second when Stephen is given the opportunity to refight his personal experience of Vietnam and forgive himself. Stu’s words of redemption for the Vietnam veteran restores

the ideal of the noble grunt and the “noble cause.” As his father tries to teach him not to respond with violence when provoked and to be kind and considerate to others no matter what they may do, Stu raises the subject of the war:

Stephen: Son, have you tried talking to them Lipnickis?

Stu: It’s self-defence, Dad! You went to war to fight for people you didn’t even know!

Stephen: Yes, I did! Because I wanted to help people. But in the end, I killed more people than I saved. I lost more friends than I ever made before or since. I lost my dignity, I lost my house, I ... I about lost my family.

Stu: None of that was your fault, Dad. You done the right thing, going to war (*The War*).

In going to war to help people he did not know, Stephen re-establishes Vietnam as a “good war.” Although, despite these noble intentions, it did not emerge to be the “good war” in quite the same way as in the heroic representations of the Second World War, he is alleviated from the blame for this: it is not his, nor America’s, fault and they did “the right thing” in going to war for the right reasons.

The second opportunity for catharsis over Vietnam is a more personal struggle. It relates to the incident during the war when Stephen’s best friend Dodge is injured and the rest of their company killed. Stephen carries him to a helicopter but finds out it can only lift off with one of them on board. He is forced to make a split-second decision and boards the helicopter, leaving the seriously wounded Dodge on the ground to die. Following the battle Stephen was presented with medals for honour that he feels he does not deserve and has been plagued by guilt ever since: “That’s what my struggle’s been about all these years. Trying to forgive myself, pardon my country” (Stephen in *The War*).

Working in the quarry with his new friend Moe, Stephen finds himself in an extremely similar situation and is able to replay his Vietnam in the truly honourable way he felt he should have, providing in a similar way to the MIA sub-genre of films, “a certain compensatory heroism” (Rowe and Berg, 1991, p.10) and the forgiveness that he sought. When the quarry caves in on them Moe’s leg is trapped under boulders and crushed. Steve ignores his pleas to leave him and escape the danger, saying: “I want you to know if I gotta break your leg into ten pieces, I’m taking you outta here” (Stephen in *The War*). Stephen moves the rock, saving Moe’s life but in the process causes a further collapse and is

crushed by debris himself, sustaining critical injuries from which he never recovers. Here, through the protagonist's catharsis as he forgives himself for his previous actions, so it implied the country can find relief and pardon its collective actions in Vietnam.

In resurrecting the figure of the traumatised veteran of so many previous Vietnam War films, from *Birdy*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Born On The Fourth Of July*, to *Jacob's Ladder*, *Heaven and Earth* and *The Deer Hunter*, *The War* indicates American cinema's continued exploration of the war in Vietnam and the continuing representation of the "Vietnam Syndrome." The need, still, to come to terms with its men who returned from Vietnam and offer them forgiveness in the post-Gulf era promoted the cinematic requirement for such "narratives of redemption" (Sturken, 1997, p.120) and efforts to revise history as are seen in the revisionist Vietnam War films. There may have been a shift from the "revenge fantasies" (Hellmann, 1991, p.140) of the *Rambo* generation to the forgiveness fantasy of *The War* but the rejection of defeat remained.

Having pardoned and excused the Vietnam veteran, *The War* can continue to establish its redemption of the Vietnam War itself in converting it to fit the template of the "good war," and placing the conflict within the boundaries of the publicly acceptable social frameworks within which prevailing collective memories, according to Halbwachs (1992), must fall. Another aspect that is central to the reconditioning of Vietnam as a "good war" is an intense infusion of patriotism. The role of the American media in the development and sustenance of the pride and deep loyalty to the country that comprise this patriotism was highly influential. This was especially so in the 1980s, during which national respect was being promoted as America began trying to escape the depression of the post-Vietnam years and in preparation for the onset of the Gulf War, with these "times of national crisis" promoting "strong 'rally round the flag effects'" (Bowen, 1989, p.794), as was convincingly argued by Gordon L. Bowen. Patriotic American war films portray the United States as liberators – not a conquering force but a moral crusader fighting to advance freedom and democracy. *The War*, with its reclassification of the Vietnam War as a "noble cause," fits neatly beside the wave of patriotism that marked the build-up to the first war in the Gulf and continued past the close of the conflict to reinforce the myth of the "good war." The unfailing dedication to American values, American heroism and support of American warfare, along with the conclusion in which Stephen was suggested to be an angel after death, identify *The War* as an extremely patriotic text. It employs clichés, in this case mostly emotional and heroic, as *The Green Berets* did in its jingoistic portrayal of battle, to convey its meaning.

The biblical references to angels throughout the film and this Hollywood clichéd ending of Stephen, the redeemed veteran, becoming an angel himself are interesting features given that *The War* was made shortly after the Gulf War. President Bush had employed biblical rhetoric in his references to the Gulf War throughout the build-up, conflict and aftermath to attain and uphold American support for the conflict through the assertion of the ideal of the “good war” and moral values:

Conscious of the fact that the original Puritan errand to civilize the wilderness has been grounded in metaphors of the visual and visionary Bush explained the need for American military action in the Gulf by asking the American people to commit themselves to a ‘purpose’ ‘higher than themselves’, to fulfil the promise of ‘renewal’ that God’s moral law and its enforcement makes possible (Melling, 1995, p.64).

The inherent righteousness in the campaign against Saddam Hussein was stressed at every opportunity, convincing Americans not only of the necessity of war, but also of the pride they should feel in America leading it. Describing the Gulf as a war that “must be fought for the greater good” (Quoted in Lewis, 1991), Bush asserted in his 1991 State of the Union Address: “Our cause is just. Our cause is moral. Our cause is right.” (Quoted in Gerstenzang, 1991). The war in Vietnam undoubtedly had an influential role in the application of such language. Questions over the morality and necessity of the Vietnam War were a contributory factor to mass protests and civil unrest for those who believed it to be unjust. President Bush introduced a number of measures to promote more of a consensus within the American public and reduce the chance of such activity being repeated with the Gulf War. Aside from the strong assertion that war was the right thing to do in these circumstances and the promotion of ideology convincing people the conflict was being fought under the American notion of the “noble cause,” he also implemented strict control of the media to prevent any disturbing images affecting public opinion in the way they were believed to have in Vietnam. He even wrote a special letter specifically to college newspapers across the nation putting forward his case for war and asking that they offer their support to the cause. The media and college campuses were the nation’s most memorable sites of dissent on the home front during the Vietnam War and it was no coincidence that this time Bush made a pre-emptive strike on them to gain their co-operation during the Gulf.

The nature of the rhetoric and propaganda surrounding the Gulf War filtered through to cinema, not only in the inclusion of the angels theme in *The War*, but as a wider practice throughout this film and others:

As the war phenomenon becomes a sacralized feature of American society – that is, as violent campaigns attached to ‘higher’ values (democracy, freedom, human rights, etc.) take on a quasi-religious meaning – cinematic heroism too comes to occupy a special niche in the culture. Hundreds of mainstream films depict glamorous, courageous military leaders able to storm the heavens and remake the world, or at least make the world ‘safe’ for all the wonderful ‘American’ virtues to flourish (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.15).

Stephen displays immense courage in his actions after having been at war and also attempts, through teaching his children, to make the world safe for American virtues and attitudes as if on a moral mission for a higher purpose.

Stephen’s profound actions and the Gulf War – a mission, in President Bush’s words, to “selflessly confront evil for the sake of good” (Bush, 1991) – were both in the same way intended to smooth over the “Vietnam Syndrome” and highlight America’s ability to triumph over it. In actuality both emphasized America’s inability to triumph over it. The victory in the Gulf may have restored national pride and suppressed the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the immediate aftermath of the conflict but, as was documented in Chapter 2, it was not long before doubts over the extent of the victory began to creep into the American consciousness. That Saddam Hussein was not pursued by United States or coalition forces and was allowed to remain in office in Iraq appeared to contradict the moral cause of defeating evil and persecution that Americans were led to believe the war was waged for. Even the liberation of Kuwait, which formed the prime mission of the conflict and was executed with such great military success, became the subject of debate, casting a shadow over the image of the Gulf War as a “noble cause” for having “hardly represented a triumph for American values” (Roper, 1995, p.39). Thomas Omestad summarises the stark disillusionment suddenly faced by the American public as people began to realise the limitations of their nation’s success:

Bush had appealed to Americans’ idealism to win support for the war; afterward, he neglected the most basic ideal: democracy. Regaining power, thanks to American soldiers was the autocratic Emir of Kuwait, a man whose idea of pluralism was to take a new wife on Thursdays... And, of course, Hussein was alive and ticking. Now and then the administration would suggest that his demise was near, but the man Bush condemned as a new Hitler seemed destined to remain in power longer than the president. Back on Main Street, euphoria gave way to cynicism and disillusionment. ‘SADDAM HUSSEIN STILL HAS HIS JOB. WHAT ABOUT YOU?’ asked a popular bumper sticker (Omestad, 1992, p.71).

Following years of public debate and condemnation surrounding Vietnam, disheartening discrepancies in the delivery of the moral, if not the military, victory were enough to revive the strength of the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

Meanwhile, Stephen’s clichéd victory, simply through its appearance in post-Gulf War cinema and continuing relevance to America and its concept of war, demonstrates the resilience of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” If Vietnam was dead and buried in the Gulf, there would be no need for Stephen Simmons and his children to refight and revise it yet again in *The War*. This film presents Vietnam revisionism in a different genre but in essence for the same purpose.

In analysing this film it has been identified how it is a notable development from the 1980s style of revisionism, in which politics and tactics were cited as the source of America’s inability to win the war, and the muscle-bound figure of John Rambo was offered as an antidote to the emasculation of the nation that was a product of defeat. Stephen proves a marked contrast to Rambo, most obviously lacking his physical strength, but instead demonstrating immense mental strength. He tackles the nation’s persevering guilt over its involvement in the conflict and conduct whilst out there and encourages a more sympathetic consideration of America and its forces in the conflict. This different approach to fighting the symptoms of the “Vietnam Syndrome” may indicate that America had made greater progress in addressing its military defeat – to which the Gulf War, displaying America’s great technological superiority and delivering a swift victory, must surely have played a pivotal role – and was more in need of psychological healing than further demonstrations of military prowess. Part of “the mass media’s inclination to offer wish-fulfilling fantasies (rather than critical investigations) of the Vietnam War” (Rowe, 1991, p.9), the film attempted to mould the collective memory of the conflict through fantasy, returning to Vietnam to provide a second chance to examine and explain it through a metaphoric re-enactment of the war, and a second chance to right the wrongs of the original version.

Employing the war movie motif of the innocent soldier is one of its most powerful representations. Through the allegory of a group of young children’s quarrelling, Vietnam is reconstructed as a war of good intentions and noble American values, fought by men who did not fail through any fault of their own, or of any other American, but of human nature. It is also depicted as an isolated incident – the defeat an outcome not to be repeated – and something from which the nation has acknowledged its lesson and pledged to return

to the tradition of the “good war.” As Lidia says in her memoirs, it is about “learning what’s worth fighting for” (Lidia in *The War*).

The adoption of such attitudes, as has been discussed, is intended to work towards repairing the damaged collective national identity of the United States in the post-Vietnam years as well as to provide redemption for the actions of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. The fantasy created in the film *The War* of America entering Vietnam to fight for what it believed to be a “noble cause” and the additional reassurance that, while mistakes were made, lessons were learned to prevent the same occurrence, were intended to bring relief to the “Vietnam Syndrome” to generate for the United States once again, after the humiliation of Vietnam and evident doubts over the moral underpinning in the execution of the war in the Persian Gulf, a credible identity and prepare for future conflicts.

Necessary for this myth to flourish was the exclusion of the wider context in this interpretation of Vietnam. Established historical and political narratives were ignored in the film, detaching the collective cultural perception of the conflict from the history books they, to some theorists, seem destined to overshadow:

Historians must also recognise that their versions of events reach a much smaller audience than films or even moderately successful fiction dealing with the same period and that history books rarely have the immediate emotional impact of film or fiction (Taylor, 2003, p.11).

While historical narratives have been concerned with the critical investigation of the past, films like *The War* have concerned the present and the future, exposing the resilience of the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

In the next chapter the revision of an earlier depiction of the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now Redux* is presented as a unique case study. This chapter shall be based on a comparison of the original and *Redux* versions to uncover the ideological variations that have emerged in the years between the 1979 film and the 2001 release.

## Chapter 6

### *Apocalypse Now Redux*

More than two decades after its original release, the Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now* returned to movie theatres. Not simply a re-release of the original version, *Apocalypse Now Redux* was intended to bring a completely fresh perspective to the movie and the war. As Peter Cowie (2000) reveals, the 2001 film's origin lay in director Francis Ford Coppola viewing the original on television whilst in a hotel and suddenly perceiving his creation to be outdated in the modern world and to a modern audience. The 1979 representation of Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now* was no longer reflective of the developed collective memory that had been subject to circulation and revision for more than two decades since. This resulted in a six-month process of re-editing and remixing the raw footage filmed in the seventies to produce a reinterpretation of the early Vietnam movie – a revision of a vision. This chapter shall examine *Apocalypse Now Redux* and discuss it as a development of the original *Apocalypse Now*. Such a comparison is unique as the two films began as essentially the same text: one version is frozen in 1979 and the other has been developed to be more relevant to American society in 2001. It is therefore a valuable case study in an analysis of the change in representations of the Vietnam War in the post-Gulf War years.

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe *Apocalypse Now* as a “reactionary way” (Ryan and Kellner, 1988, p.205) of approaching the conflict in Vietnam, highlighting the key notion of cinema adapting to contemporary situations and opinions to reflect not only the period a film directly portrays but also the one in which it was made, as Robin Wood explains:

I have become increasingly aware of the importance of seeing works in the context of their culture, as living ideological identities, rather than as sanctified exhibits floating in the void of an invisible museum (Wood, 1986, p.2).

Having been a vital aspect of this research so far, this idea of the malleability of collective cultural memory around social conditions is especially important in a comparative examination of *Apocalypse Now* and *Apocalypse Now Redux* because of the lack of other variables. They are from the same footage and the same basic idea and composed by the same director, only the time at which the footage was compiled is different.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, *Apocalypse Now* is a disturbing metaphysical journey into the Vietnam War as well as the psyche of those who experienced it, so that “by the time



the movie is over the audience had been put through an *Alice and Wonderland*” (Coppola cited in Cowie, 2000, p.28). *Apocalypse Now Redux* follows the same plot as the original *Apocalypse Now*, telling the story of Willard’s journey up the river to assassinate Kurtz. The only difference is that there are additional encounters for the crew along the way, including attending a USO show, meeting the Playboy bunnies further up the river, spending time on a French-owned rubber plantation and more time spent with Kurtz at his compound.

The film was directed, owned and predominantly privately financed by Francis Ford Coppola. A. O. Scott describes *Apocalypse Now* as “the apotheosis (and also the catastrophe) of American auteurism” (Scott, *The New York Times*, August 3, 2001). Coppola had the idea for a war film based on Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) some time in the late 1960s and had commissioned John Milius to write it. Filming was due to begin in 1971 but Coppola’s film company American Zoetrope was on the edge of bankruptcy and it was not until after the commercial success of *The Godfather* (1972, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola), *The Conversation* (1974, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola) that his thoughts could return to the project. It was originally intended that George Lucas would direct the film but by that time he was too busy with his own projects. Coppola then approached John Milius, who was also involved in other work, before deciding to direct it himself: “My thought was to do some virtuoso directing, and get on with what I’d always wanted to do – which is to have my own film company, and my own studio, and really get to work” (Coppola quoted in Cowie, 2001, p.7). Coppola had a vision for his Vietnam film and ensured that every shot was exactly as he wanted it. His emphasis of his personal interests in the film adds anecdotal support to Scott’s claim that the picture is the apotheosis of auteurism. Fellow critic David Thomson noted a basic similarity between *Apocalypse Now* and the two *Godfather* films recognising “all three offer a horrified and consistent view of America” (Thomson, 2001). Timothy Corrigan referred to Coppola as an auteur in writing on auteurism in post-Vietnam American filmmaking. Corrigan’s research into auteurism found a departure from the traditional idea of it as a creative signature and “a way to cut through the complications of mass entertainment and to locate the expressive core of the film art” (Corrigan, 1991, p.101), and a move towards the auteur as a celebrity and a commercial product sometimes marketed more vigorously than the film itself:

As generally consistent as that tradition of the textual auteur is, more recent versions of the auteurist positions have swerved away from its textual center. In line with the marketing transformation of the international art cinema into the cult of personality that defined the film artist of the seventies, auteurs have become increasingly situated along an extratextual path in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs: the auteur-star is meaningful primarily as a promotion or recovery of a movie group or group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself (Corrigan, 1991, p.105).

This description of the auteur as a type of marketing brand bridges the gap between traditional auteur theory and contemporary commercial filmmaking. One of the greatest challenges brought by an auteur theory that is embedded in commercial filmmaking is that the films are required to be successful in order to generate returns on the investment in them. A dependency on the entertainment market compromises the film as an independent work of art. This begs the question: whose is *Apocalypse Now*?

Having provided a large part of the funding for the film himself, Coppola may have acquired the artistic freedom associated with financial independence but his desire to use the success of *Apocalypse Now* as a means to generate success for himself, his own film company and own studio placed a great deal of control of the film in the hands of the audience, as Corrigan describes of *Apocalypse Now*:

With *Apocalypse Now*, moreover, this most celebrated of contemporary American auteurs surrenders the choice of three different endings to a battery of advisors and miles of computer printouts that surveyed the expectations and desires of different audiences (including President Carter) (Corrigan, 1991, p.109).

Such calculated measures of audience reaction cast doubt over whether Coppola's vision of Vietnam is his own or a reflection of majority opinion. While the film bears hallmarks of Coppola's style in his use of spectacle and his theme in the interpretation of the dark elements of American society, his reliance on the favour of audiences detracts from the film as an artistic endeavour, aligning it more closely with the commercial industry. In this respect it is as much a public representation as a private one, and though Coppola was less dependent on the financial success of the *Redux* cut there is little reason to believe the man determined to be responsible for "the definitive film about the war" (Steier: 1980: p.114) was demonstrably less concerned with audience favour this time around. In the field of this research, in which the broad social phenomenon of the "Vietnam Syndrome" is investigated, *Apocalypse* is most appropriately considered a composite of a public and a private vision – one that, though envisioned through the eyes of "a self-exiled and

stridently independent auteur” (Corrigan, 1991, p.108), was defined within the parameters of public opinion.

*Apocalypse Now* proved to be as popular at the box office as Coppola had hoped, possibly boosted by curiosity to finally see Coppola’s extravagant epic after so many years of waiting for its release. However, the original *Apocalypse Now* received, at best, mixed reviews and in many cases extremely poor reviews in the press. James Webb, writing in *The Washington Post*, criticised its “illogical absurdity” and called the film’s depiction of Vietnam a “crazed fantasy” (Webb, 1979). Critics’ main complaint about *Apocalypse Now* was that they found it a confusing representation of the war.

The *Redux* version, released two decades later when *Apocalypse Now* had been canonised as one of the great Vietnam War films, received far more favourable reviews. *New York Times* film critic David Thomson, despite little praise for the original, referred to the director’s cut as “an unmistakably great film” and “a masterpiece” (Thomson, 2001). Michael Wilmington, film critic for *The Chicago Tribune*, referred to *Redux* as “the definitive version,” and exclaimed: “The best film of 2001 was made in 1979” (Wilmington, 2001). Wilmington admired the “richer, more deeply human framework” of the new version:

Where before the film’s politics and philosophy seemed vague and evasive – trapped somewhere between the left-wing anti-war Coppola and the right-wing gung ho Milius – now the cards are laid clearly on the table. We get a deeper critique of the war and its origins and a more eloquent assault on its waste and depravities (Wilmington, 2001).

However, Wilmington did refer to the film’s limitations, conceding that the plantation scene “does add context... but little illumination” (Wilmington, 2001). Chris Vogner of *The Dallas Morning News*, made a similar point in claiming it was “best to view the new material as an interesting series of footnotes” (Vogner, 2001). This argument shall be considered in the discussion of this film.

Highly introverted in its depiction of the war as a psychological trauma, *Apocalypse Now* largely ignored the political or historical context of Vietnam by focusing the original on the corruption of the American mind in the extreme conditions of warfare as political film theorists Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard describe:

The film involves a bizarre, surreal journey of Americans into the darkness of jungle combat, where everyone winds up submerged in a cycle of unfathomable violence, fear, and paranoia and where qualities of human goodness that might have existed before the journey have simply vanished. For Coppola, Vietnam was nothing short of a descent into hell, a noirish spectacle, as U.S. troops are sucked into the insanity of brutal warfare that turns ever inward (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.93).

One of the defining features of *Apocalypse Now* was its difference in appearance to the other Vietnam films released in the 1970s. As Jay Carr, writing for *The Boston Globe* commented:

Coppola wasn't shooting a documentary view of Vietnam. That had been done. He wasn't even shooting a particularly political film. He was shooting an expressionistic evocation of war as a black hole, devouring everything it touches (Carr, 2001).

Much of the lighting in *Apocalypse Now* portrays the darkness of this black hole. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro created an interplay of stark light and shadow that accentuated the surreality of the film and reflected the nightmare experienced by those who experienced the war. This lighting effect is evident from the first scenes of Willard at the hotel room in Saigon and meeting the commanding officers at Nha Trang to discuss his mission. Their faces, in particular the officers' faces in the Nha Trang meeting, are almost always fully or partially cast in shadow. However, this is just a subtle indication of the darkness that is to follow. The artistic combination of light and shadow is best observed in the Do Lung Bridge scene, described in the Chapter 3 summary of pre-Gulf War Vietnam films, and the Kurtz compound scene. The compound scene, which in the original always portrayed Kurtz in darkness with only slivers of light to illuminate parts of his face as he spoke, is one of the scenes to have been treated differently in the *Redux* version. It shall be analysed in turn in the following discussion of the additional footage.

*Apocalypse Now Redux* includes a number of additional scenes cut from the original edit that completely alter the narrative flow and vision of *Apocalypse Now*. This chapter shall now proceed in identifying and analysing the most important of these and discussing how their inclusion has affected the text. It shall then consider how the *Redux* version when compared to the original conveys change and development in attitudes towards the Vietnam War, as well as the way in which the film depicts the "Vietnam Syndrome" at the turn of the new millennium.

The first of the new sequences to be reinstated in *Redux* that shall be examined is one that occurs early in the journey up the river, beginning in the chaos of Kilgore's attack on the village. In *Apocalypse Now Redux* the crew's encounter with Colonel Kilgore ends with Willard stealing Kilgore's much-prized surfboard and speeding away with it in the PBR. Kilgore then pursues them up the river and can be heard later that evening as he flies over the boat, demanding through loudspeakers that Lance, who he mistakenly believes to be the thief, return the board and repeatedly promising not to hurt or harm him. As well as providing a lighter, more humorous moment to the movie, this sequence also brings the opportunity for Willard and his crew to bond as they sit on the boat relaxing together, and humanizes Willard's character where in the previous version he had remained more detached and cold. The scene also conveys how innocent or naïve the men, particularly the younger Lance and Clean, are before their journey up the river and descent into madness and savagery. Lance asks Willard in an enquiring, child-like manner "Do you think he would have shot us?" and frightened by the prospect of the Colonel coming after him wants the board removed from his turret and stored at the back of the boat. Likewise, Clean then asks him slightly tentatively "Is it gonna be hairy?" These young men with their fears, whether of the enemy or the wrath of the Colonel, are in stark contrast to what the sole-surviving crew member Lance becomes by the end of the journey as, face-painted, he joins Kurtz's tribal followers in their rituals and brutal killing of a water buffalo.

The addition of this sequence encourages the audience to notice the change more, yet at the same time breaks up the relentless narrative of the original which continuously bombarded viewers with representations of horror and madness to be found in the war. In doing this, Coppola removes *Apocalypse* one step from the psychedelic feast of the original – described by Andrew Martin as "nothing less than a cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a work of art in which all the elements work together to a single purpose- simultaneously to criticize and aestheticize the distinctly American form of madness that lay at the heart of the war" (Martin, 1993, p.117). The deviation here from the psychedelic opera of *Apocalypse Now* merely begins a process of adding greater meaning and further contextualisation to the film that Coppola continues throughout his construction of *Apocalypse Now Redux*.

The second of the main additional scenes to be examined is the extension of the *Playboy* playmates sequence. In the 1979 version they only make a brief appearance at the USO show that happens to occur at a base where the crew stop for fuel. In *Redux* they reappear when their helicopter runs out of fuel, forcing them to make an emergency stop at a

Medevac base next to the river. Here the boat meets up with them and Willard trades two barrels of fuel for a couple of hours with the playmates for the crew. Once again, this additional scene is a comic moment breaking up the horror and violence of the Vietnam War:

Chief: Captain, you're giving away our fuel for a playmate of the month?

Willard: Nope, playmate of the year, Chief (*Apocalypse Now Redux*).

The scene also brings women into a greater role in the film, as does the later French plantation sequence, but the playmates are denied an audience for the voice they have been given, as the men do not actually listen to anything they are saying – no matter how important it may be to the girls.

Despite the scene being notable in its function of providing a break from the war, its significance must be underplayed as the scene was supposedly originally cut not due to an editorial decision but due to complications fitting it into the film as the filming of the scene was never completed because of a typhoon. Its inclusion in *Redux*, therefore, is possibly the result of reaching a way to include the unfinished footage within the narrative more than Coppola making an ideological decision to do so.

One sequence, however, that does have great significance in its inclusion in the *Redux* version is the lengthy French plantation sequence, set shortly after Clean's death, which "connects American involvement in Vietnam to dark precedents of French colonialism in the region" (Sadashige, 2001, p.1919). It also works to break the entirely American perspective of the film with the inclusion and intense discussion of the French situation and to open up the introspective nature of its examination of the Vietnam War.

The sequence begins with the PBR sailing through dense fog. It is seen appearing, then disappearing again into it, before a shot from the boat reveals the plantation emerging, ghost-like, and becoming clearer through the fog as the boat gets closer to the land. It looks as if they are passing into another world – a world in the past. At first it seems deserted but then a French voice is heard and the swirling fog clears enough to allow a group of French men in military uniform to become visible through it. As the sequence progresses it becomes apparent these men really are ghostly figures and the world they inhabit belongs to the past. In declaring they will continue their lives in the way they have for generations despite what is unfolding around them they demonstrate themselves to be

outdated – standing out in this nightmarish war as their antique furniture stands out in the jungle of Vietnam.

There is also a significant visual departure from *Apocalypse Now*, and even most of *Redux* as well, in this sequence. The imagery is not only softened by the dense fog, but is softened by the lighting. There is still light and shadow at the dinner scene, but the lighting is warm and soft, rather than bright and stark as elsewhere. This illuminates the decadent furniture, a metaphor for the French colonial rule in Vietnam, and enhances the reflective effect of the slower pace of the scene. The only period in the French plantation sequence to share any of the strong lighting utilised in other key scenes throughout the film is at Clean's funeral. There is strong back-lighting at the burial but even so its effects are reduced by the scene's setting in daylight.

Over dinner DeMarais, whose family have owned the plantation for seventy years, enters into a heated discussion with Willard regarding his views on both French and American involvement in Vietnam. This conversation is very powerful in suffusing *Apocalypse Now* with the seeds of a historical and political contextualisation of the war. DeMarais explains to Willard the role the French have played within Vietnam and how they have worked with its people to build something meaningful to them which they resolve to fight for:

Willard: How long can you possibly stay here?

DeMarais: We stay forever.

Willard: No, no, I mean, why don't you go back home to France?

DeMarais: Back home? I mean, this is our home, Captain.

Willard: Sooner or later you're...

DeMarais: No! You don't understand our mentality – the French officer mentality. At first, we lose the Second World War ... In Dien Bien Phu, we lose. In Algeria, we lose. In Indochina, we lose! But here we don't lose! This piece of earth, we keep it. We will never lose it. Never!  
(*Apocalypse Now Redux*).

Having stated his reasons for remaining in Vietnam, DeMarais concludes by declaring “you Americans, you are fighting for the biggest nothing in history”. A pivotal philosophical and political moment in the film, one might wonder why it was omitted from the original version. Writing about the original *Apocalypse Now* in comparison to *Heart of Darkness*, Garrett Stewart found: “One of the major surprises of *Apocalypse Now* is that

the movie does not address Vietnam in overt political terms... No one in the film even thinks to allude to reasons for being involved in the Vietnamese War” (Stewart, 1981, p.468). The French plantation sequence, had it been included, may have answered Stewart’s call for political debate to some degree. Stewart, however, offers up his own explanation for the absence of anything of this nature in the original *Apocalypse Now*:

This is not Coppola’s fault but the fault of the military action itself, the barbarism of which is after a point self-generating as well as, so his ending would suggest, self-revenging. Kurtz may once, before volunteering for the Green Berets, have had the intellectual compulsion to rationalise his nation’s political role in Indochina, but rapidly obsessed by the means of brutality, he has long since lost interest in any end but his own (Stewart, 1981, p.469).

It is not difficult to agree that the popular depiction of Vietnam as an especially barbaric conflict may have contributed in some way to the purely inward, psychological representation, devoid of substantial political meaning or rhetoric in *Apocalypse Now*. The decision, however, to omit such a pivotal scene may also have had its roots in the contemporary mood of society where the Vietnam War was concerned. As was mentioned earlier, in Chapter 2, in the years immediately after the war ended “Vietnam faded from the screen” (Berg, 1991, p.118). The American cultural industries avoided making direct references to the conflict, finding the subject matter difficult to confront. Just a few years after the American withdrawal, when *Apocalypse Now* was being produced, the defeat was still too raw for the film to examine the political and historical context in such a way in a major cinematic production. It would have been far easier to perceive Vietnam as a nightmarish mystical horror than to engage in a debate about any other matters. Had the original included the French plantation sequence it may also have left the film too controversial to appeal to a wide audience, and with a film as expensive as Coppola’s Vietnam epic and as important to his vision of success, it would not have been wise to alienate anyone, as Paul Rosenbaum explains:

The only chance *Apocalypse Now* had to succeed commercially was if it pleased everyone – hawks, doves, and everyone in between. Somehow it achieved that, not merely confirming everyone’s prejudices about the war simultaneously but also convincing members of each faction that it was speaking only to them (Rosenbaum, 1997, p.135).

By the turn of the new millennium, when *Apocalypse Now Redux* was being created, a significant amount of time had passed since the war had ended and the film. The French plantation sequence with its political debate could then more easily feature in the movie.



There is much evidence to suggest the dinner scene could prove unsettling to the newly defeated American nation in 1979. The French blame and criticise America for inventing the Viet Cong, having created the Vietminh from which the Viet Cong was derived, as a force to drive the French colonists out. They also suggest that America should have learned from their defeat, as they acknowledge the intelligence, strength and determination of the Vietnamese, as opposed to becoming entangled in the situation. However, at the same time someone else at the table brings in another view, reminiscent of the revisionist interpretations of the military downfall of the war: “Why don’t you Americans learn from us, from our mistakes? Mon Dieu, with your Army, your strength, your power, you could win if you want to! You can win.” Whilst being controversial in suggesting that America was at fault for its conduct in the war, the French plantation sequence through this section of dialogue appeases the American consciousness of its defeat by, as so many other Vietnam movies did, reducing blame to key military or political figures responsible for the strategy of America’s warfare in Vietnam.

This notion of the war being lost from home rather than from the front line is also brought into the dinner conversation through a remark by DeMarais on the French defeat against the Vietnamese:

The French Army was sacrificed. Sacrificed by the politicians safe at home. They put the Army in an impossible situation where they couldn’t win. The students are marching in Paris, protesting, demonstrating. They stab the soldiers in their back (*Apocalypse Now Redux*).

This is designed to invoke parallels with America’s anti-war demonstrations and accusations made towards politicians. It again promotes the view that America had the ability to win the war in Vietnam had the military’s efforts not been constrained. The contradiction of reflected opinions in the scene that results from the inclusion of both this perspective and the criticism of the US involvement in the country seems to be a demonstration of Rosenbaum’s (1997) claim that in making *Apocalypse Now* Coppola attempted to appeal to factions right across the spectrum of opinions on the conflict.

It is at Kurtz’s compound that the final of the most influential additional scenes is found. As with the French plantation episode, it has a political theme but its effect is not only to address the idea of political debate in the public mind, but also to alter the impression of Kurtz that is projected. For the first time, the new scene shows Kurtz in daylight, surrounded by children as he reads extracts from *Time* magazine to Willard. Scenes

featuring Kurtz in daylight were mainly left out of the original cut because it humanised him, detracting from the character's portrayal as a mythic figure. Peter Cowie, remarked of this scene, "Brando is not so menacing and other-worldly as he appears in the final version" (Cowie, 2000, p.138). In the original version of the film Coppola worked to build up the perception of Kurtz as otherworldly throughout the length of the film in the dossier Willard studies. This is in order that the audience are led to expect an encounter with someone exceptional at the end of it, yet at the same time still be surprised and shocked by the exact nature of Kurtz, as the director explains in a conversation with Marlon Brando in February 1976 (reproduced in Cowie, 2000, pp.24-29):

Kurtz is not even a man anymore, he's a trail of rumours... I would like to play with the audience's imagination, trying to imagine this guy Kurtz, trying to put him together, trying to see what he would be like... The man becomes of certain mythical proportions so that when you finally come face to face with him and he is so different than you expected, he wins you over (Coppola in Cowie, 2000, p.26).

The image of Kurtz as an otherworldly figure is also perpetrated by the American photojournalist who enthusiastically greets the crew at the compound. He is the first character in the film to have actually encountered Kurtz and be able to provide a first-hand account of him. What he relates is a description of a man who has become a god-like figure:

Willard (referring to the Cambodians surrounding them): Who are all these people?

Photojournalist: Yeah, well, they think you've come to, to take him away. And I hope that isn't true.

Willard: Take who away?

Photojournalist: Him! Colonel Kurtz. These are all his children, man, as far as you can see. Hell, man, out here we're all his children.

Willard: Could I, er, talk to Colonel Kurtz?

Photojournalist: Hey, Mac. You don't talk to the Colonel. Well, you listen to him. The man's enlarged my mind  
(*Apocalypse Now / Apocalypse Now Redux*).

When Willard is taken to Kurtz he is made to kneel before him. With the exception of the additional scene, Kurtz is always shown in shadow with streams of light partially illuminating some of his features, a metaphor for his dark visions that contain essential

occasional moments of clarity and truth. Fitting into the nightmarish vision of hell, an apocalypse, the shadowy Kurtz is an imposing figure – but by daylight he appears a much smaller man and the scene significantly reduces the perceived gap between him and “ordinary” men. Sitting down to read to Willard, he conveys his hatred for the lies propagated by influential people in the United States. He reads a highly optimistic account from 1967 before proceeding to quote from another issue of no date:

“Sir Robert Thompson who led the victory over the Communist guerrillas in Malaya is now a RAND corporation consultant recently returned to Vietnam to sound out the situation for President Nixon. He told the president last week that things felt much better and smelled much better over there.” How do they smell to you, soldier? (Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now Redux*).

Relating to Kurtz’s later statement “there’s nothing I detest more than the stench of lies,” the extracts promote criticism of the government for concealing the truth and are an extension of what Coppola refers to in conversations reproduced in *The Apocalypse Now Book* as the “anti-lies theme”.

The decision to add this further political dimension to the film can be explained as deriving from similar motivations to the inclusion of the political debate in the French plantation sequence. *Apocalypse Now Redux*, being created two-and-a-half decades after the end of the war, had the potential to involve far more material of this nature without the concern of raw political sensitivities. By the time *Apocalypse Now Redux* was being considered America was more open to debate over Vietnam. Many years had passed, during which there was been time to reflect on such matters. A more cynical nation no longer in shock from such defining events such as defeat in Vietnam and Watergate, and after the retention of power by Saddam Hussein in Iraq following the Gulf War, was willing to consider the errors made by those in power.

The decision to allow Kurtz to be humanized in this daylight portrayal was an attempt to allow for a greater understanding of the roots of his philosophy on warfare. Despite for the most part keeping Kurtz a mysterious, almost super-human, character, the effect of humanizing him in this way allowed for a greater understanding of the character as a person – like any of the others who took his journey in Vietnam. Adding a scene that removes Kurtz from the darkness and horror, though only briefly, contributes to the effect Coppola was presenting throughout the *Redux* version. Each of the reinstated scenes breaks up the narrative and deviates from the relentless horror of the 1979 edit. This has

the effect of distracting to some extent from the style of the original film – a cinematic style that historical film theorist Naomi Greene identifies as a distinct development of the 1970s that produced a new kind of cinematic melodrama:

Various described as ‘historical,’ ‘operatic,’ ‘choral,’ or ‘epic,’ this melodrama marked a new sensibility in American film, at once deeply theatrical and pessimistic, a sensibility which reflected on the one hand the formal influence of European and especially Italian models and on the other the traumatized social/political climate of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. Above all, this sensibility was dominated by a sense of history and a taste for spectacle which were interwoven with each other and with the narrative in unprecedented ways (Greene, 1984, p.28).

*Apocalypse Now*, when it was originally produced in the late 1970s, fitted the mould of this contemporary style. By the time *Apocalypse Now Redux* was produced cinema had moved on from the operatic melodrama and this is reflected in its extended, more fractured narrative structure. In the process, the intensity of the reflection of the conflict in Vietnam is reduced and the dynamic of the whole film altered, resulting in the slight shift away from the “horror” element of the original depiction.

The new scenes also add the outwardly analytical element that has already been identified as notably missing from the original text. As Albert Auster and Leonard Quart wrote in 1988 in an examination of how the Vietnam War was remembered: “Coppola doesn’t bother with giving us a moral compass; he presents Vietnam as a given: a hallucinatory, surreal world and an absurd epic” (Auster and Quart, 1988, p.66). In his synopsis for the original production Coppola was clear where the focus of the film should be:

Clearly, although the film is certainly ‘anti-war’ its focus is not on recent politics. The intention is to make a film that is of a much broader scope; and provide the audience with an exhilarated [sic] journey into the nature of man, and his relationship to the Creation (Coppola cited in Cowie, 2000, p.36).

However, by the turn of the millennium Coppola’s attitude had changed and he decided his hallucinatory vision was no longer the most relevant or effective way of communicating the Vietnam War through cinema. Subsequent events and cultural representations had influenced the public perception of the conflict. This is another demonstration of collective memory’s capacity for change and development. As James V. Wertsch remarks, “it appears that one of the few genuinely consistent attributes of collective memory is that it is likely to undergo change” (Wertsch, 2002, p.58). The agent behind this constant evolution is memory’s necessary link to the present. Memory and the interpretation of

events are processes. As each interpretation, such as a cinematic text, is formed it belongs to the era or stage in the process during which it was created, and the process continues. Marita Sturken reminds us that “unlike photographs or film images, memories do not remain static through time – they are reshaped and reconfigured, they fade and are rescripted” (Sturken, 1997, p.21). As Halbwachs described society obligating people to “touch up” their memories to renovate their original construction, Francis Ford Coppola felt he needed to renovate his original construction of a cinematic definition of the Vietnam War to better fit society’s later perception of it. *Apocalypse Now Redux*, therefore, is the natural process of collective memory viewed through cinema – a medium that traditionally rendered its interpretations, in Sturken’s words, “static through time” (Sturken, 1997. 21).

*Apocalypse Now Redux*, especially when compared to the original version of the movie, can be valuable to read in a study of the variation in representations of the “Vietnam Syndrome” and degree to which it can be seen to affect the United States at the turn of the new millennium. One of the symptoms of the “Vietnam Syndrome” was a reluctance to confront the political or historical aspects, and another, a similar unwillingness to consider any perspective other than that of the American forces. In a development from this attitude *Redux* is markedly different from the original which, as Marsha Kinder (writing about the film when it was first released in 1979) phrases it, “despite its colossal scope and great variety of tones... is claustrophobic – for it restricts us to Vietnam, to the war, to the madness, to the nightmare vision, and to the obsessive consciousness of its anti-hero” (Kinder, 1979, p.20). Opening up the scope of the film to feature women (albeit marginally) in Vietnam, the French on the land they consider their home, and American politicians back home, the updated film attempts to shed light on the confusion, whereas the confusion was the main message of the original. This shows a progression from the tight constraints of the representation of Vietnam in earlier years.

However, *Apocalypse Now Redux*, in its additional scenes as well as its original ones, continues to promote the myth that America could have won the war in Vietnam if not for certain restraints, particularly those from higher up the chain of command. This sign of the “Vietnam Syndrome” is conveyed mainly in the French plantation sequence and through Kurtz, in the belief that he knew better how to fight and win the war than those, detached from “the horror,” who issued the orders. Coppola himself illustrates this in his conversation with Marlon Brando:

Look at the way Patton says, 'I was convinced that our divisions could have proceeded to Berlin, yet there were considerations at higher levels of which I was unaware.' There's always that frustration... Kurtz has essentially disconnected himself from the American army believing that in that way he can serve it better (Coppola in Cowie, 2000, p.25).

This need to attribute blame for America's defeat to the misjudgement of those with no direct experience of the conflict itself, "those who do not know what horror means" (Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now / Apocalypse Now Redux*), and who made decisions in ignorance of the ground conditions keeps *Apocalypse Now Redux* within the framework defined most strongly by the revisionist Vietnam films. A significant aspect of the portrayal of the character of Kurtz is that though his methods are referred to as "unsound," they are said to be effective. Throughout the film there is the repeated claim that Kurtz could win the war with fewer men had he more who could match the strength in cruelty that their enemies displayed, and that the Americans were simply burdened by "judgement," that "rationality is our invention and it is leading us to defeat" (Steier, 1980, p.121). Kurtz's arguments are reinforced and further developed by Willard who concedes that it is not necessarily Kurtz's methods that are problematic, for he understands the logic behind them and respects Kurtz for his success in a seemingly impossible war, but simply that he had then gone insane:

If the generals back in Nha Trang could see what I saw would they still want me to kill him? More than ever, probably. And what would his people back home want if they ever learned just how far from them he'd really gone? He broke from them and then he broke from himself. I'd never seen a man so broken up and ripped apart (Willard in *Apocalypse Now / Apocalypse Now Redux*).

His concern was not that Kurtz had broken from the Army or from Western rationality, for Willard, too, remarks that he's not part of that Army anymore after what he has experienced, but that he had broken from himself.

The continuing relevance of this myth, that America's military strength was curtailed by those in power can be read as running parallel to debates that emerged from the Gulf War. In its aftermath the conflict in the Gulf failed to be the success it was declared to be, as moral irregularities began to emerge. As was revealed in Chapter 5, Saddam Hussein retained power in Iraq and continued to torture and kill his own people. In addition to this the propaganda photographs he released of starving and malnourished children suggested little had been done to alleviate the suffering of people in the region. The morality of the operation was further compromised by Iraq's neighbouring countries, as Jeffrey Walsh elaborates:

The Gulf war, therefore, examined in hindsight, far from being a moral beacon, looks to be politically compromised. It was portrayed as an idealistic crusade to liberate decent tiny Kuwait, and to defend benevolent Saudi Arabia against oppression, and yet the human rights record of both these countries is poor. Saudi Arabia has recently imposed severe constraints on opposition groups, while the ruling Al Sabah family of Kuwait, long known for its undemocratic ways, did little to restrain revenge killings of domiciled Palestinians after the war (Walsh, 1995, p.2).

As the discussion in Chapter 5 revealed, similar attitudes were provoked that arose with Vietnam, as Americans once more began to ask if they had fought “for the biggest nothing in history” (DeMarais in *Apocalypse Now Redux*), and questioned the integrity of their own politicians. The themes expressed in *Apocalypse Now Redux* can clearly relate to the continuing contemporary concerns of the American public regarding international warfare that have their roots in Vietnam. Rather than being extinguished by a cathartic victory over the Iraqi Army in the Gulf, they were sustained and strengthened by it. The resurrection and extension of the classic Vietnam movie *Apocalypse Now* in this climate is a sign of the sustained relevance of the cinematic text, of Vietnam’s remaining presence in the American consciousness, and of the survival of the “Vietnam Syndrome.”

As well as examining the additional scenes in *Apocalypse Now Redux*, it is worthwhile considering two other significant ones that were available but not included, and asking why they may have been left out as well as what this could reveal to assist the discussion of perceptions of the Vietnam and Gulf conflicts.

One of these is the ending, which had been a difficult scene for Coppola. There had been much debate over it before several options were finally filmed. One of these sees Kurtz being assassinated by Willard and then Willard leading Lance away from the savagery of Kurtz’s people and back to the boat. This is the ending that features in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Apocalypse Now Redux*. An alternative involves the destruction of the entire compound. The production team were legally required to dismantle the compound they had built following completion of the film and this was filmed with the intention of having Willard take Lance back to the boat, sound the siren to scare away the natives and reduce casualties, then call in the air strike and end with shots of the explosion. This would have been a far more spectacular death for Kurtz and would not only be the end to his life but to his compound, the symbol of his way of life, as well. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro describes in detail how he believes this ending should have looked. It would:

[B]egin with the normal explosion footage. Then Kurtz being killed, intercut with the temple and temple heads falling down. Then the infra-red explosions. Stop using the infra-red footage when Kurtz is down. Use the infra-red Helicopter Shot of the entire compound exploding as the last explosion (Storaro cited in Cowie, 2000, p.110).

Eventually, however, Coppola, with the aid of audience tests, decided not to use any shots of the explosion, and end the film with Willard and Lance leaving the compound intact and still inhabited by Kurtz's followers. Whereas the destruction of the compound would have removed Kurtz from the landscape, leaving it did not have the same finality. This is an extension of the claim that Kurtz's logic is sound but the man is insane. Kurtz has been surgically removed but the structure of his compound, the place where he and his ideology were worshipped by his followers, is allowed to remain standing when the whole ideology could have been obliterated in its demolition. Like the film's inherent admiration for Kurtz's work, this refusal to remove this last symbol of his ideology in *Apocalypse Now Redux* conveys the desire to preserve the belief in the myth that there was the capability to win in Indochina but, as Rambo said, "somebody wouldn't let us win" (*First Blood Part II*).

A scene in which Willard witnesses Kurtz interrogating two North Vietnamese prisoners was also omitted from both versions of the film. Kurtz shoots one of the men for refusing to provide him with information, and then attacks Willard for finding this act horrific. Kurtz demands to know how Willard expects to win the war without hurting the enemy and says that this is the job they're trained for. Had this scene been included it would have made Kurtz and his argument less acceptable to many viewers. It is arguable that given the evidence of atrocities committed by American soldiers whilst serving in Vietnam and the national guilt that followed on, this scene may even in 2001 have been difficult for the general American public to view. In doing no more than hinting at the acts he has committed the audience are left to draw their own boundaries on his behaviour.

In this discussion of *Apocalypse Now Redux* the 49 minutes of additional footage have been examined in detail and considered as part of the narrative of the film. The new version has been shown to differ in a number of respects, its alterations reflecting the fluidity and flexibility of the collective memory of an event. The film's focus has been broadened from the introverted depiction of the psychological change in American men who experienced the Vietnam War to include a greater female representation and a French



perspective, although it remains mainly focused on the American male. Through the addition of the different women involved in the war and the historical and political contextualization and parallel of the ghostly French plantation sequence, the relentless aestheticised psychological horror story of the original narrative is fragmented, and matters that may not have been of significant concern in the immediate post-Vietnam years emerge. The entire American involvement in the country is questioned, along with the integrity of American politicians – issues that would have proved highly controversial in 1979. Even the nightmare image of Kurtz has been broken as he appears in daylight, a less imposing figure, sitting down and reading to Willard while children surround him.

While displaying a detraction from the perspective of Vietnam solely as an incomprehensible nightmare, the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still evident at the heart of *Apocalypse Now Redux*. As Jay Carr wrote “the differences between this version and the original are fewer than the similarities” (Carr, 2001). No longer as reluctant to consider the wider elements of the conflict in Southeast Asia, the film nevertheless reflects an unwillingness to relinquish the myth of the American capability to win were its men not restrained. The film’s attitude has even greater relevance in the aftermath of the Gulf War given the fading of the illusion of morality surrounding it and the debates emerging to question what America also managed to achieve in taking the decision to withdraw after the liberation of Kuwait.

One of the foundation texts of the collective cultural memory of the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now* conveyed the absurdity of the conflict at an operational level. *Apocalypse Now Redux*, the revision of this vision, extended this absurdity to higher political levels and attempted to clarify the confusion that was the central focus of the original version. In renovating his original cinematic construction Coppola has broken with convention to keep his interpretation as contemporary and relevant as possible in the constantly evolving public perception. Perhaps in future years, as this evolves and develops yet more, Coppola could have the option of producing a further version utilising some of the unused footage that remains. Such a production would, once again, be valuable in a study of changing attitudes and perceptions in America regarding the Vietnam War and other conflicts.

The next chapter focuses on another Vietnam film to emerge at the beginning of the new millennium, *We Were Soldiers*. This interpretation of the conflict returns to the beginning of the American involvement in Vietnam to bring a depiction considerably different from *Apocalypse Now Redux*, appropriating the model of the traditional war drama and

reconnecting the Vietnam War film to the Second World War film. It is analysed as a case study for its representation of the “Vietnam Syndrome” during what appeared from the analysis in Chapter 2 to be a dormant period for the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States.

## Chapter 7

### *We Were Soldiers*

Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers*, released in 2002, stylistically returns the Vietnam War movie to its beginnings, drawing comparisons with *The Green Berets*, and brings to the cinema screen the image of a Vietnam War untainted with defeat. More than three decades after John Wayne and Ray Kellogg's original heavily patriotic box office hit, *We Were Soldiers*, described by film critic Jay Carr as a "patriotic juggernaut of a film" (Carr, 2002), once again borrowed from Second World War movie conventions to frame the conflict in Vietnam as a "good war." This chapter explores and assesses this development and examines the cultural context surrounding the revival of this style of war film and American cinema's renewed patriotism. It considers to what extent *We Were Soldiers* displays a further shift in collective attitudes towards the Vietnam War in light of subsequent post-Gulf War socially significant events such as the turn of the new millennium and the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, evaluating representations of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in the film during the period identified in Chapter 2 as the most dormant period in the history of the "Vietnam Syndrome." *We Were Soldiers* is a text that conveys much regarding American attitudes to wars and warfare during one of the nation's most painful and most self-conscious times, as shall be discussed later. The consideration of it in this chapter aids the analysis of the development of the "Vietnam Syndrome" to its contemporary condition – something that is particularly useful later when the subject of the Iraq War arises.

*We Were Soldiers* depicts the Battle of Ia Drang in November 1965, based on the personal experiences told in the 1992 book *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* by Lieutenant General Hal Moore (Ret.) and journalist Joseph L. Galloway who were there. The film opens showing Vietminh troops winning a battle against the French in 1954 and executing all French survivors under the premise that if they kill them all then the French government will stop sending any more. The focus of the film then moves to America in 1965 where Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore is preparing his men for deployment in Vietnam. The wives of those being sent to fight are also introduced here as they form a community. On arrival in Vietnam, Hal is sent with 400 men to fight for an American base in the Ia Drang valley. They find out on arrival that the valley is also a North Vietnamese Army base with 4000 men stationed there and plentiful supplies of weapons. A bloody battle lasting days ensues and in the process a platoon becomes cut off from the rest. The film cuts between the men on the battlefield and the wives in America as telegrams informing them of their

husbands' deaths arrive. Eventually, with air support, the Americans push through the defences of the North Vietnamese forces and rescue the isolated platoon. The North Vietnamese Commander and his remaining men flee. Despite winning the battle, the end of the film shows the Americans' ultimate defeat as the North Vietnamese move straight back in after the troops have left.

The contrast between the familiar psychological horror portrayals of Vietnam seen in a number of Vietnam films, including *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Jacob's Ladder* and *Birdy*, and the depiction of the Battle at Ia Drang in *We Were Soldiers* appears so great that viewers could be forgiven for believing they were watching an entirely different war. In some respects they were. Bearing a closer resemblance to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, Dir. Steven Spielberg) than to *Platoon*, the movie re-moulds Vietnam in the image of the Second World War, recycling images and conjuring attitudes surrounding the Second World War to present America, once again, as a moral authority and the conflict in Vietnam as a well-intentioned tragedy. As Tom Doherty comments:

*We Were Soldiers* makes Vietnam safe for the WWII combat film. Set in 1965 before drugs, before fragging, before Jimi Hendrix, the film harks back to a truly bygone America still flush with the new frontierism of a slain president, willing to pay any price and bear any burden (Doherty: 2002: 7).

The notion of fighting the "good war" for a "noble cause" was approached in detail in Chapter 5 when discussing the 1994 film *The War*. *We Were Soldiers* also applies a similar attitude of America as innocent and Americans as innocents as *The War* did, although in *We Were Soldiers* this was not presented through a parallel metaphorical story with children, but by actually taking the audience back to the battle – to the early days of the Vietnam War – to portray the situation at that time directly. *The War* used innocence to tackle the guilt left behind following the end of the Vietnam War, whereas *We Were Soldiers* applies its ideology of innocence by taking the audience back to before this guilt even existed, casually ignoring it to the greatest extent and pushing aside signs of the "Vietnam Syndrome" within the context of the Vietnam War seen in this film, as Philip Wuntch described in his review of the film for *The Dallas Morning News*:

*We Were Soldiers* finds glory in one of the country's most tortured chapters. That's not as contradictory as it sounds. The film salutes the American soldiers who fought and frequently perished during the Vietnam War. Its chorus of hosannas for these unsung heroes transcends its unflinching view of combat and its simplified depiction of the home front.

The screenplay never addresses the public's conflicted views of the war, and at times the movie plays like a chapter of *Vietnam Made Easy*. *We Were Soldiers* simply reminds us that the war was not the fault of the undermanned platoons that fought in it. The film succeeds as an homage to human spirit in the most shattering of circumstances (Wuntch, 2002).

The morality of the war and decency of the men who fought in it is expressed through a number of acts and characters. One of the most obvious acts of American heroism is shown in a battle scene when one injured soldier about to be evacuated out of the valley relinquishes his place in the helicopter to allow a man in a worse condition than himself to go instead. There also is a scene of dialogue between Colonel Hal Moore and one of his men as they sit in a church. The young man has just become a father and is questioning his role as a soldier. He tells Hal about when he stayed in Africa for a year with his wife helping build a school for orphans and explains: "They were orphans because the warlord across the border didn't like their tribe. I know God has a plan for me. I just hope it's to protect orphans, not make any" (Jack in *We Were Soldiers*). The two men then pray together. This scene is concerned with promoting the image of the American soldier who fought in Vietnam as having good intentions as well as being sensitive to the plight of other cultures and being a decent religious and moral individual. This virtuous image serves to detract from thoughts of American soldiers linked to brutal acts of violence and destruction in Southeast Asia during the conflict and helps promote the film's view of Vietnam as (at least to begin with) a "noble cause."

Even an incident of friendly fire, resulting in destruction on unprecedented level in the film, is excused with Hal telling his radio operator: "Charlie, listen to me you're keeping us alive. Now you forget about that one and you keep 'em coming in. You're doing well, son." This features as another allegory for America and its soldiers doing their very best and mistakes occurring through inexperience of the type of guerrilla warfare they faced in Vietnam and human error.

Another significant moral re-alignment in the film is the counteraction of the myth of a malicious media betrayal of the nation. This is brought out through a conversation between Hal and photojournalist Ben Galloway. Galloway explains his family history and how he is at the end of a long line of generations of soldiers:

You know, Sir, Galloways have been in every war this country's ever fought in. When it came to this one I didn't think I could stop the war, you know. I just thought maybe I might try to understand one – maybe help the folks back

home understand. I always figured I could do that better shooting a camera than I could shooting rifles (Galloway in *We Were Soldiers*).

This acts to link him to those fighting the war and to their noble intentions. The suggestion that the war correspondent is trying to communicate an understanding of the conflict to those back home in the comfort of the United States is considerably more palatable than the vision of a pack of blood-thirsty journalists betraying their country to sell their stories that the myth promoted. The image of the pool of journalists appears later in the film with the implication that their behaviour, though counter-productive to the communication of the true nature of the war, had no malicious intent. The clean and eager group arrive by helicopter and surround Galloway with their cameras and questions as they formulate their stories. He cannot answer them as they are so detached from what he has experienced. The journalists are portrayed as ignorant in defence of their damaging words and images as, again, the negative actions of Americans are ascribed to cause outside their control in defence of the national character.

There is also a strong sense of fate communicated in this conversation. As well as suggesting this by saying that he didn't think he could stop the war, Galloway also directly says "It's meant to be, I guess", after relating the story of how his grandparents met and Hal repeats the phrase thoughtfully in the context of the war, implying the unavoidability of the conflict and denying any blame on America's part in the instigation of the violence: they're merely doing the best in a bad situation. This attitude is also used to absolve the media of blame for the accusation of malicious spreading of negative images of the war that were detrimental to America's efforts.

The main assertion of the moral underpinning of the Vietnam War depicted in *We Were Soldiers*, however, comes in Hal's explanation to his young daughter of why he has to go to war. He describes a war as "something that shouldn't happen but it does," continuing, "it's when some people in another country, or any country, try to take the lives of other people and then soldiers like your daddy, you know, it's my job to go over there and stop them" (Lt. Col. Hal Moore in *We Were Soldiers*). This scene reduces the film's message to its simplest level, leaving the audience in no doubt that as far as this film is concerned, Vietnam began as worthy a cause as the Second World War.

In this respect, *We Were Soldiers* can begin to be compared to the 1968 film *The Green Berets*, discussed in Chapter 3. The "good war" ethos strongly displayed in both of these

films can closely be linked to the intense patriotism woven throughout their scripts – patriotism that drowns out objections to or criticisms of American foreign military intervention and all traces of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” *The Green Berets* utilised patriotism in an attempt to engender support for the war in Vietnam when it was needed. Similarly, the patriotic element in *We Were Soldiers* can be linked to attempts to create support for early twenty-first-century conflicts when the nation, cautious from the legacy of Vietnam, needed to be convinced of the righteousness and necessity of a war. As the film’s director, Randall Wallace, said in an interview for *The San Francisco Chronicle*: “Sept. 11 reminded us there’s such a thing as evil, and of the value of the individual who says, ‘Somebody’s gotta pick up a rifle and stop them, and it might as well be me’” Wallace quoted in LaSalle, 2002).

The film’s strong patriotic foundations have also been considered a representation of the post-9/11 American outlook and this is certainly a topic that it would be very difficult to overlook when considering any cultural products of these early years following the attacks. Cynthia Weber has written extensively on the subject of the American national image in the aftermath of the 2001 New York terrorist attacks, arguing:

[B]etween 9/11 and the following summer (when the United States and a very few of its allies made the decision to invade Iraq in what became known as Gulf War II), who Americans were as citizens and what America was as a national and international space was not only in flux (which it always is) but in crisis. The shock many U.S. citizens felt by the events of 9/11 led to a national debate about what it means to be American individually, nationally, and internationally, and the terms of this debate were primarily moral. For U.S. citizens, this debate wasn’t just about what we ought to *do* in response to 9/11; it was about who we *are* – about how our responses to 9/11 morally configure us (a collective form of inclusion in the U.S. nation) as individual, national, and international subjects and spaces (Weber, 2006, p.4).

Weber’s description of a nation striving to recover from a major shock to its national identity would on the surface appear to concur with the sudden shift in projected attitudes concerning the Vietnam War in American cinema that is seen in *We Were Soldiers*, even explaining the sudden re-occurrence of the John Wayne World War II attitudes. She describes U.S. citizens as “allowing their desire for their perceived moral clarity of the past to underwrite their concerns about the moral uncertainty of the present,” claiming that “who we think we were during WWII was equated with who we think we are in the post-9/11 war on terror” (Weber, 2006, p.11). In order to deal with the moral uncertainty that plagued the national consciousness, films such as *We Were Soldiers*, along with *Behind*

*Enemy Lines* (2001, Dir. John Moore) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001, Dir. Ridley Scott) utilised popular culture to “rescue American morality” (Weber, 2006, p.56), and *We Were Soldiers* in particular re-moralized the nation’s crusade in Vietnam.

While an analysis of *We Were Soldiers* strongly supports the suggestion of Americans looking back to the Second World War and of the films constituting an attempt to “rescue American morality,” the main problem with Weber’s analysis is that the films to which she refers were all considerably well-advanced in their production by the time of the attacks on the Twin Towers and therefore are overall less likely to have been directly influenced by 9/11. The release of *We Were Soldiers* (released early in 2002) and *Black Hawk Down* (rushed onto movie screens in December 2001) may have been brought forward to profit from the post-9/11 atmosphere of confused national identity and increased need for patriotic portrayals of America and American nationals, but this explains their reception to a greater degree than their production.

Tom Doherty has suggested another explanation that is more in agreement with the chronology of films such as *We Were Soldiers*, claiming these texts to be “born of Y2K-ruminations” (Doherty, 2002, p.4) rather than 9/11 issues. A Y2K-centred reading of *We Were Soldiers* would reveal an America that, as it looked back and bade farewell to the turmoil of the twentieth century, collectively viewed The Second World War as the most outstanding moral moment in a century of warfare – a conflict with one of history’s most clearly defined cases of good against evil, and in which the evil was eventually defeated. The notable absence of the noble mission, clear morality or ultimate success of the Second World War that became emergent during or in the aftermath of subsequent military operations such as those in Vietnam and the Gulf at the dawn of the new millennium was retrospectively required to be corrected for the nation to attempt to move forward into the new century and new millennium.

Having been surrounded by debate relating to the 9/11 New York terrorist attacks and millennium anxiety, *We Were Soldiers* could also be considered outside this sphere. Randall Wallace also wrote *Braveheart* (1995, Dir. Mel Gibson) and *Pearl Harbour* (2001, Dir. Michael Bay), two films replete with themes of patriotism, identifying him as a filmmaker who actively promotes historical events in a patriotic light irrespective of current events and attitudes. *We Were Soldiers* could also be regarded as simply the natural evolution of the cinematic representation of the war in Vietnam following so many films to exhibit only limited success in influencing the American public perspective of the



conflict and the nation's role in subsequent foreign operations. Going just another step further than previous revisionist films within the genre, *We Were Soldiers* served not only to simplify the Vietnam War to a level that could be understood by Hal's young daughter but also to edit the conflict, further supporting Samuel Hynes' (1999) theory that narratives of war that do not conform to the myth are ignored. The filmmakers also edited Lieutenant General (Ret.) Hal Moore and Joseph L. Galloway's original book, with the film omitting the less positive second half of the book. *We Were Soldiers* reduces the Vietnam War down to the emotional level of the group of men and their families that it depicts. As previous films such as *Platoon* and *84 Charlie MoPic* did, *We Were Soldiers* thus brings the focus in close to a small group of soldiers and excludes the wider political and historical issues almost entirely, as Doherty describes in his discussion of both Wallace's film and *Black Hawk Down*:

Being so locked and loaded onto the target of military brotherhood, neither picture brings into focus the Big Picture. Better not enquire too deeply into why American soldiers must be helicoptered into the killing fields of a barren, sun-drenched African desert or a humid Southeast Asian jungle... 'It's about the man next to you and that's all it is,' says a soldier at the end of *Black Hawk Down*, a sentiment echoed nearly verbatim in the coda to *We Were Soldiers*, when reporter Ben Galloway (Barry Pepper) intones in voice-over that the men of Landing Zone X-Ray fought 'not for their country or their flag – they fought for each other' (Doherty, 2002, p.8).

*We Were Soldiers* can be seen as being similar to *Black Hawk Down* in closing in the focus in the representation of the conflict towards the groups of men in combat in the manner highlighted by Doherty. In viewing these type of representation, the American audience is presented with a heroic close-range snap-shot of brave U.S. Army personnel – decent young American men struggling to do their job as well as they can in conflicts they are depicted as not fully understanding, and which the films attempt to ensure the audience are not given the opportunity to try to understand.

Despite the similarity in terms of scope between *We Were Soldiers* and the previous films to employ this technique, most notably the examples of *Platoon* and *84 Charlie MoPic*, Wallace's film takes the selective representation process much further than these texts through editing the war itself down to its early days in 1965. In not going beyond this and repeating the trend of reframing the Vietnam War as a "good war" as well as simplifying the reasons behind the fighting to a child's level rather than exploring the wider and more complex issues, *We Were Soldiers* can be seen to appropriate a number of elements from

previous cinematic portrayals of the conflict in an extreme manner which can be read as a major assault on the “Vietnam Syndrome” and even, in line with Doherty’s millennial influence arguments, an attempt to push America patriotically into the new millennium with a renewed national self-esteem through a renewed collective memory of Vietnam.

Despite it being unlikely to have been heavily influenced by the September 11th terrorist attacks beyond its release date and relevance to its audiences, having already been written and in production at the time, *We Were Soldiers* portrayed a perfect attitude for the time, when the American public needed its reassurance and craved its perspective on American wars. The strong revision of Vietnam in *We Were Soldiers* marks a firm cinematic attempt to combat the “Vietnam Syndrome,” and the film rode a wave of patriotism in the wake of the terrorist attacks that was sweeping the “Vietnam Syndrome” underneath it anyway.

*We Were Soldiers* features a repeated deviation from the battlefield that differentiates it from the classic unit-focused style observed of *Platoon* as the war is shown being fought on the home front as well as in the jungles. A shot of the men shooting on the battlefield is cross-cut with Hal’s wife vacuuming. It is at this point the story begins of the women getting the telegrams informing them of the death of their husbands. As they support each other they fight their own Vietnam as a unit as their men are doing thousands of miles away. Hal’s wife adopts the difficult role of delivering the telegrams personally rather than leaving it to the cab company hired by the Army. At the end of her first day delivering telegrams the film cuts back to Hal on the battlefield in Vietnam, reciting the Lord’s Prayer. This repeated cross-cutting reinforces the link between the Vietnam War on the battlefield and the Vietnam War as it affected people back home, asserting Vietnam’s status as a national, not just military, event.

There is also a subtle but significant alteration of the Second World War imagery that dominates this film’s portrayal. This is evident at a turning point in the plotline that reflects a similar shift in the American military’s perception of the conflict in Vietnam. It occurs when Hal gives the code “broken arrow” which means that an American unit is overrun and is calling in all air support. This is met in the control room with the statement “My God, there’s no hiding it now.” This is the moment that Vietnam became Vietnam and marks a departure from the Second World War as the battle is of such brutality and such distinction from anything America has encountered before and is now ill-prepared for. It is also an admission that the war in its early stages was covered up. From the instant the napalm strike begins the style is considerably different to the Second World

War vision seen earlier. No longer are the battlefield shots reminiscent of the style and mise en scene in *The Longest Day* (1962, Dir. Bernhard Wicki) or *Saving Private Ryan*. Napalm surrounds the fighting. The helicopter gains prominence as the wounded are evacuated from the battlefield, one of the iconic symbols of the war in Vietnam dominating both the frame and the sound track. The characteristic rotor blade sound transports the viewer instantly into *Apocalypse Now*. We also see more use of hand-held camera style. As Jimmy is loaded on to the helicopter the footage bears a particularly eerie resemblance to contemporary war footage sent from Vietnam. It appears as if a documentary cameraman is in the helicopter filming Galloway bringing Jimmy towards it and the evacuation. The camera work is particularly unstable here and the colour, lighting and slightly grainy quality remove it from the professional cinematic quality of earlier. The night scene in which Hal leads an expedition to retrieve the bodies of two of his men has a surreal and eerie appearance. It is accompanied by a soundtrack virtually identical to *Apocalypse Now* and the lighting in which Hal's face is lit in stark light and shadows is reminiscent of the stylistic effects in the Do Lung bridge scene in *Apocalypse Now*.

The final morning battle sequence marks a return to First and Second World War imagery interspersed with shots from tunnels and interrupted with a helicopter gun strike to summarise the film's point about the transition. Presented side by side here, audiences can contrast the eras of war and perhaps find it easier to accept the errors of the latter, rewriting the trauma of the Vietnam War as an unexpected tragedy.

As was discussed in Chapter 4 during the examination of *Heaven and Earth*, *We Were Soldiers* also features a notable humanisation of the enemy that differs from the characteristic unsympathetic or one-dimensional depiction. Following a brutal slow motion battle sequence the Vietnamese commander is seen sitting in the field peacefully as he expresses his respect for his men and also the suggestion of respect for America's men: "For the courage of those who have died, for those who are about to die, I am grateful." At the end he expresses sorrow at the numbers who will die during the conflict – again, without expressing what nationality he is specifically referring to. In addition to presenting a more sympathetic and humanised enemy, the use of this ambiguous dialogue could also be read as a means of rendering the American trauma equal even when being represented through the eyes of the Vietnamese, promoting a sense of their suffering also, as was seen in *Heaven and Earth*. In considering Americans to suffer equally to Vietnamese, collective national guilt surrounding American generated harm is minimised and the conflict promoted as an equal tragedy.

The representation of the opposing side as victims, however, continues. Later, Hal tells Sergeant Major he wonders how General Custer felt sending his men to a slaughter. After the final early morning battle the Sergeant Major replies to him “You wanted to know how Custer felt, sir – ask him,” indicating towards the devastated body of Hal’s North Vietnamese counterpart. The film then cuts to the North Vietnamese bunker as the Commander is told their lines are broken and he evacuates his command post. Just after this the young North Vietnamese man’s diary with the photograph of his sweetheart in it is found on his body, firmly establishing North Vietnamese Army as victims in a way that most films depicting the American experience in Vietnam came nowhere close to.

A greater equality between the sides is also rendered in the depiction of the body during battles. The deaths and injuries are graphic. Following the censorship of the Gulf War coverage, the wounded and dead body returned to screen representations of conflict in vivid violence. Also, unusually, the depiction of North Vietnamese soldiers being shot is as graphic as Americans – not the noticeably cleaner death observed in previous films such as *Casualties of War*.

These observations are a significant departure from typical Vietnam and Second World War films. As was concluded in Chapter 4, *We Were Soldiers* displays a more sympathetic attitude towards the North Vietnamese people, their Army and the Communist Commander Nguyen Huu An. This is a relatively subtle but firm indication of a greater willingness to confront hitherto notably suppressed aspects of the war and allow them into the collective memory of the conflict. However the other features of the film, namely the strength of the “good war” discourse, the pardoning of errors, the patriotism and the return to innocence, adhere far more closely to traditional depictions of the conflict and significantly counter this effect.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 are impossible to ignore in any study of American culture around that time, as if the nation’s recent history has been neatly divided into pre- and post- 9/11 states. The attacks on that day shook America causing the nation to seek ways to define itself and its ideology. The Second World War era depiction in *We Were Soldiers* did much to promote the image of America fighting the “good war,” covering the image of Vietnam as a defeat, an error of policy or a nightmare and allowing it and other morally confusing military actions carried out by the U.S. to align more with the revered American view of the past in which, in the words of Edward Said, “the United States was not a classical imperial power, but a righter of wrongs around the world, in pursuit of

tyranny, in defence of freedom no matter the place or cost” (Said, 1993, p.3). September 11th primed American audiences to enthusiastically accept and even to demand the favourable and patriotic portrayal of their military and their people found in *We Were Soldiers*. Through its portrayal of America as a victim and clear definition between right and wrong, the film reflected a greater suppression of the “Vietnam Syndrome” than decades of previous cultural attempts or even the superficial victory of the Gulf War that ultimately generated as many doubts over U.S. foreign intervention as those it had attempted to silence.

The following chapter combines the research findings from the previous five chapters on the subject of American Vietnam War films to present conclusions on the genre’s treatment of the conflict in the aftermath of the war in the Gulf and on the reflections of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in them, preparing for the subsequent examination of films depicting the Gulf War itself.

## Chapter 8

### Intermediate Conclusion of Vietnam on Film After the Gulf War

In the previous series of chapters a selection of American Vietnam War films was examined in depth to discuss the impact of America's 1991 victory in the Gulf and help establish the progression and variety of different responses to the "Vietnam Syndrome" in those years. Here this research shall be briefly summarized and some early conclusions drawn as the work focusing on the Vietnam War films is brought together before Gulf and Iraq War films are considered to allow progression into the second section of this thesis with a clearer view of the mapping of the representation of Vietnam and the "Vietnam Syndrome" in the post-Gulf War films discussed so far.

Taking the development of the genre from *The Green Berets*, through the early post-Vietnam movies, psychological horror tales, the eighties revisionist trend, and the realist style, a number of conventions and variations in representations were established in Chapter 3 that have helped to both contextualise the main discussion and identify continuing and changing aspects in cinematic portrayals of the conflict. Outlined in this brief introductory chapter to the Vietnam section was, firstly, that the representation of the war can clearly be seen to have developed over time, predominantly affected by contemporary events and attitudes. It was then also established that these films reflected efforts politically, socially and culturally to expunge or diminish the long-running "Vietnam Syndrome." These efforts were typified in the techniques and myths employed in the films. This allowed for similar attitudes to be compared in post-Gulf War cinematic texts.

The first post-Gulf Vietnam War film approached was *Heaven and Earth*. The aim of the analysis of this was to establish departures and continuations in the representation of the Vietnam War in a film that was projected as a revolutionary text. Though on the surface it appeared to be a revolutionary American depiction of the conflict from a South Vietnamese perspective, a closer reading revealed a continuing commitment to the developed cinematic tradition of the portrayal of Americans as the primary, or at least equal victims. *Heaven and Earth* was in particular closely compared to the 1989 film *Casualties of War*, and even the 1978 film *Go Tell The Spartans*, as the promotion of the American victim status in all these texts is concealed beneath the veil of a representation of Vietnamese experiences. Despite Stone's effort to bring closure and healing through this concession to South Vietnamese issues and suffering born of the American war in

Vietnam, which may suggest a softening of the representation “Vietnam Syndrome” and decline in its relevance to American society, the film is deceptive in its appearance through confronting the experiences of only a small select group of Vietnamese people. There is the simultaneous exclusion of experiences of others as well as its digression to American issues, and even an American setting in the second half of the film. Consequently, *Heaven and Earth* was found to actually convey the American unwillingness to accept the conflict, its outcome and its legacy. Displaying the classic “Vietnam Syndrome” response of re-mythologizing in its depiction, *Heaven and Earth* continued to prevent a substantial cinematic examination of wider issues associated with Vietnam. In addition, further diminishing its effect on a national scale, the film proved considerably unpopular on the domestic market, the public predominantly preferring to leave the Vietnamese account out of their narrative of Vietnam.

The next film that was examined, *The War*, took a heavily revisionist approach in an unconventional revisionist setting. Despite appearing very different to the revisionist films of the 1980s, *The War* was found to be an extension of these, developed and packaged more relevantly for the post-Gulf War, post-Reagan society. Divorcing the war from its political and historical context to isolate the emotional element, *The War* employs a cast of children to represent the American soldiers as innocent and naïve, and blames human nature under extreme conditions for any unsavoury behaviour to ease the collective public guilt for such actions. Furthermore the classic figure of the psychologically tortured Vietnam veteran, Stephen, is also allowed to achieve catharsis in his replay of the war, sacrificing his life to save that of his friend. Through these devices, *The War* attempts to fit Vietnam back into the familiar template of a “good war” fought for a “noble cause,” favoured by Americans when considering the nation’s view of itself. The film asserts the men fought with good intentions and for the right reasons but were ultimately failed by conditions outside of their, or anyone else’s, control. The sustained need in the post-Gulf War climate for such further revisionism and redefinition of the conflict, it was concluded, suggests a continuation of the battle against the “Vietnam Syndrome” in its pre-Gulf War concerns over the trauma of defeat as well as a renewed and strengthened need to address it through remoralizing American foreign military intervention, a sign perhaps of the emerging moral doubts over the war in the Gulf.

The re-edited version of *Apocalypse Now* then provided a unique opportunity to compare early and later, and pre- and post-Gulf, visions of the conflict. The additional footage included in *Apocalypse Now Redux* shows an evolution in both style and content,

providing the surrounding context of issues too sensitive for wider examination in the immediate aftermath of the war but part of an emerging debate over time. There is also the strong development of Coppola's critical "anti-lies theme" in which blame for America's failure was placed on politicians, military commanders, and others on the home front or behind the battle lines. Despite the notable absence of the reluctance to approach the historical or political context and the inclusion of an alternative perspective suggesting a weakening of the "Vietnam Syndrome," the film was shown to perpetuate the myth rooted in 1980s cinema of America's inability to win the war being the result of these restraints on military actions. This is a theme seeming to run parallel to the subsequent curtailment of military effort in the Gulf. Unlike *The War, Redux* portrays the view of Vietnam as an immoral conflict, but nevertheless displays evidence of excusing it through apportioning the blame firmly to those in command.

The last of the films in this section was the post-September 11th dormant "Vietnam Syndrome" film *We Were Soldiers*, released in 2002. Adopting a variation on the technique in the earlier film *The War*, *We Were Soldiers* recreates the attitude of the innocence of earlier years of the conflict, before protests, reported atrocities instigated by U.S. military personnel, and before defeat. Appropriating Second World War movie motifs and a strong moral and patriotic underpinning throughout, this movie was read as a millennial retrospective consideration of the conflict and intense revision to align the Vietnam War more closely with the "good war" discourse of the Second World War. The only significant deviations from a return to this *The Green Berets*-style representation were the inclusion of a narrative from the North Vietnamese Army side, and some Vietnam imagery in the later battle scenes which served predominantly to depict America's loss of innocence occurring during rather than on entering the conflict. An evolutionary step in the portrayal of the enemy in American Vietnam War films, its release was rushed forward in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks because of the relevance of its depiction to the sentiments of the time. It reflects well, in its contrast to earlier Vietnam War films, American attitudes towards the "Vietnam Syndrome" at this time and the "Syndrome's" decreased relevance during this period.

All of the films discussed portrayed the "Vietnam Syndrome" in different ways. There appears, however, to be a number of similarities in the manner in which films approached the public legacy of Vietnam and displayed changes in the collectively held perception of it. *Heaven and Earth*, though it appeared so different from other portrayals, was found to have links back to previous films in its treatment of the conflict and those involved in it.



*The War* and *We Were Soldiers* both utilised myth to revise and reframe the Vietnam War as morally sound and well-intentioned, and the American forces in action innocent and naïve of the horror that they had become involved in – the realization of which was the focus of *Apocalypse Now* and *Apocalypse Now Redux*. *Apocalypse Now Redux* also continued the established theme of assigning blame to government and military officials, accusing them of both ignorance and betrayal of the American soldiers. *We Were Soldiers*, having returned the Vietnam War and the Vietnam War movie to their beginnings in the 1960s, again showed recent cinema's continuation of traditions within the field of Vietnam.

Reflecting the desires of a nation eager to forget the misery and guilt of the Vietnam experience, the selective remembrance and alteration of the memory of the conflict with the features of myths and strong attitudes of patriotism attempted to deny the original memories of the war and develop an alternative collective perception of it, America's conduct in it and ultimately American national identity. The signs and symptoms of the "Vietnam Syndrome" have prevailed in post-Gulf War year and films have continued to challenge them repeatedly. The analysis of the previous collection of case studies has led to the intermediate conclusion that the "Vietnam Syndrome" is strongly reflected in post-Gulf War Vietnam War films, but that it does not take the same form as the "Vietnam Syndrome" reflected in earlier texts. Films have reflected it through new variations and different methods. They have also enforced a greater moral underpinning to their representations. These developments suggest that while the "Vietnam Syndrome" is still relevant to post-Gulf War American society, it may be relevant in a different context.

The following second section of film analysis in research concerns films depicting the Gulf War directly. The next chapter contextualises the representation of the Gulf War through a discussion of the television coverage of the conflict.

## **Section II: Battling the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Gulf**

## Chapter 9

### The Impact of the Television Representation of the Gulf War

As the focus moves from the examination of Vietnam War films to Gulf War films, a discussion of the disparity between contemporary press coverage and other such public representations aids the understanding of basic variations in the perception of the two conflicts. The contemporary press coverage and television representation is crucial to a discussion of the Gulf War in cinema as the memory of the war was so strongly created through it as “instant history” (Gerbner, 1992, p.245) and changed later. On the basis of combating the “Vietnam Syndrome” the Bush administration, with a willing broadcast media, created the first collective memories of the conflict, only for them to be influenced and altered from other sources, from further news reports to lingering memories of Vietnam and Vietnam War films. This chapter aims to provide a sufficient grounding in the subject of the news coverage of the conflicts to enlighten and inform the subsequent chapters concerning the direct representation of the Gulf War in cinema.

In the development of war coverage both the Vietnam and Gulf Wars were significant events as Vietnam was the first war the United States was involved in to receive widespread television coverage and the Gulf War the first in the age of 24-hour news networks and instant satellite communications. The way in which American conflicts have been represented on television has had a direct impact on the way they are depicted and remembered as well as how subsequent conflicts are then remembered. Jean Baudrillard even argued that the Gulf Conflict existed more as a series of television images than as a war. In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, first published as a series of essays in 1991, he claimed the United States fought such a massive technology and media based war that the conflict was too biased in their favour for it to be regarded a real war. He described it as a “fake war, deceptive war, not even the illusion but the disillusion of war” (Baudrillard, 2004, p.68). This analysis of the conflict highlights the importance of the television representation of the war that accompanied events in the Gulf. The discussion of the Gulf War media coverage later on in this chapter focuses on the disillusion of this war that was presented to the American public. As Baudrillard found the Iraqi forces to be of little consequences to the American operation in the Gulf, so too this chapter will argue they were of little consequence to the constructed media portrayal of it.

The following discussion shall focus on discussing the transition in the methods by which American wars and conflicts were reported in the United States, from Vietnam to the Gulf

War and thereafter, as well as the effects of both the conflicts and the methods of reporting applied during them on their public remembrance, prior to the forthcoming analysis of their cinematic representation.

The Vietnam War was reported with unprecedented intensity. The press enjoyed significant freedom to report and images of combat and destruction flooded back to the United States. Official military accreditation of reporters was granted routinely and usually with very little difficulty, and there was virtually no censorship, only voluntary guidelines that if violated could result in a reporter losing their official accreditation. These guidelines were primarily focused on not reporting troop movements or casualty figures until they had been officially announced in Saigon rather than relating to the curtailment of any distressing images, which the press were free to gather.

Daniel C. Hallin (1986) does claim information was often withheld from journalists and sometimes access to the front lines was restricted, but generally the press were granted considerable freedom in what was “the first war in which journalists were routinely accredited to accompany military forces, but not subject to formal censorship” (Hallin, 1986, p.128).

Technological advances were another major factor to affect coverage of the war in Vietnam. With television only in its early years during the Korean War and technology not quite far enough advanced, it was Vietnam that became known as the first television war, as exposure to footage and images from the front line became a daily occurrence in households. Equipment became smaller, lighter and easier to transport in the field, and, more importantly, footage became easier to transport back to the United States via aircraft or even satellite. The American public was presented with daily visual updates, including images of such horrors as “on-screen killings, as well as live action footage of the bulldozing of human carcasses into mass graves, the napalming of children, and the ravaging of villages by American soldiers” (H. Bruce Franklin, 2000, p.13).

The Vietnam War and this coverage of it permanently changed media reporting in the United States of foreign military operations. Overwhelmingly this was due to the myth of media responsibility for the defeat that emerged soon after the conclusion of the war, as Stig A. Nohrstedt describes:

Just as the Germans did regarding their surrender in World War I, leading U.S. military circles developed a dagger-thrust (*Dolchstoss*) myth to explain and in fact deny the U.S. defeat on the battlefield of the Vietnam War. But whereas the Nazis blamed cowardly officers for Germany's defeat, U.S. military leaders blamed the media. According to this view, the television coverage of the Vietnam War caused the home front to withdraw its support for U.S. forces and eventually made the president and Congress change their minds (Nohrstedt, 1992, p.118).

In order to help ease the symptoms of the "Vietnam Syndrome," boost the nation's pride and self-confidence, and evade any blame, military and government officials took the opportunity to place the defeat in the newsrooms of America, not on the battlefields of Vietnam, a point former U.S. President Richard M. Nixon further argued in his memoirs:

More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war. Whatever the intention behind such relentless and literal reporting of the war, the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home (Nixon, 1978, p.350).

Such attitudes were investigated by Daniel C. Hallin (1986) and later by Jerry Lembcke, (1998) expelling the myth that the media, in particular television, was responsible for producing sufficient criticism to result in America's defeat in Vietnam. Hallin found that media criticism did not appear until around 1967 and 1968 when important government officials began to disapprove of the coverage, revealing that "for the most part television was a follower rather than a leader: it was not until the collapse of consensus was well under way that television's coverage began to turn around; and when it did turn, it only turned so far" (Hallin, 1986, p.163). The Tet offensive of 1968, in which the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacked a series of strategic U.S. positions, would have been a significant catalyst in the collapse of consensus to which Hallin refers. Images of the destruction appeared on television news bulletins and newspaper front pages across America and around the world. If the media had a role in causing that collapse of the consensus that then led to criticism of the war, it was arguably more in the circulation of these shocking images than through direct condemnation of any government or military policies. In the earlier stages of the conflict, however, while Washington supported the war it appears so too did the mainstream media.

Hallin also found that even when the media did begin to portray the Vietnam War more negatively, the reports remained restrained in their criticism:

News coverage in the later years of the war was considerably less positive than in the early years, but not nearly so consistently negative as the conventional wisdom now seems to hold. If news coverage largely accounted – at least as an ‘intervening variable’ – for the growing public desire to get out of the war, it probably also accounts for the fact that the Nixon administration was able to maintain majority support for its Vietnam policies through four years of war and for the fact the public came to see that war as a ‘mistake’ or ‘tragedy,’ rather than the crime the more radical opposition believed it to be (Hallin, 1986, p.10).

Nevertheless, it could still be argued that the media, while remaining loyal to the government and military and their policies in Southeast Asia, could have unwittingly affected public opinion through the images they circulated regardless of the attitudes they broadcast with them. Although not the simple cause declared in the myth, it is highly plausible that the media played a role in reducing public support for the war – although doubtfully responsible for America’s defeat on the battlefield. Hallin describes his theory for the loss of support for the fighting in Vietnam:

The collapse of America’s ‘will’ to fight in Vietnam resulted from a political process of which the media were only one part. And that process was deeply rooted in the nature and course of the war – the fact that it was a limited war, not only in its tactics but in its relevance to vital American interests; and also the fact that it was an unsuccessful limited war, which expanded well beyond the level of containment most policymakers would have considered rational at the outset (Hallin, 1986, p.213).

This links back to the brief discussion of public support for the war in Chapter 2 and is supported by Mueller’s (1973) research that was cited there. The background to the negative attitudes towards the war was wider than simply the effects of the media. American governments and military commanders, however, continued to blame the uncontrolled media for the loss, and used this to implement strict controls over the coverage of subsequent military intervention that were to have major effects on the public conceptions of conflicts. Jerry Lembcke, who investigated the often-cited image of the victimized Vietnam veteran in his book *The Spitting Image*, takes this notion even further to suggest that criticism of Vietnam was used as a tool to create support for the Gulf War. He argues that the loss of support on the home front and the associated treatment of Vietnam veterans was utilised to silence criticism and anti-war sentiments and encourage people to support the troops and therefore the war:

In the United States, the idea that Vietnam veterans had met with malevolence gained prominence during the fall of 1990, when the Bush administration used it to rally support for the Persian Gulf War. After sending troops to the Gulf in August 5, the administration argued that opposition to the war was tantamount to disregard for their well-being and that such disregard was reminiscent of the treatment given to Vietnam veterans upon their return home. By invoking the image of anti-war activists spitting on veterans, the administration was able to discredit the opposition and galvanize support for the war. So successful was this endeavour that by the time the bombing of Iraq began in January 1991 President Bush had effectively turned the means of war, the soldiers themselves, into a reason for war (Lembcke, 1998, p.2).

As seen here, and in the forthcoming discussion of media coverage of American military interventions, the legacy of Vietnam ran through the conflicts that followed to affect public perceptions before, during and after the fighting.

Following Vietnam and the perceived issues regarding press freedom in war zones, the United States took inspiration from the British war in the Falklands in which the press presence was highly orchestrated by the British military. Only thirty journalists from the whole international community were allowed onto the battlefield and they were transported and entirely censored by the Royal Navy. Philip M. Taylor describes the war as having been fought “within an information vacuum” (Taylor, 1992, p.4).

The United States then followed in a similar fashion with its intervention in Grenada in 1983. The military requested no reporters whatsoever be present on the island during the invasion and the president supported this policy. After the first 48 hours a select group of fifteen reporters were allowed into Grenada, under strict military supervision. After this, further correspondents were gradually permitted access to the island, before freedom was granted to them on the fifth day after the start of the invasion and after the majority of the fighting was over.

The conflict proved reasonably popular with the American public upon its conclusion, although this should not be read as entirely the result of a lack of media coverage unveiling the reality of war but also the result of additional factors. Despite concerns, the operation was of minimal risk to the United States from the outset. A relatively small force was involved, with an initial deployment of 1900 U.S. Marines and Army Rangers followed by a further 4000 U.S. troops during the combat period, and America was able to overpower the Grenadian military swiftly, with the president announcing just eight days after the initial announcement of the invasion that the fighting was over and troop withdrawal

would soon begin. As the public welcomed such a positive outcome, confidence in the America's ability to execute military operations began to grow slowly. Gordon L. Bowen (1989) has also argued that the developing public support for such limited conflicts is the result of a "rally 'round the flag' syndrome" (Bowen, 1989, p.794) whereby the public tends to support signs of action in critical foreign situations. He describes the "rally 'round the flag' syndrome" as follows: "In times of international crisis, when presidents act decisively in foreign affairs, the public appears to 'rally 'round the flag': support for presidents and policies rises" (Bowen, 1989, p.794). However, Bowen also identifies the effects of this "Syndrome" as being no more than temporary and incapable of affecting any major long-term trends in opinions regarding presidents or policies. Like Bowen's "rally round the flag' syndrome," such conflicts may also affect a temporary rise in national self-confidence and military pride in their immediate aftermath that could in a similar way fade over time as the excitement of the victory subsides. Bowen's "rally 'round the flag' syndrome" and an associated temporary rise in national military confidence could render contemporary representations and perceptions of conflicts merely of short-term significance, to be considered, as here, in the context of post-conflict attitudes in order to gain a full insight into the outlook towards a conflict and effects it has on American opinions towards further military intervention.

Another limited conflict, the invasion of Panama, received strong public support at all stages of the operation. This was argued in Chapter 2 as a sign of America's increasing acceptance of military deployment in limited conflicts. During the conflict, named Operation Just Cause, the press was once again heavily restricted. Following unfavourable reactions from the media over its access to Grenada, the Department of Defense had commissioned a review of the military's press policy and in 1985 the press pool model was created. The system was intended to allow a pre-selected pool of reporters greater access to report on operations under military supervision, however as with Grenada correspondents were denied access to the earlier stages of the operation, being held at barracks and delayed with presentations about Panama's history. Once access to the battlefield had finally been arranged the media was once again subject to censorship, as conveyed in this account from Mike Hudson and John Stanier:

[T]he media was now severely blocked in what it was allowed to report. There were to be no pictures of U.S. casualties, no pictures of damaged helicopters and no pictures of Panamanian prisoners. No facilities were offered to fly film back to the States and none arrived until just before Christmas (Hudson and Stanier, 1998, p.209).



However effective this severance of communications was in curtailing negative publicity, it left a severely disgruntled media industry lacking material. When the Gulf War was in preparation they were promised improved access to the battlefield and more stories than they had received in Grenada and Panama. The Bush administration was acutely aware that in the absence of sufficient material the news agencies would be tempted to fill their airtime and column-inches with speculation or even Iraqi reports infused with propaganda that they feared Saddam Hussein would leak. They were anxious to provide sufficient material to avoid such outcomes, but at the same time the Bush administration and American military both remained eager to avoid the open-access policy of Vietnam and retain the type of public support governments had enjoyed with their experiences of conflicts fought with strict media controls. The press orchestration in the Gulf War was of such importance and scale as to become a military operation in itself. It resulted in a system comprised of accreditation, press pools and embedding of journalists in military units designed to allow the news agencies to gather all the material they needed to produce stories, but also orchestrated to give the military substantial control over the content of those stories. In addition to managing press access, the military had the right to view and censor all material before it was exported back to America. This prevented the acquisition of “an independent first-hand view of combat” (Boyd-Barrett, 2004, p.30) and resulted in a carefully crafted image of the Gulf War that did not necessarily represent the true situation or most significant events.

At the forefront of the Bush administration’s image of the conflict was the promotion of its morality. The entire operation was promoted as a moral crusade, an almost biblical fight against the evil of Saddam Hussein, who was cast as the second Hitler. When justifying the absence of body counts in the Gulf War morality was cited as the reason behind the decision, and the smart bomb technology used against Iraqi targets was intensely publicized as moral and virtuous. From the outset and throughout the conflict Americans were informed with the utmost clarity that they were doing the right thing and fighting a just war, as Arnold Isaac explains:

The vision of war reaching the home front was pretty clearly just what the public wanted. What it did *not* want, unmistakably, was the kind of painful, morally confusing information it remembered receiving about Vietnam (Isaacs, 1997, p.80).

The image of war projected through the media during the Gulf War, therefore, was very different to that seen during Vietnam. The American public was treated to revolutionary

24-hour saturation coverage of a conflict promoted as a “clean” war and led by images of U.S. computer-guided “smart bombs” faultlessly hitting their specified strategic military targets like in a video game, surgically removing them whilst leaving civilian lives untouched. Just as the government had gone to great lengths to assert that this would not be another Vietnam, television showed the public that it was indeed *not* another Vietnam, as H. Bruce Franklin describes:

Fascinated, tens of millions of excited Americans stared at their screens, sharing the experience of these missiles and bombs unerringly guided by the wonders of American military technology to a target identified by a narrator as an important military installation. A generation raised in video arcades and on Nintendo could hardly be more satisfied. The target got closer and closer, larger and larger. And then everything ended with the explosion. There were no bloated human bodies, as in the photographs of the battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg. There was none of the agony of the burned and wounded glimpsed on television relays from Vietnam. There was just nothing at all. In this magnificent triumph of the technowar, America’s images of its wars had seemingly reached perfection (Franklin, 2000, p.24).

The war had been sanitised for civilian consumption. As in Panama there was a notable absence of dead or wounded bodies in news reports. There was even a succession of euphemisms employed to further mask signs of death from reports, from “theatre of operations” and “surgical strikes” to describe the battlefield and bombing attacks, to “soft targets” translating as human targets and “collateral damage” and “friendly fire” representing death itself. There was no visual or reported indication of the action Erskine B. Childers, who examined the media’s representation of the Gulf War shortly after the conflict, specifies as a unprecedented kill-ratio, with more than a hundred thousand Iraqi deaths to just 150 coalition dead, and describes as “a planned and deliberately, brutally protracted high-technology massacre” (Childers, 1992, p.241) or that pilots simply referred to as a “turkey shoot”. As Marilyn Young describes:

By the end of the war, it had become possible to believe that the enemy were not people at all, but machines; that the tanks, buses and cars which jammed the highway out of Kuwait City had fled on their own, that their charred hulks contained no human remains (Young, 1991, p.22).

Despite the incredibly intense media coverage, led by CNN’s commitment to covering the conflict, remarkably little of the Gulf War was actually communicated to American audiences back home, resulting in its description by Edward Said as “the most covered and least reported war in history” (Said, 1993, p.3). This void remaining in the coverage was filled by an endless stream of press briefings, speeches, interviews, press pool stories and

images released by the military, reports from embedded correspondents, news reports and summaries, personal stories, and expert analysis, to conceal and compensate for the absence of the routine war images described by Keith Beattie:

It is inescapable: an object of war is to wound. War is blood, war is body fragments, war is the dismemberment of the body – though not the body's absence. Mortally wounded bodies are present on the battlefield in a display that attests to the dreadful power of war. Censorship, however, attempts to obscure this fact by concealing the presence of the injured, wounded body. In the case of the Gulf War, Pentagon censorship functioned to deny the essential object of the conflict (Beattie, 1998, p.11).

This style of sanitised war coverage supplied the image of American foreign intervention that the public wanted to see and that the military wanted to report, in which America fought in defence of others and to restore freedom, peace and democracy, protecting the innocent and killing only those responsible for pain and suffering. Such an image would ensure the continuation of public support for the operation. One group of a series of telephone interviews carried out by Michael Morgan, Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1991 highlights the effect of television coverage of the Gulf War on people's perception of the conflict. Upon asking both light viewers and heavy viewers of the television coverage to estimate the number of Iraqi deaths to date they were given a mean figure of 9848 from light viewers and a mean figure of only 789 from the heavy viewers. The difference between the two figures is quite dramatic and of considerable significance when considering the effects of the mediation of conflicts on the public perception and remembrance of these events. As Morgan *et al* elaborate:

The question here was not about accuracy but about relative perceptions – clearly heavy viewers were more inclined than light viewers to buy into the idea that the war was being fought cleanly and efficiently with smart bombs that were damaging only buildings. The lack of visual pictures of actual dead people no doubt helped to cultivate this image of cleanliness (Morgan et al, 1992, p.226).

As cinema had worked to re-write and edit the story of the Vietnam War in the years following it, the media – in particular television – coverage of the Persian Gulf War served to re-write and edit its story from the beginning, while the conflict was actually taking place. So strong was the promotion of a clean, low casualty war, that even when television did occasionally report a negative event the image could not be shattered as so much positive propaganda had surrounded it, as in this case outlined by Isaacs:

Television did report from Baghdad, showing destruction and casualties. But those reports made only the slightest dents in the sanitized, antiseptic image fostered by U.S. officials. When American bombs killed more than two hundred Iraqi civilians in a Baghdad bunker that U.S. intelligence had identified as a key military command post, there was hardly any discernable impact on American public opinion (Isaacs, 1997, p.81).

By the time it was revealed that 70% of the 88,500 tons of explosives dropped during the conflict had missed their targets and that only 7% were the revered smart bombs (Brittain, 1991, p.xvii), the Gulf War's image as clean and precise had already been established as symbolic of the conflict. The pictures broadcast during the conflict then went on to become a significant part of the public's remembrance of the war; to be appropriated and challenged in cinematic representations of the Gulf, as is evident in *Three Kings*.

It is despite this media image that the further information to emerge after the conflict and the positive media excitement surrounding it began to alter the public's subsequent collective remembrance of the war in the Gulf, along with the subsidence of the "rally round the flag" (Bowen, 1989, p.794) effect and euphoria of victory. Aside from Saddam Hussein's continued presidency raising doubts over the extent of the moral victory achieved in the conflict, the Iraqi government proceeded to release its images of starving and malnourished Iraqi children that he claimed to be the direct result of the American military actions. Such pictures reminded Americans of the human suffering of war that had been hidden from them during the conflict. As well as the Iraqi propaganda, oppositional voices within the United States further served to taint the media image of the clean war. With a presidential campaign in operation, the Democrats had not wasted the opportunity to depict the intervention in the Gulf as a failure. Douglas Kellner explains how the media coverage of the morally murky aftermath of the war in the Gulf, rather than the wartime coverage of it, worked to raise later opposition to the intervention:

Although saturation television coverage was strongly propagandistic and seemed to help mobilize audience support for the war, continued coverage of the turmoil in the region, especially images of the suffering of the Kurds and other Iraqis at the end of the war, soured segments of the audience on the war and perhaps on military intervention which did not seem to have achieved the promised positive results... It may be that the nightly images of soldiers in the desert and then images after the war of the continued suffering and turmoil might have raised questions concerning the wisdom of U.S. military intervention (Kellner, 2004, p.148).

As Kellner suggests, it is not until after the initial excitement of the victory and the publicity surrounding it had receded that the clarity with which the Gulf War had been

perceived a success grew more ambiguous and morally confusing. Under such conditions the “Vietnam Syndrome,” temporarily masked by the successful execution of Operation Desert Storm, was given the opportunity to afflict American minds and the American media again. As the shining image of the Gulf became tainted, memories from Vietnam resurfaced to become associated with attitudes regarding the war in the Gulf. The dark precedent of Vietnam had such a permanent effect as to be able to seep through to fuel negative sentiments regarding subsequent American foreign military intervention. Events surrounding the American support of the Contras in Nicaragua had likewise left scars on the American public’s conception of such issues, with the 1987 revelation of the arms sales to Iran and subsequent illegal funding of the anti-Sadinista rebels scandal discrediting and generating controversy over U.S. action abroad for years to follow.

Though the contemporary television and news coverage to the greatest extent represented the government-endorsed view of a near-perfect conflict with the minimum loss of life and the minimum disruption to civilian lives, the retrospective perspective of cinema is better placed to communicate such later developing revisions of the war’s collective memory. The forthcoming chapters on both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* shall analyse the communication of these changes.

Prior to this, however, a brief consideration shall be made of the further changes to media coverage of conflicts in the post-Gulf War period with the most recent conflict, the war in Iraq. The onset of that war saw more than 3000 journalists descend on the region to report. Following the complex and sophisticated censorship of Gulf War I, the American government announced there would be no official censorship of this second war in the Gulf. This policy was the result of the Coalition Forces Land Component Command Ground Rules Agreement, formulated at a major meeting between representatives of the Department of Defense and officials from major news agencies held from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2002. The DoD presented the guidelines it expected embedded and military-assisted news reporters to adhere to, and the press were granted the agreement that “the Pentagon would not review or censor reporter dispatches” (Paul and Kim, 2004, p.53).

Yet despite this removal of censorship there was still no recurrence of the stream of memorable images that characterised the Vietnam War. The media, now reliant on the officially supplied material to fill the vastly increased hours of airtime of modern 24-hour news, as pioneered in the Gulf War, benefited more from co-operation with official sources than from seeking out their own – a practice actively encouraged by the George W. Bush

administration in the Iraq War – as is outlined well in Philip Knightley’s analysis of contemporary war coverage:

I believe that the traditional relationship between the military and the media – one of restrained hostility – has broken down and the U.S. administration, in keeping with its new foreign policy, has decided that its attitude to war correspondents is the same as that set out by President Bush when declaring war on terrorists: ‘You’re either with us or you’re against us.’” Those journalists prepared to get on side – and that means 100 per cent on side – will become ‘embeds’ and receive every assistance. Those who try to follow an objective, independent path, the so-called ‘unilaterals,’ will be shunned. And those who report from the enemy side will risk being shot (Knightley, 2004, p.100).

There is no real need for strict censorship policies in such a current climate as the media has become more focused on presenting a product to an audience than presenting a world-view to them and has become reliant on regular news feeds. This is the ideal situation for the United States Government and military as the media serves their interests and to a large extent becomes self-censoring. Added to this, a general increased tendency towards infotainment in news reporting in recent decades has only served to further distance contemporary television news coverage of war from any controversial, distasteful or upsetting stories. There is evident a marked preference in screening a high number of experiential stories of military life during war, demonstrations of military technology, human interest and personal stories among the news updates, a feature that Morgan et al in their analysis of the 1991 war in the Gulf attribute largely to the demands of advertising:

Television’s tendency to present a one-sided view is compounded by the economic imperatives of advertising. The upbeat tone of the coverage was seen as necessary to retain advertisers because nobody wanted their product surrounded by images of death, pain, and destruction (Morgan et al, 1992, p.230).

Even though criticism of the Iraq War grew increasingly common as the conflict lengthened, television mostly refrained from screening disturbing images or participating in any sustained criticism.

It took many decades for the military and the media to reach such a co-operative system as has been established recently. From the hugely memorable and shocking images from Vietnam to the resulting blackout of images from Grenada and much of Panama followed by the web of censorship surrounding everything to emerge from the Gulf, it shall become evident in the forthcoming chapters that the media coverage of foreign military

intervention has had a direct and varied effect on both the contemporary public perception and later collective remembrance of these conflicts. It shall also become evident, however, the extent to which subsequently this positive perception was overridden.

## Chapter 10

### *Three Kings*

David O’Russell’s 1999 Gulf War film *Three Kings* employs the narrative device of a moral fable to relate the moral lessons of the Gulf War and rewrite America’s moral position towards the Iraqi people by revising what was perceived as a moral defeat. It tells a story of a group of four U.S. soldiers on operations in the Gulf at the close of the conflict as they discover a map to one of Saddam Hussein’s secret bunkers containing a large quantity of Kuwaiti gold bullion and plot to steal it for themselves. The men, led by Major Archie Gates, find the bunker and take the gold, but in the process witness torture and murder of Iraqi dissidents obeying George Bush’s pleas to rise up against Saddam Hussein. They attempt a rescue mission to get the people out of the town but are attacked by the Iraqi Army and one of the Americans, Troy, is captured. The others make a deal with the Iraqi dissidents. In exchange for their assistance in rescuing Troy, they will endure the people safe passage across the Iranian border. Troy is rescued, but wounded, and another of the four is killed in the process. The focus of the remaining men’s mission changes from acquiring gold to saving the group of Iraqi people. They drive them to the Iranian border only for them to be stopped just before crossing by the American military who have come to arrest their men. Gates arranges a deal with his commanding officer to reveal where he has hidden the stolen gold in return for assistance to allow the Iraqis to cross the border safely. Although created around a distinctly American-focused fictional plot, the film actually works to bring in Iraqi issues and voices to a certain degree as the movie develops. This chapter shall discuss many features of *Three Kings* in detail, drawing comparisons with some of the Vietnam War films previously discussed, and shall analyse the progression of the American collective remembrance of the Gulf War, before reaching conclusions on the continuation of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in American culture and the national psyche.

Critical reception of *Three Kings* on its release were mixed. Reviews generally contained praise for technical aspects of the film alongside criticism of the representation of the Gulf War. Stephen Hunter, writing in *The Washington Post*, claimed the film’s style “has the feel of no other film” and it “re-imagines the old war movie in postmodern terms” (Hunter, 1999), while concluding that it was ideologically unremarkable:



The final action debriefing on “Three Kings” would read as follows: While it feels different, it really isn’t different. Under it all lurks our old friend Duke’s myth, “The Green Berets,” about old-fashioned warriors in a new fashioned war, and about men learning to do the right thing, not the easy thing, and to risk not their bank accounts but their butts (Hunter, 1999).

Michael Wilmington of *The Chicago Tribune* was less critical of the film as a repeat of a myth, describing it as a “dark, zesty, live-wire action comedy” (Wilmington, 1999), but thought it “overreaches morally and is slightly preachy” and “a genre movie with an agenda that’s too packed” (Wilmington, 1999). It appears that an action film set in a war was a more popular idea than a film about a war.

With its appearance of bleached-out television footage and interjections of artificial graphics, *Three Kings* is visually far removed from Vietnam War films. There is, however, one exception that is worthy of note as a visual connection to the Vietnam War to accompany the thematic ones. In an early scene Major Gates is having a discussion with his Staff Sergeant. The scene’s establishing shot frames them standing directly in front of a helicopter with the rotor blades whirring just over their heads and over their dialogue. The image of the helicopter was an iconic feature of Vietnam War films, but is not a strong or frequent visual feature in *Three Kings* outside of this scene. When the establishing shot cuts to a closer shot it is clear the characters are positioned so the blades remain in the centre of the screen, in between the two figures in conversation. The dialogue of the conversation supports this link to Vietnam:

Gates: I don’t even know what we did here. Just tell me what we did here, Ron?

Staff Sergeant: What you want to do? Occupy Iraq and do Vietnam all over again?  
(*Three Kings*)

The camera then returns to the position of the establishing shot and the Staff Sergeant gets into the helicopter which takes off out of the shot. This scene explains the restraint of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the restraint America exercised in its involvement in the Gulf. When the helicopter takes off, the Vietnam imagery leaves with it and does not return in the remainder of the film. This draws attention to the fact that *Three Kings* utilises only Gulf War imagery in its depiction. It also suggests that the moral issues raised in the film refer specifically to the Gulf. While the film may interpret and address these issues in a

similar way to Vietnam War films, *Three Kings* frames them in the context of the Gulf War.

Throughout, the film has the distinct appearance of a music video that proved popular with the critics. This is particularly emphasised in the opening credits where a pool party atmosphere is depicted as the troops sunbathe, dance, play and work out. Loud music, short cuts and motion distortion such as the use of slow-motion photography not only bring the contemporary MTV-video feel to the film but moreover present the view of the war in the Gulf as a conflict with little suffering, little effort and a considerable amount of fun. This reflects the style of television coverage that became associated with the war and dominated American war reports, as described by Daya Kishan Thussu:

In addition to video clips providing visuals, news programmes are providing more and more complicated maps, graphics and studio models to illustrate the progress of war. Mimicking war-gaming, miniature tanks and aircraft re-create battlefields in the studio, where, more often than not, male correspondents and experts enthusiastically discuss tactics and strategies, reinforcing the feminist critique of war as 'toys for the boys' (Thussu, 2003, p.125).

Coverage of the conflict itself had adapted to the MTV age, as H. Bruce Franklin (2000) had also observed, and *Three Kings* reflected this change in style. To further cement the link between the style of the movie and the visual coverage of the war, *Three Kings* even contains a shot from the perspective of a bullet as it rushes towards Troy, parodying the images captured from smart bombs that were an infamous feature of American Gulf War television reports.

The opening montage then leads into a scene with reporter Adriana Cruz giving a piece to camera as she reports on the recent victory and corresponding mood in the military camp. Her report and the montage leading the film towards it, remind viewers of the narrow, glorified and patriotic view they received during the war, a style of reporting summarised neatly by Arnold R. Isaacs:

Television news-casts, particularly, seemed in all kinds of ways to be intentionally giving the viewers the triumphant story they clearly wanted. This was true not just in the reports themselves. The glitzy, eye-catching montages used to open and close news shows, for example, displayed the most romantic possible images: soldiers and weapons silhouetted against desert sunsets, sleek jets thundering off carriers into crystal-blue skies, ranks of rippling American flags (Isaacs, 1997, p.79).

The portrayal of such coverage in *Three Kings* serves the purpose of highlighting the message conveyed through the remainder of the film, that the media coverage of the Gulf War focused on trivial stories and interviews rather than presented the most important issues surrounding Operation Desert Storm.

Adriana begins her triumphant report by telling viewers that “Music is high, and spirits are soaring...” before moving on to interview some of the U.S. troops stationed in the region. The impression given by the men in the interview with Adriana – the impression seen back in the United States – is what the government wanted to present and television willingly complied to broadcast, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Adriana Cruz: They say you exorcised the ghost of Vietnam with a clear moral imperative ...

Soldier (interrupting): We liberated Kuwait!

[others cheer and this leads into an outburst of singing]

Troops [singing]: And if I had to start again  
 With just my children and my wife  
 I would thank my lucky stars  
 To be living here today  
 Because the flag still stands for freedom  
 And they can't take that away  
 And I'd gladly stand up next to you  
 And defend her still today  
 'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land  
 ... God bless the U.S.A.  
 (*Three Kings*, 1999).

As the men sing the lines “I would thank my lucky stars/To be living here today” they point to the ground beneath them, implying that their nation’s involvement in the region had made a considerable improvement and that the people living there should likewise notice this and be glad the American intervention has taken place – a notion that shall be challenged in the remainder of the film when the audience is shown the conditions under which these people live. The implication that they are referring, at least in part, to the Gulf region and Iraqi and Kuwaiti people continues right up until the end of the song when, after a pause they sing “God bless the U.S.A.”

The manner in which the press was orchestrated during the Gulf War is exposed in *Three Kings* in two distinct ways. The first of these is in the return of the dead and wounded body to a portrayal of the conflict. As was discussed in the previous chapter, this feature

of war coverage was notably absent from contemporary television coverage of the Gulf War as a thoroughly sanitized version was presented to viewers 24 hours a day across America. *Three Kings* counteracts this in the very first scene of the film, opening with the sight of an American shooting an Arab who was waving a white flag, unsure if the man ought to be considered a target. After numerous attempts at asking his comrades if they are shooting people on their operation result in no clear answer, he decides to shoot the man anyway and the audience are witness to the surrendering soldier in the process of dying from a horrific neck wound. Later, Major Gates then shows the young men accompanying him on the journey to Saddam's bunker full of Kuwaiti gold some of the unseen casualties of the American air strikes. A collection of charred bodies line the road, depicting the results of the bombing campaigns that were given so much coverage during the war. This indicates to the audience that the human cost of the conflict was far greater than the media had led them to believe. It also exceeded this limited consideration given to it in *Three Kings*, as is dramatically expressed by Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, who cite Gulf War veterans in their investigation of the morality and violence of the conflict:

During the brief land war launched by Washington, the allies shot thousands and thousands of fleeing Iraqi soldiers and civilians in the back. Their shooting was described as being like a 'giant hunt.' The Iraqis were driven ahead 'like animals,' by the allied air and land attacks (Aksoy and Robins, 1992, p.209).

The passing observation of one incident of American bombing is scarcely able to convey the scale of the casualties alone, nor does it touch upon many related consequences that had an immense impact on the lives of civilians in the country, many of which Rami G. Khouri identified in an article originally published in *The Jordan Times* on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1991:

The wholesale destruction of the civil infrastructure of Iraq, including power stations, roads, refineries, industrial plants, bridges, water systems, homes, religious sites, and other non-military facilities, has brought hardship and political health hazards to virtually the entire population of 17 million people. Everywhere, but most critically in big cities, people live without electricity, clean water, sewage systems, emergency medical supplies, heating oil and gasoline, and other essential goods and services. Cholera and typhoid epidemics are a major immediate hazard (Khouri, (1991) 1992, p.234).

Another way, however, that *Three Kings* does attempt to convey to its audience the human suffering of war is through Gates' description of bullet wounds. A vivid visual illustration aids his account of sepsis of a gunshot wound. Using Troy to demonstrate, the audience

see a bullet enter his stomach and are then taken inside him to the site of the wound to be shown the cavity filling up with vivid green bile and bacteria. Such a personal depiction with one of the principal characters of the film increases the effect of the demonstration and leads to increased sympathy for those affected by such wounds, including Iraqis and in particular the surrendering man seen shot unnecessarily by Troy at the beginning of the film.

The effect of American weapons on people is further emphasised immediately after this when a cow steps on a cluster bomb. Here the wounded body in war is displayed in the shocking illustration of the animal's body being ripped apart and scattered around the area by the powerful explosive. As a final shock to both the audience and the young men who claimed "The only action we seen was on CNN, except for that dude Troy shot," the cow's head lands intact on the front of the Humvee. Whilst not depicting much of the everyday issues to affect the general population of Iraq, such illustrations of the destruction and suffering created by the war should not be overlooked as a significant development in the perception generated of the conflict from that seen during the period of the war itself, as they are far removed from the depictions discussed in Chapter 9. The extent of the representation of civilian Iraqi issues shall be further discussed later in this chapter when the rescue of those who rose up against Saddam Hussein is analysed.

The second illustration of Gulf War press orchestration in *Three Kings* is the depiction of Adriana's reports being disrupted and manipulated by the military. Archie Gates is assigned the task of providing her with the stories that the military want to be projected to the public and preventing her from covering the stories that it does not. Gates is told by his commanding officer that "This is a media war," and the control of the press is presented as being a significant aspect of the military's operation. When Gates leads his small team in the quest to recover the gold an elaborate decoy is employed to deny Adriana access to the story. Walter is assigned the job of distracting her. At first he tells her that Major Gates has a new story for her and that he has gone in advance to arrange it while she is to travel with him. After many hours of driving around the desert, Walter continues to distract and delay her by offering her previously covered military-approved stories such as the burning oil wells, a rare pelican migration and birds covered in oil.

This is highly reminiscent of the manner in which a number of correspondents in the Gulf were inhibited from reporting events in the war. NBC News correspondent Gary Matsumoto was assigned to what was known as a "quick reaction pool", one of a select

group of media pools who were to be granted access to breaking news stories at a moment's notice. During the air war phase of the conflict Matsumoto found this to be the way the system worked, but during the ground war his experience was markedly different. He reported a scheduled reconnaissance mission due to be conducted on February 18 being replaced with a five-hour drive around the desert in the back of a Humvee – similar to Adriana's journey around the desert in *Three Kings* – because the PAO claimed to be lost. The next day another reconnaissance mission was scheduled for Matsumoto's pool, only to be cancelled by General Schwarzkopf, and on 20 February another PAO failed to locate the helicopter squadron the pool were scheduled to witness carrying out an assault in Iraq. Matsumoto later discovered that during this period, in advance of the official starting date of 24 February, the ground war had begun and the military had gone to great effort to prevent the media from covering it for as long as possible:

Matsumoto's crew, delayed by a sandstorm as well as its military minders, did not catch up with a combat unit in Iraq until February 27, when the 'fighting' was virtually over. Arriving at Jalibah Airfield after the allies had seized it, the 'quick reaction' pool was allowed an interview with the commanding officer but was prevented from filming surrendering Iraqi soldiers one hundred yards away. Officers said there were no American casualties at the airfield; the reporters later found out that at least one U.S. soldier had died and several others were wounded in a friendly blunder – an M1 Abrams tank had fired through the rear ramp of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, killing the driver and injuring some infantrymen (MacArthur, 1992, p.191).

The treatment of Adriana Cruz in *Three Kings* brings to the screen image of the Gulf War the manipulation behind the news coverage Americans were receiving back home, allowing viewers to see for themselves how “much that happened went unreported and much that was reported was only part of the whole truth” (Hudson and Stanier, 1998, p.209).

Aside from exposing the deficiencies in the press coverage of the conflict, the other major consideration surrounding the Gulf War that is included in the film is the lives of Iraqi civilians and how they have been affected by America's actions in the campaign. As when *Heaven and Earth* gave viewers an insight into the Vietnamese perspective, *Three Kings*, although to a lesser extent, allows them access to the Iraqi perspective by introducing local concerns and voices that had been denied during the Gulf War as the conflict was once again presented as “an internal issue for Americans” (Said, 1993, p.355). The manner in which *Three Kings* introduces these voices is different to that of *Heaven and Earth* in that *Three Kings* promotes them somewhat more indirectly, through the American characters'

experiences, whereas *Heaven and Earth* was a direct focus on a South Vietnamese story. It is nevertheless a significant development that they were included, particularly when taken into consideration the notable absence of them in contemporary news coverage.

Some of the failings of the American operation in the Gulf are exposed as the small group of men enter the Iraqi village where the bunker containing the bullion is believed to be hidden. People plead to them for food and medicine, and as the men search the bunker for gold they find some of Saddam's supporters torturing an anti-Saddam rebel and holding a group of dissidents captive. Gates' explanation leaves the audience in no doubt as to who is to blame for their suffering: "Bush told the people to rise up against Saddam. They thought they'd have our support. They don't. Now they're getting slaughtered."

Saddam's men show less concern for the gold than they do for retaining possession of the prisoners and the Americans only care about their own personal gains, mimicking the self-serving concerns of the Bush administration and American military in the Gulf War. The administration and the military chose not to assist the Iraqi rebels against Saddam Hussein for fear of spoiling the carefully generated clean, swift and successful image of the war that characterised it. Strobe Talbot explains:

President Bush had numerous, mutually reinforcing reasons for ending the war as abruptly as he did. Much of the U.S. military wanted to quit while it was ahead. Continuing the military campaign would have meant risking much higher allied casualties and perhaps becoming bogged down in a Vietnam-like quagmire. Curing the United States of the "Vietnam Syndrome" was seen as an important benefit of Desert Storm, not to be jeopardized by over-reaching in the flush of victory (Talbot, 1992, p.59).

This self-serving attitude appears to put people second to politics, however in *Three Kings* the men are shown to have a distinct change in their attitude towards their Iraqi allies. As they are leaving with the Kuwaiti gold, a woman begs them not to go and she is shot in front of the U.S. soldiers and her family, including her small daughter. The young soldiers want to leave but Gates, having witnessed this injustice so closely, becomes involved in the situation even though it risks "allied casualties and becoming bogged down" (Talbot, 1992, p.59). After Saddam's men refuse to leave peacefully, claiming the dictator will kill their families if they do so, Gates shoots one of them and a battle erupts. Gates orders all the people to be loaded into the truck they stole from a local to transport the gold, even if some of the bullion has to be taken back off and left behind. If President Bush put politics first, *Three Kings* asserts that given the opportunity to see and understand the situation

directly, Americans would put the people first. This argument that the distance from which the war was fought and lack of engagement with the local area and its people was responsible for the attitude that the victory was more important than Iraqi lives is seen most strongly in the scene in which the military intercept Gates and his men at the Iranian border. Before discussing this, however, it is first important to outline further how these men reached their understanding of Iraqi people and issues, and how they worked to rectify their country's abandonment of them.

When Troy is captured by some of Saddam's men, they are in a position of control in the situation and are granted a voice in the film. The purpose of this is to discuss issues of America's conduct in the operation from an Iraqi perspective. As Troy is questioned over his country's actions both he and the audience are forced to consider the Gulf War from another perspective. He is asked if his Army helps the children and people of Iraq, before being told of how American bombs ruined his captor's whole street and how the falling rubble crushed his wife's legs and killed his baby son. Troy, a new father himself, is then asked "Can you think how it would feel inside your heart if I bomb your daughter?" This question is answered with a vision of Troy's wife and child being engulfed in flames as a bomb strikes their home in the United States – a highly effective image, generating considerably more empathy than a corresponding one of his Iraqi torturer's family would have as the audience have bonded with the character of Troy and can identify more easily with him.

The torture scene makes further criticism of U.S. policy by raising the question of the Bush administration's motives for instigating the military action. Troy is force-fed oil because this, his torturer claims, is America's real interest in the region. The United States, he claims, does not step in to help every nation in trouble and is not really concerned with the interests of Kuwait as much as the vast oil reserves beneath its ground. Such criticism was omitted from the patriotic propaganda operation waged across the media in the United States where anti-war sentiments, while occasionally aired and usually through less mainstream networks, received disproportionately little coverage and any critical or oppositional views were marginalized, even on the network most famous for its Gulf War coverage as Herbert I. Schiller describes:

Though a relatively large number of international locales and speakers were presented, CNN with the limited exception of its one correspondent in Baghdad, differed slightly from the routines and patterns that dominated the three national networks. Exclusion of dissident voices and general omission of



material critical to the war policy were not as blatant. The extent and varied CNN programming gave an impression of comprehensiveness. It was largely an impression (Schiller, 1992, p.28).

*Three Kings* does contain blatant criticism. As with the Vietnam War, it was a number of years after the conflict before cinema attempted to depict the war and even longer before challenging perceptions of it. This is connected to the style of representation the Gulf War received during the conflict that was censored, heavily infused with propaganda, and promoted through stylish images with little consideration of the context surrounding them, leading to its frequent description as “instant history.” This definition by George Gerbner explains the term:

Instant history is image history. The crisis unfolds before our eyes, too fast for thoughtful consideration of antecedents, alternatives, or long-range consequences but just in time for conditioned reflex. The show is on, we are in it, and the deed must be done before second thoughts, counteracts, and regrets can derail the action (Gerbner, 1992, p.245).

The television representation of the Gulf War was “instant history” and instant memory, but that reflected in *Three Kings* is the beginning of a collective retrospective analysis of events. The presentation of arguments critical of U.S. policy and conduct in the Gulf suggests both wider acceptance of these emergent views across the general American public and an underlying sense of national guilt regarding the way in which the war was fought and Iraqi people treated.

In a revisionist attempt to rectify this and ease the collective national conscience, the rogue American troops act in contrast to the rest of the military and help their Iraqi allies, failed by a previous American promise of assistance, in crossing the Iranian border to escape Saddam Hussein. As with Stephen in *The War* and Rambo in *First Blood*, Gates and his team get the opportunity to re-fight the Gulf War the way that in retrospect the American public would like it to have been fought, as well as in the manner that once again reinforces the American self-image of the nation as an upholder of morals. Such a collective revision of the Gulf War is displayed through countering the criticisms made against the United States throughout the film. Although the government and military powers abandoned those who answered their call to rise up against Saddam Hussein and his Army, the soldiers who left their military camp and experience the situation in the country themselves do not, instead risking or losing their own lives to do so. They even help distribute bars of gold among the fleeing Iraqi people and when the American military

try to prevent them from crossing the border, Gates bargains with his commanding officer to inform him of the location of the remaining gold in exchange for safe passage across the border for the refugees. As the Iraqis cross the border the men have finished fighting their battle and have won a humanitarian victory in their Gulf War, eclipsing the failures of the Gulf War as a whole that were identified throughout the film. *Three Kings*, like its Vietnam War movie predecessors, is another of example of Sturken's narratives of redemption for American military operations.

The film, however, does not only offer the moral compensation of this rescue mission. It also presents a reason for the actions of the United States during the war, suggesting that under different conditions the entire military operation would have operated with similar compassion to those who ventured out to the village in search of the gold. This further projects the image of the United States as a moral leader and defender of freedom. The attitude of the American military at the Iranian border is one of the strongest demonstrations of the film's suggestion that the distance at which the Gulf War was fought was a reason for the resulting lack of consideration for the people of Iraq, as "with our very modern technologies we brought Armageddon to people we scarcely knew" (Aksoy and Robins, 1992, p.209). The military command orders Gates and the young men to stop assisting the refugees and announces that they are under arrest. Soldiers then drag the arrested men away despite their pleas that the Iraqis' lives depended on their presence, cementing the image of the ignorant and cruel actions of the military fighting a war predominantly from behind the front lines, and appearing in direct contrast to the attitude of the small group of men who left their base in search of the gold bullion and demonstrated American values in their conduct outwith their military directions.

Their transition from ignorance to understanding is shown to be in direct relation to their contact with Iraqi people – whether through working with them to free Troy and reach the Iranian border, or through being forced to consider their perspective as Troy was when he was held captive. The resulting reflection of Americans in *Three Kings* is of them as good, well-intentioned people. This is reiteration of the Vietnam soldier portrayal described by Boggs and Pollard as "noble grunts, innocent and often illiterate kids just struggling for survival in the hot, dense, menacing jungles of an alien country" (Boggs and Pollard, 2007, p.90). The negation of responsibility in collective representations such as these displays a repeated desire to reaffirm the same cherished national identity projected within the community of America and throughout the world. *Three Kings* suggests that Americans' lack of understanding and compassion was derived from the way the Gulf War was fought.

This removes blame or criticism, as many Vietnam War films did, taking it away from those who fought in and the public who supported the Gulf War, and further up the military ranks or even away from America altogether to simply circumstantial causes.

Such an interpretation of the Gulf War indicates the conflict as being fought under the same “cultural blindness” (Desser, 1991, p.82) that was evident in America’s treatment of Vietnam decades earlier. This similar attitude once again resulted in criticism of U.S. foreign policy and led to comparisons with Vietnam which Marilyn Young found inescapable despite the government’s best efforts to deny it:

In 1991 George Bush began a war in the Persian Gulf which, he insisted, was not another Vietnam. Iraq, he pointed out, is a desert. Vietnam was a jungle. Moreover, Iraq was not Vietnam because this time the U.S. would win. It was at this point that Iraq became Vietnam. The difference between Iraq and Vietnam, according to the president and his men, did not lie in their histories, cultures, political ideologies or geographies, but only in what the U.S. had not done to one and would most certainly do to the other. The only variable in this system was America – its will, its history, its power (Young, 1991, p.22).

As Young argues, the Bush administration’s Gulf War attitude towards Iraq was remarkably similar to the attitude towards Vietnam decades earlier. The failure of the United States to consider the conflict from any perspective other than an American one and the resulting criticism over the lasting legacy of the war prevented the Gulf War from delivering the catharsis over Vietnam that it had been hoped it would. This in turn resulted in cinema, in such texts as *Three Kings*, to reflect the moral ambiguity in re-examining and re-interpreting the conflict. Saddam Hussein’s continued presidency and the persecution of his people raised questions of America’s outcome on a humanitarian level. This was only exacerbated with consideration of the death and suffering of the civilian population generated by the extensive American bombing of the country. Questions over the Bush administration’s motives in the region followed. Writing in *The San Francisco Chronicle* on 27 March 1991, Robert Scheer asked if the United States was only to go to the aid of countries rich in oil while ignoring the plight of civilians elsewhere, citing Cambodia and Uganda as places the U.S. should have made equal efforts to assist.

This post-Gulf re-consideration of America’s role and achievements in the region and the doubts that emerged from it, as has been argued in previous chapters, is a reflection of the “Vietnam Syndrome” within American society and culture. In exposing the degree of censorship discussed in Chapter 9 and discrepancy between the actual and the reported in

the Gulf, showing television coverage to be “full of the most romantic possible images” and being devoted to presenting “the triumphant story” (Isaacs, 1997, p.79), the film communicates public concerns over their deception by the media coverage.

*Three Kings* begins with a shift of blame for the suffering of Iraqi civilians towards America and its conduct in the Gulf War. This premise exposes a notion of collective guilt, similar to that displayed in the aftermath of Vietnam and the criticism of American treatment of the Vietnamese during that conflict. It is a largely unavoidable notion as there could not be much doubt over America’s direct involvement in this situation. However, it is the revisionist response to this portrayed through the narrative of the film’s moral fable that most strongly connects it to Vietnam War films, suggesting that Vietnam and Gulf War films share common expressions of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” *Three Kings* essentially responds, in a remarkably similar way to many revisionist Vietnam War texts and in particular the film *The War*. It excuses Americans of the responsibility for this, instead, exactly as in *The War*, blaming human nature affected under certain circumstances. It is a far more acceptable belief for Americans to blame the technology rather than their nation or their people. This also works to re-establish the fractured image of the noble American soldier. As *The War* did through Stephen giving his life to save his workmate, and *We Were Soldiers* did through the soldier relinquishing his place in the helicopter to someone in greater need, *Three Kings* promoted a positive image of the American soldier through the privileging of lives over the gold.

The film’s use of the narrative of the search for Saddam’s gold to explore the Gulf War follows in the basic literary tradition of using stories to convey meanings and moral messages. The circulation of stories like this is a pivotal part of collective memory. They are active tools by which memory is constructed, reconstructed and maintained. *Three Kings* can project its portrayal of the morality of the Gulf War to an audience more simply through this parable than in the format of a documentary or standard docu-drama. This utilization of simple stories is a basic component of human culture as Alasdair MacIntyre argues:

[M]an is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal... It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into

which they have been born and what the ways of the world are... Hence, there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources (MacIntyre, 1984, p.216).

In an identical manner to the circulation of traditional stories described by MacIntyre above, *Three Kings* teaches through the simple narrative of the quest for gold and resulting interaction with local people how America acted during the Gulf War and how it could have and should have acted in the interests of the people, although, as with even the most sympathetic Vietnam War films, the main concern of the story remains with Americans and their attitudes or actions with only a limited representation of Iraqis and Iraqi issues.

The reflective attitude to the Gulf War appears through such a representation in this story to be symptomatic of the “Vietnam Syndrome” that featured so strongly in considerations of American foreign intervention in light of the Vietnam War. While the Gulf War may not have been a military defeat like Vietnam, and indeed alleviated doubts over U.S. military capability, it nevertheless brought moral defeat through its human suffering and Saddam’s continued domination of Iraq. By 1999, the pristine image of the “clean” war had developed considerable cracks. Regardless of the highly supportive press coverage, the ultimate result of the Gulf War was American people still in doubt over the success of its military operations. The “instant history” images of the war in the Gulf may have become recognised in culture as synonymous with the conflict, but in the aftermath the collective perception of it has evidently moved and been developed beyond this to include the consideration of wider issues and unfavourable outcomes of the United States military intervention in the region. These emerged later and had to be addressed in order for people to reconcile their nation’s conduct in the war with their idea of how America should behave. In the metaphorical narrative of four men’s quest for riches, *Three Kings* presents a revision of the Gulf War on a moral basis that continues the revisionist technique of many Vietnam War films, with the absurdity of the fable and comic dialogue in the film reflective of the unreality of the Gulf War’s hitherto unprecedented style of contemporary television coverage. It does so, however, specifically within the framework of the Gulf War, and not Vietnam.

The analysis of *Jarhead* in the next chapter explores the direct reference to Vietnam War films in a Gulf War context through their use as media templates to reflect Gulf War comparisons in the film’s representation of the Gulf Conflict in the shadow of the Vietnam War.

## Chapter 11

### *Jarhead*

*Jarhead* was released in 2005, six years after *Three Kings* and fourteen years after the Gulf War. With the passage of this amount of time, alterations in the representation of the war have become greater and more easily visible. The film follows new Marine recruit Swofford, or Swoff, through his training and time in action in the Gulf, during which it continually places the Gulf War within the context of the Vietnam War with persistent comparisons with and references to Vietnam and Vietnam films. In this chapter these references and comparisons will be identified and examined closely, and their ideology and contribution to the American collective memory discussed

Upon passing his training, Swoff is deployed to the Gulf but not in combat. He must endure a long wait at the base before being called for duty in the field. During this wait Swoff's morale drops through boredom, worries over his girlfriend seeing someone else and being demoted after a fire starts at the camp on his watch. He threatens to shoot a fellow Marine, Fergus. Eventually, ground operations begin but as the men patrol the desert they face no combat as the air strikes have burned every vehicle and every person they encounter. When Swoff and his spotter, Troy, are given a mission to assassinate two Iraqi officers they are stopped just before firing the rifle by a superior officer who calls in an air strike. By the time they return to their base camp that night, the war is over and the men are then sent home.

The film overwhelmingly failed to impress the critics. The majority of criticism focused on its lack of depth in its representation of the Gulf War, with Stephen Hunter in *The Washington Post* referring to it as “far more an evocation than a judgement” (Hunter, 2005). Bob Longing of *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution* wrote that while *Jarhead* “has its moments, it never quite attains its loftiest goals. One of its faults is that the film tries too hard. Visual moments are just that – pre-packaged visual moments” (Longing, 2005). Peter Rainer, in a review for *The Christian Science Monitor*, made a similar remark:

Despite all the heavy artistic artillery Mendes has brought to bear, his movie isn't all that far removed conceptually from “Top Gun” – which was also about military men itching for a chance to rock ‘n’ roll. The only difference is, “Top Gun” was unabashedly a popcorn movie while “Jarhead” is a box of unpoped kernels passing itself off as a full meal (Rainer, 2005).

These opinions are in sharp contrast to the views expressed in 1999 when *Three Kings* was released. In 1999 reviews expressed criticism towards the moral reading of the Gulf War in *Three Kings* alongside praise for the slick style of the film, suggesting a desire for the conflict to be represented as an action movie without any detailed analysis, like it was in its original television coverage. Six years later, the criticism of *Jarhead* for its lack of judgement and concept imply American audiences were by then ready to consider the war in more detail and expected more of representations of it.

The film opens with a voiceover spoken by Swofford that communicates to the audience a simple narrative about a man and his rifle who have been to war. The narrative, even at this early stage of the film, denotes the theme of a war's memory enduring for those involved in it and anticipates the emergent depiction of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars' continuing psychological ramifications for the United States:

A story. A man fires a rifle for many years and he goes to war. And afterward, he turns the rifle in at the armoury and he believes he's finished with the rifle. But no matter what else he might do with his hands – love a woman, build a house, change his son's diaper – his hands remember the rifle (*Jarhead*).

If the story states that “his hands remember the rifle” and it follows therefore that the soldier always remembers the war, the strong implication is that the memory of war is extremely difficult to escape. *Jarhead* proceeds to depict how the Vietnam War lingered on in the Gulf and how memories of the Gulf War, like Vietnam, will remain to affect future perceptions of and opinions towards conflict. At the close of the brief narrative the scene cuts straight to the beginning of Swofford's military career at boot camp with no further narrative or visual explanation of its source of knowledge – at this stage it merely suggests to viewers a feature of war that they will be faced with later in the film.

The first scenes of Swofford at the boot camp are instantly reminiscent of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987, Dir. Stanley Kubrick). The homage to Stanley Kubrick's 1987 Vietnam blockbuster not only works to tie this movie to Vietnam from the outset but also, as *Full Metal Jacket* did, to show the transition of young men from their ordinary lives to that of trained soldiers. Sam Mendes has not stopped at merely borrowing elements from the representation of boot camp life from *Full Metal Jacket*, but has actually recreated shots and camera angles from it with considerable accuracy. This should be read as more than a coincidence. The series of wide shots facing down the room as the men line up in front of their beds while their Drill Instructor shouts at them, and close-ups of Drill Instructor Fitch

directly targeting Swoff are almost identical to those in *Full Metal Jacket*, prompting a comparison with the hugely popular Vietnam film to such an extent it almost renders the display a parody in its attempts to align the Gulf War with Vietnam. Furthermore, the scene not only has this visual link to the cultural representation of Vietnam, but also introduces a direct connection to the main character in Swoff's opening dialogue with Drill Instructor Fitch in which the audience is informed of Swoff's father's service in Vietnam. This works to reinforce the visual suggestions of the scene as well as to set the Gulf Conflict to be portrayed as his generation's Vietnam. The lineage from Vietnam to the Gulf in the wider political and historical sense is reinforced by this familial link between the two generations of the Swofford family serving in those respective conflicts. Swoff's story of how he ended up joining the Marines then highlights the causal relationship between the two wars for him as he narrates to the audience his father's trauma, the resultant pressure and consequent stress and depression it placed on his mother, and how this affected his childhood home life. He claims that after failing to get into college the military was his only option and therefore implies that, for him at least, the Gulf War was unavoidable, as Vietnam was for his father.

In addition to Swoff's boot camp experience there are several other borrowed elements from Vietnam War films. Another iconic Vietnam movie moment follows soon after this scene, when Swoff is given his rifle. Having recycled another feature of *Full Metal Jacket* with the "this is my rifle" chant, he narrates through voiceover: "The grunt dies for 15,000 poorly placed rounds. The sniper dies for that one perfect shot." This reference, repeated later in the film, to the "one perfect shot" brings back the fascination of the "one shot" in Michael Cimino's movie *The Deer Hunter*, a film the Marines also gather to watch later. However, the greatest link to a Vietnam War film involves the direct use of Coppola's epic *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola). The Marines are excitedly viewing it in the cinema. When the audience join them they are watching the scene in which Kilgore launches a helicopter attack on a village, accompanied by Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. The men sing along to the music and cheer on the U.S. helicopters. One Marine further cements the link between the men depicted on the screen and the ones in the room by mimicking the soldier tapping his machine gun's magazine on his helmet with his box of sweets. Through such methods *Jarhead's* Vietnam parallel is firmly established.

Having set up the Vietnam connection, *Jarhead* can use it to highlight its main theme that "every war is different, every war is the same" (Swoff in *Jarhead*). To prove the similarities between wars, the psychological deterioration of the troops in the Gulf is



depicted in an attempt to show that Vietnam was not the only war to have its horrors and to prove disturbing to those involved in it. Swofford's deteriorating mental state is portrayed through a surreal dream in which he gets up during the night, rinses his face at the sink and sees his girlfriend reflected back to him in the mirror. He then vomits sand into the sink before waking up choking back in the dormitory room in daylight, surrounded by all the other Marines. On the return journey to camp he acknowledges through voiceover that he is "losing his mind" and that the Army, even after the well-publicised traumas of Vietnam veterans, continues to treat this issue poorly, as was the case during and after Vietnam:

For most problems the Marine is issued a solution. If ill go to sick bay. If wounded call corpsman. If dead report to Graves Registration. If losing his mind, however, no standard solution exists. No. Standard. Solution. Exists (*Jarhead*).

Shortly after this Swofford's mental breakdown is revealed to those around him as he threatens to kill Fergus before turning the gun on himself and demanding that Fergus shoots him. Later his spotter, Troy, is also shown breaking down as their request to take the shot they are in position for is denied in favour of calling in an air strike. This type of mental attitude displayed by the two men as the result of their experiences in the Gulf matches well that described by Jerry Lembcke as being a general feeling apparent in Gulf War veterans:

The Gulf War, like the Vietnam War, was a strange event. Although nominally it was a victory for the United States, it was fought entirely from the air by a small number of elite pilots who inflicted a kill ratio on the Iraqis even more obscene than that visited upon the Vietnamese. Notwithstanding the yellow ribbon hoopla that surrounded their mission, there was little that Gulf veterans could take pride in. As veterans *qua* veterans just what were they supposed to feel? What could they ask their countrymen to feel for them? What identity could they derive from a war that was not really a war? (Lembcke, 1998, p.186).

In addition to such deep psychological effects of war *Jarhead*, like so many Vietnam War films, also draws attention to the negative effects it has on their home life. The Gulf War may have been quicker and had fewer casualties than Vietnam, but the conflict is still shown to have destroyed Swoff's relationship with his girlfriend, and eventually leads to Troy committing suicide upon his return to the United States. This theme shall be returned to and discussed in greater detail later when it reappears as the central theme in the Iraq War film *Home of the Brave* (2006, Dir. Irwin Winkler).

However, one of the strongest Vietnam similarities comes from the depiction of civilian casualties and suffering in *Jarhead*. This has almost become a staple component of the American Vietnam War film as well as a looming shadow in the collective remembrance of Vietnam, but was noticeably absent from the majority of contemporary television footage and photographic material from the Gulf, as shall be discussed in more detail shortly in the analysis of another scene. In a similar way to the first depiction of death and wounding in *Three Kings*, the inclusion in *Jarhead* of burnt-out civilian vehicles and charred bodies, bombed by American planes as they tried to flee the city, and the criticism of it portrays typical Vietnam-movie attitudes and iconography rather than their Gulf War equivalents. In this and other ways, *Jarhead* shows the “Vietnam Syndrome” to be alive and well, and to have haunted proceedings in the Gulf.

As well as the reappearance of the association between dead and wounded bodies and war, *Jarhead* also repeats the theme of media coverage and censorship that featured strongly in *Three Kings*. Though the media as an institution is not personified through a character like Adriana Cruz, the issue of censorship is directly represented and clearly debated as Swoff’s platoon are interviewed for television. The scene begins with overt criticism of the press policy as the men are informed by their Staff Sergeant what they can and cannot say to the interviewer. They can talk about how well-prepared they are and that they are happy to be on the mission, but nothing else. One young Marine questions the Staff Sergeant’s orders and the military’s press policy:

Marine 1: This is censorship!

Staff Sergeant: This is what?

Marine 1: Censorship. You’re telling us what we can and can’t say to the press. That’s un-American.

Marine 2: Yeah, what about freedom of speech, the Constitution?

Staff Sergeant: No, you signed a contract. You don’t have any rights. You got any complaints you complain to Saddam Insane and you see if he gives a fuck.

Marine 1: That’s exactly what Saddam Hussein does. You’re treating us the same way.

Staff Sergeant: You are a Marine. There’s no such thing as speech that is free. You must pay for everything that you say (*Jarhead*).

With this remark the debate over censorship ends but the film cuts to the Marines giving their interviews to the television crew where Swoff and Chris visibly struggle to answer the interviewer's questions in a way that abides by the military rules without compromising their integrity. While Swoff attempts to provide the interviewer with answers, Chris simply sits silent, unable to repeat his Army-issued answers.

The debate over the high levels of censorship and media manipulation is not the only controversial issue that *Jarhead* raises in its retrospective portrayal of the Gulf. In scenes shortly after the Marines' arrival in the desert questions are raised and opinions aired on the motivation behind the Bush administration's decision for military involvement in the region. The first signs of a preoccupation with oil are suggested in Lieutenant Colonel Kazinski's motivational speech to his men in which he informs them that while Saddam has committed some horrific acts against innocent people, they are not allowed by the government to attack the Iraqi Army at this stage but are to protect the wealth of the region's vast oil fields: "Our current mission is to protect the oil fields of our good friends in the Kingdom of Saud until further notice. And gentlemen, I'm talking about a lot of oil. *A lot of oil*" (*Jarhead*). The Lieutenant Colonel's emphasis on the sheer quantity and importance of the oil implies its value to America as a nation and the Bush administration in particular. As in *Three Kings*, oil is cited as one of the greatest factors in the U.S. policy of intervention in the Middle East. However, *Jarhead* develops this criticism a stage further in having one of the American Marines directly accuse the government of waging war over their oil interests, whereas in *Three Kings* the main accusation of this nature came from Troy's torturer and therefore was an Iraqi voice. As the Marines are being transported across the desert their conversation is about the war they are there to fight, when one asks, "for what?" He continues: "I've been around these old white fuckers all my life. They got their fat hands in Arab oil... That's why we're here – to protect their profits" (*Jarhead*). He then goes on to inform his comrades that Saddam acquired his arsenal of weapons from the United States – another criticism levelled by opponents to the war. Yet while these issues are raised in the film, any discussion about or consideration of them is cut short as another of the men interrupts, telling him they're there and nothing else matters to them. It is implied that such matters are beyond the Marines' concern. This allusion to political and critical concerns surrounding the conflict but curtailment of debate of them is a significant element of the film. It conveys a desire to acknowledge the moral failings of the operation yet, as with Vietnam, an inability to confront them in detail. Nonetheless the criticism of the conflict, though brief and restricted, shows a similar kind of public displeasure and moral concerns raised by the war in Vietnam. It is also a key

step in re-forming the desired American collective identity through the cinematic memory of the war. The young soldier who voices criticism is not the only party isolated in the conversation. The “old white fuckers” who are involved in the American oil industry are also marked out as a minority section of American society and therefore not representative of the whole population when the morality of the U.S. Military’s actions are brought into question. Here the memory of the Gulf War conveyed through this film can be seen to follow Cubitt’s (2007) analysis of the formation of a useable group identity, along with my own link to the rejection of past behaviour and preparation for future behaviour. The identification and distancing of the minority for whom the war would have been desirable allows the majority to consider themselves separate from them and have a more positive group identity on which to ground their present and future activities.

The portrayal of death and overt criticism of government policy decisions during the conflict may act to bring the Gulf and Vietnam conflicts together as very similar experiences, however the push to remove the Gulf conflict from Vietnam – to show it as distinct – is also strong in the film. This is a reflection of an attempt within society to escape the shadow of Vietnam despite the desire to remember war and compare other conflicts with it. One scene in *Jarhead* that illustrates this point particularly clearly is when the Marines are working among the burning oil wells. The sound of helicopter blades, very similar to those heard in the opening shots of *Apocalypse Now*, are heard, followed by The Doors’ song *Break on Through*. Swoff complains about the music being played over his scene being Vietnam music, and asks for the men fighting in the Gulf to be given their own music, to escape the claustrophobic legacy of Vietnam. As if to emphasise this trapping of the Gulf War representation in a Vietnam model further, it is not only the soundtrack that alludes to Vietnam in this part of the film. The colours – tones of orange, brown and black – the flames, the mise-en-scene in this scene all have a distinct Vietnam movie appearance, seeming particularly reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now*’s cinematography, and the movie is stating clearly to the audience that the Gulf War should be thought of as different and distinct from Vietnam – that it needs its own music and other such cultural iconography, and that it needs its own memories.

At the end of *Jarhead* there is another clear attempt to convey the sentiment that the Gulf War and Vietnam War are different and distinct conflicts when a Vietnam veteran comes on board the Marines’ bus at their homecoming parade. The welcome home in itself is a marked contrast to what people remember from Vietnam when the defeated troops were not given such support and the myth of the spat-upon veteran was circulated. When the

veteran boards the bus he is visibly emotional and congratulates the men, telling them he's proud of them. If the audience missed any of the previous clues as to the film's claims of a contrast between the Gulf War and the conflict in Vietnam, it would surely be inescapable now.

Yet despite the repeated attempts throughout *Jarhead*, including this last and strongest assertion that this time it really was different, the conclusion to the film brings back into question how far America managed to suppress the "Vietnam Syndrome" with its victory in the Gulf. Swoff ends by concluding that "every war is different, every war is the same" – that while the Gulf War was not Vietnam, there are always similarities in war and how men behave and react under such circumstances. In the closing scene he is back home in America, reminiscing about the lasting effects of being a Marine and serving in combat. He tells us that although he has come home, a man who has been to war like he has "will always remain a Jarhead," continuing, "and all the Jarheads killing and dying, they will always be me. We are still in the desert (*Jarhead*)." This attitude posits that wars do not end when the leaders declare peace. Their memory goes on through to subsequent conflicts. For those who served, as well as the nation back home, the psychological effect of Vietnam continued through the Gulf War – something to which the shaken veteran on the bus is proof.

Even with the Vietnam veteran on the bus, there is a hint that his belief in the slaying of the "Vietnam Syndrome" is ill-founded when he congratulates the Marines, saying they "did it clean." This key phrase should strike the audience as running contrary to some of what they have already seen while in the Gulf with the Marines – burnt-out shells of cars, charred bodies and incidents of friendly fire. All in all, what they witnessed in the Gulf with Swoff did not look as something one would describe "clean" if they had seen it.

The use of the phrase "you did it clean" also conjures up an association with one of the most frequently discussed aspects of the conflict, media censorship. At the close of the Gulf War it would not have been uncommon for people in America to have held the same perception as the veteran, yet, as was discussed in Chapter 9 when considering Gulf War media manipulation, it has since been revealed that the "clean" war executed with "surgical precision" was a myth perpetuated by careful government censorship of images and information in the media.

Writing in 1997, before either *Three Kings* or *Jarhead* had been released, Marita Sturken described the Gulf War narrative that had been established by the Bush administration, the military and the compliant media as having attempted and, more importantly, succeeded in establishing the Gulf War as a “good war,” in the mould of the Second World War:

Attempts to give the Persian Gulf War a neat narrative reinscribing master narratives of World War II – in which the United States liberates a desperate and weak country imperilled by a dangerous tyrant – are intended to chart the lineage of war directly from 1945 to 1991 in order to establish the Vietnam War (and its shadow, the Korean War) as aberrations. The Persian Gulf War will not need to be re-scripted like the Vietnam War; it was expressly manufactured for the screen and a global audience, complete with a premiere date (January 15, 1991) and a cast of familiar characters (the evil, dark tyrant; the fearless newsman; the infallible weaponry). In one sense, the history of the Persian Gulf War was written before it began; it was, like the reinscriptions of Hollywood cinema, a spectacular orchestration of a new ending for the Vietnam War (Sturken, 1997a, p.123).

Sturken, however, was arguably wrong that the Gulf War would “not need to be re-scripted like the Vietnam War” (Sturken, 1997a, p.123). She was overlooking the fluid nature of collective memory and the opportunity for society and culture to amend the representation of the conflict upon the emergence of evidence subsequent to this original narrative being produced and circulated. As was previously explored in Chapters 9 and 10, in the years following the successful military conclusion of the Gulf War, accounts of the devastation, destruction and death inflicted on Iraq by America had a profound effect on the public perception and evaluation of the conflict. The image was further altered by revelations about some of the myths publicised during the conflict – including that of the “media stereotypes of elite republican guards; and the prowess and efficiency of the world’s ‘fourth largest army’” (Walsh, 1995, p.4) who turned out to be “a poorly led force, understandably lacking in morale, and still suffering from the after effects of the long and arduous campaign against Iran; ill equipped conscripts and worn out regular soldiers, most of whom sensibly did not want to die for Saddam’s futile cause” (Walsh, 1995, p.4). Such misleading representations and morally confusing revelations that rekindled associations with Vietnam encouraged the reappearance of Vietnam War film images in the context of the Gulf War film *Jarhead*.

The lack of wideranging visual material from the Gulf War may also be a contributing factor in this tendency to appropriate Vietnam and Vietnam movie motifs in films as *Jarhead* has. In the absence of the quantity and quality of images of combat, destruction and human suffering that flooded the American media from Vietnam, and with fewer

sources of available images, most of which were under strict government control, it seems plausible that filmmakers could have simply recycled the old ones that had already been used to great effect in their previous Vietnam films. Therefore, despite the unprecedented 24-hour coverage of the conflict, this lack of close combat images such as emerged from Vietnam left a distinct void in people's understanding of the war – a void that, in the absence of anything more suitable, it can be argued was filled by the available images from the conflict in Vietnam.

Jenny Kitzinger has also written of the appropriation of images or motifs from the representation of one issue to another in news reporting, using “media templates,” a theory that transfers well to an analysis of the representation of historical events in cinema such as this. Media templates are based on events that have had such an effect on society that they have become permanently associated with that type of issue. In the case of Vietnam it has become a media template for war. Its images and ideology are recycled and repackaged in depicting other conflicts, especially the Gulf War. Kitzinger writes that media templates function as “rhetorical shorthand” and “are instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems, guiding public discussion not only about the past, but also the present and the future” (Kitzinger, 2000, p.61). In *Jarhead* Vietnam serves as rhetorical shorthand for all of the death, destruction, atrocities and injustices, suffering and emotional effects of the war in the Gulf, or indeed any war. In depicting key Vietnam or Vietnam movie images, the audience make the connection and transplant the template into the scenario of the Gulf War, without the director having to make any further explanation to convey his desired effect.

Kitzinger goes on to describe media templates as not only useful as a point of reference to assist in this kind of explanation, but also as “proof of an ongoing problem” and useful “to highlight patterns in particular issues” (Kitzinger, 1997, p.76). Appropriating this theory to the discussion of *Jarhead*, the use of Vietnam as a media template therefore suggests that the conflict was an ongoing issue and that in retrospect a pattern, or at least similarities, had been identified with the Vietnam and Gulf Wars. This certainly suggests the continuation of features of the “Vietnam Syndrome” following the Gulf Conflict.

However, as with the symptoms of the “Vietnam Syndrome” following the Vietnam War, the features discussed in this chapter are symptomatic of a development and extension of the “Vietnam Syndrome” that was not universally experienced by all Americans. Although there was the series of accusations over the reasons for the Gulf War and manner

in which it was conducted discussed previously, many people remained in favour of Bush's policies in the region and considered the war a success with the ingrained images of smart bombs and surgical strikes from the television coverage still forming an integral part of many people's memories of the conflict. As with Vietnam, popular cinema catered to the market of those who experienced a need for meaning (Heller, 2005) – of those who felt effects of a “Vietnam Syndrome” on their nation. Likewise, as media and society have a mutual influence on each other (McQuail, 2005) this portrayal of a war and a nation overshadowed by the legacy of Vietnam could grow and spread even further into the wider societal psyche, even though the texts may not have been viewed and evaluated by all its members (Wertsch, 2002). This cyclical nature of cinema texts is one of the primary features rendering the medium so effective as a cultural tool (Wertsch, 2002) in the creation of a useable past (Bodnar, 1992).

Controversial as the war may have eventually proved and despite the uncovering of a number of its failings and the human cost, there remains a considerable defining difference separating the Persian Gulf Conflict from Vietnam – that this time America celebrated a military victory. One of the primary symptoms of the “Vietnam Syndrome” – a reluctance to engage and fear of failure in foreign military interventions – had been faced and overcome with success. Yet the other symptoms, the deeper psychological wounds described in the review of literature, clearly remain embedded in a large section of American culture. *Jarhead* certainly provides considerable evidence suggesting that cinema has not let go of the war in Vietnam, using it as a base or template with which to portray the experience of the Gulf War beyond what the television cameras reported. Andrew Martin (1993) plausibly argues that in the MTV age Vietnam had rewritten war as melodrama. This would make it perfect as a symbol for war – to be reused in cultural products whenever Americans needed to think of war as difficult and traumatic. As Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh wrote, Vietnam has been “resurrected to serve as all our wars” (Louvre and Walsh, 1988, p.1). The graphic depiction of the conflict in Vietnam had so much more of an imprint on the American imagination than any subsequent military action that it left its stamp on portrayals of these other conflicts.

Certainly, the mark of Vietnam on the film *Jarhead* is not deeply hidden, looming over the entire portrayal of the war and serving as a framework for interpreting it. It would seem that for America every war is different, every war is the same, and every war is Vietnam. Such overt reference to Vietnam in a Gulf War context provides one of the strongest cinematic arguments for the continuing relevance of the Vietnam War in the “Vietnam



Syndrome” beyond the victory in the Gulf War. This is in direct contrast to *Three Kings* which specifically broke away from Vietnam.

The next chapter concludes the Gulf War section of this thesis by bringing together the analysis of *Jarhead* and *Three Kings*. This shall be followed by a brief discussion of the legacy of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars in the early representation of the Iraq War in cinema, prior to the thesis conclusion.

## Chapter 12

### Intermediate Conclusion of the Gulf War on Film

In this second series of chapters two American fictional depictions of the 1991 Gulf Conflict, *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*, were analysed. Before the films were considered, however, the media representation of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars was reviewed in order to understand the differences between the two as a possible source for variations in portrayals of the conflicts. From this review it is possible to establish the developmental process in American war correspondence from the 1960s to the current climate and to identify major differences between the Vietnam and Gulf coverage.

It was established that the American government, inexperienced in managing war correspondence in the early years of mass television broadcasting, allowed considerable freedom to report from Vietnam and the conflict was intensely covered without formal censorship. Upon defeat, government and military officials began looking for someone to blame. The media, in a “dagger-thrust (*Dolchstoss*) myth” (Nohrstedt, 1992, p.118) became the principal target. The lack of evidence to support this accusation was identified by Daniel C. Hallin (1986), who researched Vietnam War coverage, and Jerry Lembcke (1998), who researched American attitudes towards Vietnam veterans, both of whom found little evidence of sustained or strong criticism within the mainstream media. It was concluded that the main manner in which the media could have adversely affected public opinion towards the Vietnam War was through the quantity of images and sustained attention over so many years. Whilst not the deliberate attack on government policy it was accused of being, it is hard to imagine this would generate anything other than negative attitudes.

To ensure there was no repeat of this, American war coverage underwent a complete revolution from the access model of Vietnam to the blackout model employed in Grenada and Panama, and then the press orchestration of the Gulf. Despite the saturation coverage of the Gulf, there was remarkably little content to the reports and nothing that was not sanctioned or generated by the U.S. military. The key points to emerge from a review of the media coverage of the Gulf War were the promotion of the conflict as a moral enterprise and the sanitation of images of war published and broadcast in the United States. The result of this was the vision of a war as the public wanted to see it – surgical bombing, no casualties and a swift conclusion.

The creation of this image is explored as an issue in both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*. It is a continuing theme in *Three Kings* as the character Adriana Cruz represents the misled media in a critique not only of the military censorship of the war but also the media's willingness to cooperate with officials and their failure to successfully pursue other sources. In *Jarhead* the criticism is shorter but more direct and, in the absence of a comically incompetent media character such as Cruz, solely directed at the military. The young men interviewed in *Jarhead* blatantly show their disgust and voice their opinions towards the censorship policy. Both of these films indicate a shift from the clear perception of a clean war to suspicions of media manipulation. While some of the iconic images of smart bombs and surgical strikes may continue to be identified with the conflict, the subsequent emergence of statistics associated with the bombing and the moral confusion surrounding Saddam Hussein's continued reign of power in Iraq, along with disturbing images of civilian suffering, resulted in the appearance of negative public opinion and a Vietnam association. Both films make use of the contemporary television style and imagery, both critique the superficial and incomplete nature of it and both go on to show a very different Gulf War to that portrayed in 1991.

*Three Kings* adopted the visual style of the television coverage and rejected images in the template of Vietnam. In contrast, Vietnam War films played an important role in *Jarhead* which appropriated Vietnam images and movie motifs in the absence of close combat images from the Gulf and as a shorthand representation of attitudes and method of conveying comparisons with Vietnam. This, now part of the social memory cycle, only served to deepen the association and strengthen comparisons.

*Jarhead* was selected for analysis because of its display of overt references to Vietnam and use of Vietnam War films as media templates throughout. As was uncovered in Chapter 11, *Jarhead* in parts resembles the many psychological horror tales of Vietnam with sequences resembling films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Birdy* and *Jacob's Ladder*. The training sequence also bears striking similarities to *Full Metal Jacket* and the general representation of the American soldiers and their camaraderie to close combat films such as *Platoon* and *84 Charlie MoPic*. The film also contains a number of direct references to Vietnam and the repeated comparison of the Gulf War to it throughout. The cinematic definition of the Gulf War within the framework of Vietnam and use of Vietnam images as rhetorical shorthand suggest Vietnam has become an allegory for the "bad war" in the same way the Second World War has become an allegory for the "good war."

While *Three Kings* may have the same direct visual links to Vietnam and the movies the conflict inspired, but strong comparisons in the cinematic treatment of the conflict with that of Vietnam were uncovered. There is a link with *Heaven and Earth* though the introduction of the Iraqi voice. While the representation of the victim status of Vietnamese civilians can be traced back to *Casualties of War* in 1989 and *Go Tell the Spartans* in 1978, it was 1993 with *Heaven and Earth* before a Vietnamese character was given a voice in such a way. Moreover, there is a strong link between the revisionist narrative methods employed in the cinematic illustration of *Three Kings* and those of revisionist Vietnam texts. *Three Kings* can in particular be compared to the Vietnam film *The War* through the fictional narrative that acts as a metaphor and divorces the wars from their original contexts. The analysis of *Three Kings* in Chapter 10 showed this fictional narrative to express almost identical sentiments as that of *The War*. The conclusion of both tales as minor victories for a select group of Americans is an extension and reapplication of the cinematic replaying of the Vietnam War that evolved in the 1980s in a society unwilling to accept the outcome of Vietnam and the guilt that American actions in the region brought. This reflects a post-Gulf strengthening of the “good war” discourse. One of the strongest features to emerge from this analysis of post-Gulf Vietnam and Gulf War films, Americans are repeatedly depicted as fighting with good intentions and for a “noble cause.” This was found to be strongly reflected in the Gulf War texts as well, suggesting the continued importance of the promotion of a positive identity within the cultural sphere of American society and the sustained need to collectively remoralize American foreign military intervention.

The representation of the Gulf War in the conflict’s aftermath appears to have followed a similar pattern to that of Vietnam. In the years immediately following the conclusion of the war there was little cultural representation and even less criticism. Then when the silence broke on the former it sparked the growth of the latter. The criticism of the American conduct in the Gulf War grew to greater levels markedly quicker than in the case of Vietnam. This could have resulted from the precedent of the previous conflict acting to raise critical arguments quicker. As before, the criticism deepened over time with *Jarhead* found to be markedly bolder than *Three Kings* in its negative representation of elements of the conflict. This can be compared to the developments seen in Vietnam films over the three decades following the conflict or, even more obviously, can be identified in the comparison of the *Apocalypse Now* and *Apocalypse Now Redux* films. Criticism in *Jarhead* is not buried in isolation within a certain event or group as much as that in *Three*

*Kings*. Also, verbal as well as visual criticism of issues such as ineffective equipment, friendly fire, civilian casualties and censorship is far more direct.

The examination of Vietnam War films led to the identification of a degree of softening in severity of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in later texts compared to earlier ones, though by no means an eradication of it. The analysis of Gulf War films in the previous three chapters tends to support this. It also supports the argument for a shift in focus away from military defeat and towards concerns over a moral defeat. This concurs with the primary sources analysed in Chapter 2. Both films are symptomatic of a collective depression and disillusionment that followed the initial euphoria of the victory of the war the American public witnessed as the “instant history” broadcast on television. Innocence and morality feature strongly in the post-CNN representation of the Gulf as American society attempted to rectify its self-image as a heroic force for good, as characterised the nation’s portrayal in Vietnam war films a generation ago.

In the next chapter – the final of the film analysis chapters – the research of the previous chapters is contextualised in the analysis of films depicting the 2003 Iraq War. The conflict drew instant and persistent comparisons with Vietnam in the media and as such it relevant that the early films to emerge about it are included in this examination of the legacy of Vietnam expressed in cinema.

## Chapter 13

### The “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Early Iraq War Films

The Iraq War instigated in 2003 by the United States-led coalition against Saddam Hussein is a significant event for this study of the continuing repercussions of Vietnam in American attitudes towards war. Not since Vietnam had a war proved so controversial, sparking a series of protests before it had even begun and eliciting increasing criticism since. This chapter is a brief tour of relevant notable features expressed in Iraq War films and how they relate to the Vietnam and Gulf texts analysed in this research.

One of the most striking points about the Iraq War is the repeated comparisons made between it and Vietnam from the outset and the strengthening of these as the conflict drew on. This featured often more strongly than it did with the previous Gulf War. Ronald Steel provides a bullet-point summary of what he believes to be the parallels between the two conflicts that resulted in such comparisons, highlighting that, like Vietnam, the Iraq War:

- Was one of choice, not of necessity;
- Involved a culture alien to American experience;
- Was directed as much against an ideology as a nation-state;
- Sought the political transformation of another society;
- Alienated old allies and threatened the cohesion of NATO;
- Divided Americans and shattered the domestic consensus on the nation’s global role;
- Strained the American economy and added to its crippling debt; and
- Came to be repudiated by the American public that initially supported it (Steel, 2007, p.155).

Of this list, however, the main comparisons drawn between Vietnam and Iraq concern the public’s increasingly negative attitude towards the conflict. In addition, it would also be tempting to add to Steel’s list the protracted and stalemate nature of the war, one of the prime factors leading to the decrease in public support as time passed.

The case for the Iraq War was founded on claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction, an association between Saddam Hussein and terrorism, and the prospect of liberating the Iraqi people from an oppressive regime. Stephen D. Reese describes how this generated enough support from the public and within the government to instigate the conflict:

The power of this 'war on terrorism' and its associated 'axis of evil' was further illustrated by the fact that the majority of Americans were reported to hold Saddam Hussein responsible for the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, even though no evidence supported such a link. He was also implicitly linked by his inclusion in the 'axis,' against which the war on terrorism was arrayed... this framing cast a preemptive strike national policy into a self-defence context, making it more intuitively palatable to most Americans (Reese, 2004, p.250).

As Reese describes, the war started in a climate of fear, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and confusion about Saddam Hussein's role in them. While there may have been dissenting voices from the start, such a social climate allowed initially for adequate public support to progress with operations. As with the first American war in the Gulf the previous decade, the main criticisms would follow later and contemporary attitudes and the changes in them could once again be captured by fictional cinema.

The first major fictional Iraq War film was *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* (2005, Dir. Sidney J. Furie). It is the fictional story of one day in April 2004 when U.S. casualties were at their highest. The film depicts a group of American soldiers on this day as they struggle to maintain the peace and free prisoners being mistreated at a POW prison. As in the earliest Vietnam film *The Green Berets*, the script for *American Soldiers* is a glowing reference for the U.S. Army that shows its troops to be outstanding men of great bravery and morality, and silences any questions or doubts that the mission may raise.

Reaffirming traditional Hollywood models, *American Soldiers* portrays the troops as noble heroes and re-instates the "good war" ideology in the representation of the latest conflict. For example, the men come across an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and try to detonate it safely but a local boy runs towards it just as it is being detonated. Deke runs out to save him at the risk of his own life, claiming "I got two sisters back home as young as that kid. I don't want my family to get hurt. Don't want no family to get hurt. Ain't what I signed up for." Later there is another humanitarian triumph when the soldiers put their hatred for their enemy aside and rescue a group of insurgents from a prison in which they are beaten and tortured.

The film has barely begun before the relentless insurgents make their first of many appearances, sporadically appearing in pick-up trucks firing guns and mortars at an inexorable rate. One of the American sergeants is injured, an event that begins the weak storyline that carries the unit from one street battle to the next, the enemy appearing at

every corner they turn. *American Soldiers* presents the Iraqis in the mould of the savage, “diabolical Oriental” established in Vietnam War films. They are also portrayed as ungrateful, with one soldier exclaiming: “We’re building schools, hospitals, roads. Seems to me like we’re getting an awful lot of discontent in return.” This also echoes Vietnam War film messages, such as that promoted through *Casualties of War* when Eriksson’s involvement with the local Vietnamese community leads not to the friendship he hopes but rather an attack on his platoon that leaves his friend Brownie dead.

In discussing Vietnam War films earlier it was argued that Reaganite revisionist accounts of the war were characterised by two main claims that were forcefully projected through the medium of popular cinema to allow the United States to reclaim the moral high ground in Vietnam. The first of these was to obscure Vietnamese issues and depict the Vietnamese as cruel or inhuman while raising American troops to prime victim status, therefore vindicating unpleasant American actions in the conflict and assisting the re- portrayal of the conflict as “a legitimate pursuit” (Melling, 1995, p.69). This ideology is very much evident in *American Soldiers*, even at this very early stage in the Iraq War’s cinematic depiction.

The second claim structuring revisionist Vietnam films is also in evidence within *American Soldiers*. This attitude was one of refusal to believe in America’s defeat, in which the responsibility for the outcome of the war was ascribed to a few high-ranking individuals rather than the might of the United States Army or the efforts of its men. It allowed a significant shift in the perspective of Vietnam by allowing Americans “to confront their failure rather than their defeat” (Roper, 1995, p.30). This attitude is largely absent from the body of *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*. However, it is to be found in certain pockets of the film and is communicated through a few key scenes. One such allusion to an accusation of military commanders failing their troops on the ground is the denial of much-needed air support as the insurgent presence outside the hospital increases dramatically, however this could also be read as simply a narrative device to allow the continuation of the ground war plot without the audience continually questioning the lack of military support throughout. Far more obvious than a relocation of responsibility is a simple repeated denial of blame for events, transferred through the redemption of the characters in the film:



Billy: It's all my fault, Sarge.

Sergeant Stalker: Get off it. You did your best. Sarge did his. Shit went down, ok. That's war, Billy. You just gotta re-group and move on  
(*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*).

This device is to feature on more than one occasion in this film. Another utilised in *American Soldiers* contains a new element that has not been carried through from Vietnam. It is an attempt to refer to the controversy surrounding the conflict by blurring the issue and further complicating dialogue surrounding criticism of it by reinforcing a staple myth:

Sergeant Stalker: You kill our boys, we kill yours. Kids are butchering kids, for what? Explain it to me, huh?

Prisoner: It is a holy war. Talk to Allah, not me, crusader. God wants you dead. We were safer under Saddam, that I know. And so do my people. You only brought more terror, not less.

Sergeant Stalker: After 9/11 we gotta take the fight to the enemy, and Saddam was our enemy but why do you have to be our enemy?

Prisoner: Because of my brother's wedding party. Bombed by you, by mistake. Or such was the claim. My brother was no insurgent. No, he believed in you and you killed him. You killed my parents, my cousins, but you missed me and that was your mistake for I will fight you now until my last breath (*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*).

This dialogue not only reaffirms the myth that Saddam Hussein was connected to the September 11th terrorist attacks on America, but provides support for the ideological foundations of the Iraq War through the prisoner's explanation of how he came to be the American soldiers' enemy. The reference to the wedding party bombing is surrounded by the term "mistake" while the insurgent's brother is stated to have been a supporter of the American/British operation and it was not until the death of his brother in the bombing that the man elected to fight in his brother's honour. The implication appears to be that were it not for "mistakes" such as this there would be a much more positive reception in Iraq. Like Vietnam, Iraq is cloaked in myth, and responsibility is re-directed away from those involved. Iraq in *American Soldiers*, like Vietnam, is being subtly re-written in America's favour to provide redemption for this conflict also.

At one point one of the characters does raise a criticism of the U.S. invasion and the reasons for going to war, saying he joined up because of 9/11 and WMDs yet Iraq had nothing to do with either of them. But here Sergeant Stalker silences him and any other

critics: “You ain’t fighting for Iraq, numb nuts. You’re fighting for Romeo and Aitkins and us and these Ohio boys, and Iraq just happens to be the place where we have our sorry asses” (*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*). As films like *Platoon* and *84 Charlie MoPic*, did decades earlier, *American Soldiers* keeps the frame of the picture firmly around ordinary U.S. soldiers and their experiences, attempting to avoid political arguments. There is even an attempt to simplify the reasons for Iraqi discontent at the occupation:

Soldier: Sarge, why the fuck are these guys so pissed off at us, man?

Sergeant Stalker: Just ‘cos we’re here.

Soldier: Yeah, but I don’t get it. We shit-canned Saddam. What, that doesn’t count for nothing?

Sergeant Stalker: How would you feel if they were in Miami, huh?

Soldier: Hey, don’t even go there, man! ‘Cos Miami be a totally different story, alright. These guys would be toast. You fuck with my home town, you’re going down – that’s just the way it is, alright?

Sergeant Stalker: That’s my point, dumb ass. Nobody likes being occupied. It’s like living with your parents (*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*).

To reduce the causes of Iraqi discontent with the occupation to simply a childish reaction to a guiding parental figure further obscures wider political, social and cultural influences on the unrest as well as to deny any American fault in the principle of the invasion – even to put a positive spin on it in the suggestion that they are looking after the best interests of the Iraqis.

The comparison of the Iraqi dissidents to rebelling youngsters is carried forward when the American-led operations are given the support of local authority figures, the Iraqi police. Attempting to escape the abandoned warehouse they have become trapped in by surrounding insurgents, the American troops are suddenly joined by the local police force led by an extremely pro-American officer. His greeting towards the American men makes this clear: “Your enemy are our enemy, my friend... Welcome to the new Iraq, my friend. My home is your home – it is not much but it is ours.” Then to prove his commitment to the American Forces’ objectives, the Iraqi policeman almost immediately makes a dramatic attempt to defend them by wrestling with a suicide bomber, pushing him away from the American vehicle, although unable to prevent him from detonating the bomb a few feet away, killing civilians.

To project an even more positive perception of American forces, and further distance them from any negative press, there is a prominent scene in which the soldiers find themselves at an American prison and interrogation camp for terrorists. Both the soldiers and viewers then witness terrible conditions and torture while being informed that the Geneva Convention does not apply at Camp Zebra as its inmates are classed as terrorists rather than prisoners of war. Tyler voices disapproval, only to be met with the opposing arguments that many Americans may have considered as an immediate reaction:

Soldier 1: So what? If it saves one American life who cares, right?

Soldier 2: Yeah, right. Look at what they did to Sergeant Stalker, man, and the Sarge- never mind what's been happening to us all fuckin' day. Fuck them, man. They deserve it.

Tyler: This ain't about them. It's about us. And that we stand for something. Or we don't. We got a code of uniform military justice that says this type of shit don't fly. We have a duty not to walk away  
(*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*).

The men act together to end the practice at Camp Zebra, locking up the guards and taking the prisoners. Banning, responsible for transporting people to the camp, reinforces the decision to break military regulations in this way: "You're right for doing this... I never liked this place, Jackson, I hope you know that." This direct support is reminiscent of the attitude expressed in *The War* that Steve "did the right thing" in Vietnam, and also the "good war" attitude promoted through other Vietnam films discussed, most notably *We Were Soldiers*. Like *Three Kings*, *American Soldiers* asserts that given the opportunity to act outside of military and government orders, American troops would take the moral route and pursue the right course of action. This is a direct link in cinematic representation of modern conflicts that can be traced from the representation of Vietnam, through the Gulf and to Iraq. The blame for negative aspects of the conflicts is placed firmly with the higher authorities, as in these previous films, allowing Americans to consider the fault of a few and not of their culture, their military or their people as a whole. Though perhaps too early to be making strong anti-war statements, *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* nevertheless in this way continues the cinematic tradition of highlighting negative issues within the war whilst being fiercely supportive of the troops, excusing behaviour through a technique of shifting responsibility and utilising the "war is Hell" template which dominated the Vietnam War film.

*Home of the Brave* (2006, Dir. Irwin Winkler) follows another, probably even more familiar, Vietnam War movie template – the theme of the coming home story. The film follows one veteran who was a doctor in the war as he grieves for the lives he could not save, another who grieves for his best friend, one as he tries to come to terms with post-traumatic stress disorder, and a female veteran who struggles to cope having lost one of her hands in a roadside bomb. As in *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Birdy*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *Jarhead*, and countless others, this movie depicts the psychosis and extreme difficulty in re-adjusting that can be experienced by war veterans. The film opens by introducing Dr Will Marsh in a scene instantly reminiscent of Korean-set, Vietnam-themed War movie *M\*A\*S\*H*, complete with American football, a homemade wooden sign showing distances to places such as “Disney World,” “Salt Lake” and “Hell,” and a dedicated doctor shown treating Iraqi civilians with as much care as American soldiers. Once again there is evidence of the rhetorical shorthand of Kitzinger’s media templates in operation to prime the viewer’s emotions for what is to follow by showing them a well-known point of reference.

Having immediately identified Dr Marsh with his personal humanitarian efforts, the positive portrayal of American action in Iraq continues with the foregrounding of an official unit deployed on a humanitarian mission to send medical supplies and a doctor to an Iraqi community. These demonstrations of American compassion and constructive military action are once again accompanied by the use of the clichéd Vietnam phrase “hearts and minds” and, as in the films discussed previously in this thesis, are included in order to counteract the aggressive or colonialist visions of the United States Army to have emerged from the conflict and resurrect the ideal of the “good war” fought for a “noble cause” that was so often the goal of revisionist accounts of Vietnam. The propaganda continues as a soldier risks his life to save an Iraqi child in a similar fashion to an incident shown in *Three Kings* when the convoy is attacked *en route*. Also, civilian casualties are at least partly excused in this scene as the difficulty of urban warfare is demonstrated when a woman is shot during attempts to secure a building.

There is a broadly pro-military perspective in these opening scenes of the film, therefore. The one significant deviation from this is expressed through the character Richard, who spoke against humanitarian missions, describing them as needlessly placing them in danger. As the convoy is attacked and many are wounded or killed, including Richard himself, he is proved correct. Such an outcome portrayed as the result of attempting humanitarian missions in Iraq sours Americans toward the enterprise and promotes the

view that they are not generally to be afforded high priority and the military not chastised for not pursuing more of them.

It is with this American-centred assessment of Iraq that the viewer is transported back to the focus of the action in *Home of the Brave*, the United States. It is here that the primary criticism the film makes of the war in Iraq is developed from Richard's argument, the perception that the conflict is devastating American lives. Not surprisingly to anyone familiar with the coming home sub-genre of war films, Dr Marsh, tortured by the lives he could not save and injuries he could not treat, experiences a mental breakdown. Another character who fought in the war, named Tommy, also suffers mental problems and finds it so hard to re-adjust he has to re-enlist and go back to Iraq. Another, Vanessa, shows the struggle for those with physical disabilities, having lost a hand in an explosion. In an impromptu speech Marsh then completes the picture by according victim status to all the other American soldiers in Iraq:

... and the boys, who are young and brave and scared, and the Kevlar propped against upside-down M16s with boots next to them. Boys with wives and fiancés and babies and mothers and fathers. Boys who just wanna come home. And they do come home – maimed and haunted and fucked-up, if they come home at all (*Home of the Brave*).

As with *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*, there is a distinct imbalance of sympathy for the Iraqi people in comparison to the relatively small number of Americans involved as, like Vietnam, the war is clearly depicted as a predominantly American experience. It was found with both Vietnam and Gulf War films that there was a tendency for more inclusive and sympathetic portrayals of foreign civilians or the enemy themselves to emerge in later cinematic portrayals. Perhaps in the case of Iraq also there will be an increased inclusion of Iraqi issues in later films, although it should be remembered the reading of such representations in this thesis revealed that while Vietnamese and Iraqi issues were greater in later films, the majority of representations were still American-centred.

There is also little engagement with the wider political context of the war itself in *Home of the Brave*. As with the sympathetic portrayal of the enemy or of foreign civilians, allusions to any wider political criticism of wars, as has been illustrated throughout this thesis, do not often surface in the early waves of films, while the intense sympathy towards the plight of the Americans involved and respect for their noble intentions appears strongly from the outset.

Another feature of *Home of the Brave* that characteristically emerges early in cinema is that of the maimed body. Told here through Vanessa's story of her experiences following the loss of her hand, the film echoes sentiments of *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* in the return of the injured body that can be read as a backlash against cleaned-up media images of conflict. Like these two Gulf War movies, *Home of the Brave* stresses the extent to which the body is mutilated by war:

I amputated six arms and legs in three hours, four soldiers died on the table – all under the age of twenty. I mean I saw all that, and I'll always have that, but there's that moment when you realise you can't help someone and you feel the heartbreak and then the shame because you couldn't do your job (*Home of the Brave*).

This concluding memory of Dr Marsh also neatly summarises the three key motifs of the film for the viewer: the glorified portrayal of individual Americans within the military unit, the narrowing of the portrayal to almost exclusively American concerns and the re-association of the maimed or dead body with the actions of the war. This reproduces key themes communicated through the Vietnam War film.

A more recent and slightly different interpretation of the coming home theme is *Stop-Loss* (2008, Dir. Kimberley Peirce), a film which follows the mental turmoil of a group of soldiers from a small Texas town as they attempt to re-adjust to life after Iraq, including the main character who cannot face returning to the war when he is stop-lossed and ordered to go back. This film makes a token criticism of the U.S. military in stating that 81,000 such troops have been stop-lossed and ordered back to Afghanistan and Iraq against their will, but this is no more than a token criticism and like both *American Soldiers* and *Home of the Brave* it ignores wider issues surrounding the conflict. This failure to fully engage with the topic was one of the main points of criticism made towards *Stop-Loss* in film reviews. Ty Burr wrote in *The Boston Globe* that "Peirce wants to leave us with something heavy to ponder, but I'll be damned if I can figure out what that is" (Burr, 2008). The other main concern about the film, and one of the likely causes for its failure to draw audiences into movie theatres to watch it was the feeling that: "For most viewers (and some critics as well), the prospect of another Iraq movie, like so much else about the war, is likely to be more wearying than galvanizing" (Scott, 2008). This was a stylistic complaint as well as an ideological one:

The first 15 minutes of the film are set in Iraq and shot, as is the fashion, with a shaky, you-are-there digital camera. We see a checkpoint incident lead

inexorably to a back-alley ambush – order devolving into chaos – and the worst part is that the scene feels all too familiar by now (Burr, 2008).

Writing of the coming home sub-genre of films, Ty Burr makes a good argument as he speculates why these Iraq War coming home films fail to generate audiences: “pundits wonder why no one wants to see these movies, and it’s true American audiences don’t have the stomach for bad news (especially when it’s about us), but can’t the films themselves be at fault, too?” (Burr, 2008). Both *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* follow the coming home narrative, with little originality in theme or style of their representation. Using the template of the traumatised Vietnam veteran, the films are able to reflect horror in the Iraq War without having to pay it direct consideration. The veterans of *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* could essentially be of any war. Both films are examples of texts that manage to write Iraq out of the Iraq War.

As with *Home of the Brave*, American concerns are prioritised, even in scenes set in the streets of Iraq. When U.S. soldiers are shot in a street fight there is an abundance of blood and emotive chaos surrounding it yet when the enemy are shot they simply fall down in a noticeably cleaner manner. Civilian casualties are yet again portrayed as an unavoidable necessity in the fight against the axis of evil. In one scene Brandon tells Michelle of an incident that haunts him. When in the building rescuing Steve he was met by an insurgent with a grenade on one hand and a child as a hostage in the other. To prevent the insurgent killing them all Brandon is forced to shoot, killing both the man and child. This incident and his reaction to it is representative of a collective American guilt, as is Brandon’s other source of psychological torment, that, like Dr Marsh in *Home of the Brave*, he failed to do his job in saving those around him. In an argument with Steve about not wanting to return to Iraq he shouts:

You know that box inside your head, that box inside your head where you put all the bad shit you can’t deal with? Well mine’s full and it’s spilling out. Steve it is full of all the people I got killed – Preacher, Randy, Harvey, Thomas... Steve, I didn’t do what I was supposed to do (*Stop-Loss*).

The guilt reflected in *Stop-Loss* is similar to that evident in *The War* and many other Vietnam texts. As in these previous cases, the transfer of wider collective guilt to one well-intentioned individual’s personal circumstances defines the guilt and presents it in a manageable format whereby the actions can be excused as unavoidable and the guilt eased. Other, more distasteful acts on the part of the U.S. military in Iraq are dealt with in a similar yet slightly more complicated manner that continues to echo cinematic accounts of

Vietnam. For example, at a homecoming party when the young men return to Texas after their tour of Iraq Steve advocates dropping a bomb on an Iraqi city every time they take an American soldier's life, while another wants to "send them right back to Bible times." These controversial suggestions are quickly dismissed as unthinkable by locals but, having witnessed some of the unit's experiences in Iraq, the audience is more inclined to put the suggestions into that context and sympathise with them, as viewers were in *Casualties of War* two decades earlier.

In addition to the typical representation of war veterans suffering from flashbacks, severe mental problems, physical disabilities, extreme difficulty in readjusting to civilian life, and even being driven to suicide, *Stop-Loss* makes another distinct reference to a specific well-publicised and highly criticised feature of the conflict in Iraq. On more than one occasion American and British cruelty to prisoners of war hit the headlines. In a similar way to the situations described above, *Stop-Loss* approaches the subject in a manner more sympathetic to the perpetrators. The main character Brandon is shown losing his temper and reverting to Army behaviour when his car is broken into whilst he is offering comfort to the parents of one of his fallen men. He pursues the thieves, disarms them and turns their handgun on them, shouting: "Stay down! OK Haji's, on your knees, hands behind your heads. Now, I said! Do it! Hands. Behind. Your. Head. You havin' fun haji? You havin' fun? ... Y'all better start praying to Allah, son" (*Stop-Loss*). The implication is, yet again, that the exceptional circumstances of war lead otherwise good people into this type of behaviour. While Michelle is able to calm Brandon and prevent him causing any harm in this situation, it is easy to presume that without the influence of her removed perspective bloodshed could have easily occurred as it did in Iraq. Whilst the film does introduce issues specific to the Iraq War, it can easily be identified as presenting them in the template of coming home Vietnam War films, encouraging the two conflicts to be regarded as parallel.

One of the more intriguing features of *Stop-Loss*, however, is a stylistic element. The opening scene is a home movie by one of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq documenting the day they prepare to leave the desert for return to America. This self-documentation is a recurring feature of Iraq War movies and a new development in the war movie genre that was not evident in films depicting previous conflicts. It reflects the varied and fragmentary nature of the documentation and reporting of the war in light of the technological advances of digital recording equipment and the internet. While in most films, including *Stop-Loss*, this is merely a minor deviation from the classical Hollywood narrative of the film,



director Brian de Palma adopted the style as a narrative basis for the entire film in *Redacted*, which shall be examined shortly.

Cinema appears to follow a pattern whereby many early war movies both cover and combat questions with a dose of patriotism and if in doubt avoid them altogether in favour of something they can safely depict, such as the coming home story which portrays the war as an individual experience and an American event and excludes the Iraqis, but *Redacted* (2008, Dir. Brian de Palma) and *Lions for Lambs* (2007, Dir. Robert Redford) have both emerged more recently and begin to show the cracks.

The main storyline in *Lions for Lambs* follows a debate between a Senator and a journalist, while a secondary debate unfolds between a university lecture and his promising but apathetic student. The debate opens as journalist Janine Roth is called to the Senator's office to cover a story, having been specially chosen because of a favourable article she wrote about him for *Time Magazine*. The Senator spends most of the interview defending himself against criticisms surrounding the Iraq War. Going beyond the concerns of the troops on the ground and outwith the frame of most war movies, *Lions for Lambs* takes viewers through the debate as the Senator reveals his new strategy of sending smaller units out in Afghanistan to establish various strategic points in the hills. Throughout the main body of the debate the Senator has a plausible argument in reply to everything Janine says, including her direct comparison to the war in Vietnam when she compares his "new" strategy to that of Abrams in 1968, in stressing that Abrams is history – that Vietnam is history – and answering criticism surrounding the war's morality in saying that evil and terror cannot be allowed to spread. Just as in Vietnam the war was started because Communism could not be allowed to spread. Stating the good intentions of the war was one of the primary features identified throughout this thesis as symptomatic of attempts to alleviate the "Vietnam Syndrome" in Vietnam War movies through a persistent need to communicate that the war was "the right thing" (Lidia in *The War*) thus preserving the good-war discourse. Another Vietnam feature also occurs in the film's analysis of Iraq through the Senator's use of a familiar concept in explaining his nation's apparent defeat: "We have everything we need to break the enemy right now – except the public will to do it." This is yet more evidence of a war being considered a failure at home as opposed to a defeat on the battlefield. The argument is presented with the insistence upon American success in that "we took Iraq" with the emphasis on this specifically being the case "militarily" and the remaining challenge being to win "hearts and minds."

The film also contains strong criticism of the media, beginning before the two principal characters have even been established with the Senator accusing journalists of picking and choosing from the facts to suit their own agenda. The criticism continues later with his prediction that his story will be treated with less importance than the lifestyle and entertainment features that have come to dominate the mass media. He claims the press have “become a windsock... blows with the prevailing breeze” and asks “when did you start confusing majority opinion with the right opinion?” He also presents the press as hypocritical for not owning up, as he does, to their part in promoting errors through what they published as he does:

We made mistakes, colossal mistakes. That should never be forgotten... but six years ago who could have known what to do or when to do it after watching our jets fly into our buildings? Do you remember how petrified we were what our enemies might do for an encore? And how all at once everything was at risk – families, friends, and kindergartens, rivers and bridges, nuclear plants? Do you remember how terror coloured that next morning in shades we’ve never seen before? (*Lions for Lambs*).

In the admission of such mistakes is also an emotional plea to understand them. Though *Lions for Lambs* is different to the Vietnam and Gulf War films examined in that it directly addresses such political issues, it utilises similar methods to aid in excusing or promoting a publicly acceptable understanding of them through reference to the difficult circumstances under which the war was fought. Like *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* it also adds support – although in this instance more subtle – to the association of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq with the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in which Americans were victims. This then leads to the Senator’s argument legitimising the Iraq War, representing a controversial conflict as a just war: “The American people need to understand that it is not only our choice to stop these insurgents but our moral obligation. We simply cannot allow their form of evil and terror to spread” (*Lions for Lambs*).

For much of the film the Senator’s arguments are convincing, not only to Janine Roth, but also to the viewers. In the end, however, Janine exposes the Senator as a liar and strips all his arguments of their credibility, just as Vietnam films criticised those in command and the wars they started. She realised he is only trying to promote his Afghanistan strategy to distract from the wider and deeper problems in Iraq. Ultimately *Lions for Lambs* serves to reflect the fog of war in Iraq and the only message conveyed with absolute clarity is one against apathy in Americans, as expressed through the secondary debate between Professor

Malley, a philosophy lecturer, and his student, Todd Hayes, that break up the main debate surrounding the Senator:

Rome is burning, son! And the problem is not with the people that started this – they’re past irredeemable. The problem is with us, all of us, who do nothing, who just fiddle, who try to manoeuvre around the edges of the flame. And I’ll tell you something, there are people out there, day to day, all over the world, that are fighting to make things better (Professor Malley in *Lions for Lambs*).

Even in the event that this makes no difference, the audience are reminded that “at least you did something” (Professor Malley in *Lions for Lambs*). The film expresses a desire to move away and move on from debates about the immorality of the war in Iraq and step away from issues regarding blame for entering the conflict. The focus is transferred from these wider issues of how wrong it was to have got into the current situation (described as a series of “colossal mistakes”) to it being right to continue to fight in the region and try to improve the situation that has developed. This is reminiscent of the techniques employed in the representation of Vietnam to avoid the wider areas of criticism and focus on the positive aspects. As is usually the case, *Lions for Lambs* follows the pattern of putting the attitude of the ordinary Americans fighting at the forefront of this.

The film rarely deviates from the relentless series of close up shots of the debating pairs. Occasionally, the debates are interspersed with former students of Professor Malley’s who joined the Army to fight in Afghanistan and have been deployed as part of the Senator’s new strategy to operate in smaller units to get closer to the enemy. These scenes, however, are brief and visually unspectacular. Mostly shot in low light, they noticeably lack the choreographed violence, noise and drama of other combat sequences. The domination of conversation over images, the pace of the arguments thrown at the viewer and the blatant infrequency of variation in shots leaves the film appearing less like a creative work and more like an essay. This perhaps is a contributing factor in the film’s lack of critical and box office success. Many critics wrote particularly unfavourably of the script, by Matthew Michael Carnahan, with Alan Smithee writing in *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution* that it was “embarrassingly contrived posturing on “the war on terror” (Smithee, 2007). Michael Phillips wrote in *The Chicago Tribune*:

This one practically exhausts itself nudging the audience to engage, engage, engage. It’s not easy. The dialogue sounds like writing, not talking. The script by Matthew Michael Carnahan tackles every huge issue hammering our country’s sense of self, and sense of direction, beginning with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (the I-word is uttered in the first sentence of dialogue, so

good luck at the box office!) and the media's role in shaping, and selling, that war to a sceptical public (Phillips, 2007a).

This sentiment was echoed by Wesley Morris in *The Boston Globe*:

The politics in Carnahan's script – he's the writer of the "FBI demolishes Saudi Arabia" action-thriller "The Kingdom" – are flung at the screen. Some of them stick. Some of them don't. He's got more beefs – the wars, the politicians who manufacture them, the media's pandering, complacent college kids not out rioting and protesting – than any bun can hold (Morris, 2007).

Moreover, the lack of originality in the arguments only adds to the negative views of the film:

It tells us everything most of us know already, including the fact that politicians lie, journalists flail and youth flounders. Mostly it tells us that Mr. Redford feels really bad about the state of things. Welcome to the club (Dargis, 2007).

Manohla Dargis here, in her review for *The New York Times*, raises another issue why *Lions For Lambs* may have proved so unpopular – that the public felt bad about the situation surrounding the war in Iraq, the false pretext, the media coverage, and the attitudes displayed by Americans both at home and on the battlefield, and about the American Military's inability to bring the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq to swifter and more successful conclusions. The reluctance of Americans to engage with the topic of America's wars in the Middle East could be based on the fact the conflicts were ongoing and unresolved at the time, as Wesley Morris explains:

When the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan started, I was naively eager that Hollywood would find ways to dramatize the conflicts' political complexities and personal toll. We're probably too close to get any real artistic perspective. The great movies about Vietnam either were not about the war or were made once it was over (Morris, 2007).

Aside from making a notable comparison of modern war films to those depicting Vietnam, suggesting their use as templates for all war films since, Morris raises the important issue of perspective. The Iraq War films to date have failed to make strong visual, political or ideological statements as there has not been time for reflection at a distance from the conflicts. *Lions for Lambs* is full of ambiguity, and all of the other Iraq War films omit or evade political engagement.

*The Hurt Locker* (2008, Dir. Kathryn Bigelow), most distinctly of all the films, draws the perspective of the film in so close that the bomb-disposal team become the sole feature, even at the expense of a plot. Aside from *The Hurt Locker*, the others all make references to Vietnam, either directly in dialogue or through theme, style or attitude.

*The Hurt Locker* is a series of normal episodes in the daily lives of a bomb disposal squad in Iraq, thinly held together with the storyline of the psychological torment of the team's latest member, Sergeant William James. James is tortured by thoughts of his morality and constantly convinced he is about to die. Surprisingly, this actually leads him to take greater risks in his job as he employs unofficial and suicidal methods of defusing the explosives. He is a highly successful bomb disposal expert, but in a brief sequence set in the United States it becomes apparent that he cannot function in ordinary life back home, and in the end feels compelled to request to be sent back for another tour of duty.

The film was written by Mark Boal, a journalist embedded in Iraq with an Explosive Ordnance Disposal squad and the film is not a comment on the war, but a pseudo-documentary about bomb disposal squads compiled from Boal's experiences with a team. It "depicts men who risk their lives every day on the streets of Baghdad and in the desert beyond, and are too stressed out, too busy, too preoccupied with the details of survival to reflect on larger questions about what they are doing there" (Scott, 2009). *The Hurt Locker* is predominantly filmed in close shots, often with low shots taken entirely from ground level or that start from the feet of characters and work slowly up to their hands and faces. Both of these features combine to emphasise the scale of the operation at hand and to exclude the wider context of the conflict which serves only as a backdrop for the film's action. Even when the camera does show a wide shot the focus remains either with a character from the team in showing a viewpoint of them from another perspective, or showing the situation from the point of view of one of them. The viewer is trapped in their immediate vicinity and their immediate situation.

*The Hurt Locker*, unlike the other films discussed in this chapter, was hugely successful. It was critically acclaimed for its verisimilitude, described by A. O. Scott in *The New York Times* as "the best nondocumentary American feature made yet about the war in Iraq" (Scott, 2009), and earned six Academy Awards. This is arguably because of the film's lack of politics, an argument which supports the argument made in this chapter that it is perhaps too soon to engage in ideology surrounding the Iraq War. Even James' psychological descent lacks the negative imagery of that suffered by Vietnam veteran films

and of Swoff in *Jarhead*. There are two brief scenes communicating his mental problems. In one he leads his team on a renegade mission to chase the insurgents he says are laughing at him. The scene is an interplay of light and shadow, and orange flames reminiscent of the imagery of *Apocalypse Now* that was also utilised in *Jarhead* at the burning oil fields. In the other, immediately following this, James is seen crying in the shower. However, the film does not depict any painful deterioration of his relationship with his family. It simply shows him explaining to his baby that his only love is for his job. There is no scene that shows him explaining this to his wife, nor is there any scene depicting the effect of this on her. The film remains as close as ever to James, excluding even these outside considerations. The portrayal of his psychological condition itself is not particularly disturbing either, as Peter Rainer notes:

Bigelow doesn't push it. James is not a "dark" character. There is nothing specific to Iraq about his deathly fixations. We never really hear him (or the other soldiers, for that matter) talk politics. What Bigelow is saying is that, ultimately, all wars, regardless of the reasons they are fought, boil down to one mantra – survive (Rainer, 2009).

*The Hurt Locker* makes no direct references to the Vietnam War, but, as Rainer explains in the above quote, neither does it make any direct references to the Iraq War. The film not only avoids difficult issues surrounding the war in Iraq, it avoids the war altogether, suggesting it is too difficult and too controversial to confront, as Vietnam was in the mid-1970s.

The final Iraq War film, *Redacted*, more strongly identifies the Iraq War in the template of Vietnam than the others; in fact, in this case the exact template of the Vietnam film *Casualties of War*, in which events surrounding the rape of a teenage Vietnamese girl are depicted. In *Redacted* the same events surrounding the rape of a teenage Iraqi girl are portrayed with a strikingly similar attitude. This is not surprising given *Redacted* was written and directed by Brian de Palma, who directed *Casualties of War* two decades earlier. Nevertheless, the resurfacing of such a hugely controversial and critical issue faces head-on the "Vietnam-cum-Gulf-cum-Iraq Syndrome" that now seems inescapable in American culture. The accompanying disclaimer that unsavoury acts, while they certainly occurred and were considered deplorable, were perpetrated by a minority of U.S. troops under extreme circumstances, only enhances the connection. The "Vietnam Syndrome's" representation still bears the distinctive scars of the conflict in which it was born.

*Redacted*, with the exception of a series of controversial real still photographs of Iraqis abused by American soldiers at the end, is a series of fictional scenes that together communicate a story of civilian rape and murder at the hands of U.S. Army troops. The first half of the film depicts various episodes that show soldiers at checkpoints, or on patrol duty and disastrous circumstances that can arise on these regular duties, such as the shooting of a pregnant woman at a checkpoint and the killing of a U.S. soldier by an improvised explosive device as he moves some rubbish from the road. The combination of the series of unfortunate episodes are portrayed as leading to the decline in morale of the men who plot and execute the rape of an Iraqi teenager they saw in an earlier house raid. One of the soldiers attaches a night-vision camera to his helmet and films the incident, the footage of which is posted on the internet and the U.S. Army is forced to take action against the men responsible.

As was mentioned earlier, a recurring stylistic feature introduced in the Iraq War movie forms the narrative basis for *Redacted*. A development from the style of *84 Charlie MoPic* in which the film was presented as the footage of a war journalist embedded with a platoon, this film also employs the self-reflexive camera model, but in a more fragmentary way. The deviation from the traditional Hollywood narrative single perspective to a fusion of scenes and film clips from many sources – fictional CCTV footage, documentary-style film, internet postings, and home movies captured by the characters on their camcorders – has several effects. Firstly, it places the conflict within the contemporary media and 24-hour surveillance culture. It also distances it more from other war films, particularly those about Vietnam, the conflict Iraq was often most closely compared to. Arguably more importantly, it adds verisimilitude to the representation. The events are depicted from the perspective of cameras. This encourages viewers to believe they are witnessing unmanipulated and unbiased truth first-hand, irrespective of issues of time, distance and perspective. In a society distrustful of government and media portrayals of events, this offers people the impression of distance from official sources in order that they more readily accept the perspective being offered by the film. This is crucial in a work attempting to neutralise a highly negative story by portraying it as a regrettable but understandable feature of war. The film's multi-viewpoint narrative style appealed to film critics such as A. O. Scott at *The New York Times* who wrote “Redacted takes us on a tour not only of the battlefield, but also of the modern media environment, where no moment goes unrecorded and where everyone is, at least potentially, a filmmaker” (Scott, 2007), and *The Boston Globe*'s Ty Burr:

Structurally this is pretty smart – not as original as De Palma thinks it is, but still a way to show how truth can get lost amid a barrage of viewpoints, and how it sorely needs to be sifted out again. Unfortunately, the content filling that structure is junk (Burr, 2007a).

Burr also made reference to the content the film fulfilling de Palma's penchant for depicting violent and controversial stories, describing it as "a crude, unbearably smug attempt to provoke outrage from a filmmaker desperate to be relevant again" (Burr, 2007a). *Redacted* is not only similar to *Casualties of War*. Brian de Palma also directed *Blow Out* (1981, Dir. Brian de Palma) in which a murder is caught on tape, as well as the violent *Scarface* (1983, Dir. Brian de Palma) and *The Untouchables* (1987, Dir. Brian de Palma). Asked in an interview with Robert K. Elder about the similarities between his projects, in particular *Casualties of War* and *Blow Out*, de Palma explains why he thinks *Redacted* is relevant:

Everybody says: "Here we are, Vietnam all over again." Well, I, who lived through Vietnam, am the same age of the architects who created the invasion of Iraq. I'm very aware of the fact that we're repeating the same things we did before. So it makes a tremendous amount of sense to me (de Palma interviewed in Elder, 2007).

*Redacted* opens by introducing Private Angel Salazar and his camcorder as he films the start of his documentary titled "Tell Me No Lies." Salazar's footage is to become one of the central sources of the film and he strongly insists that he will be showing "the truth" and that "this camera never lies." Having introduced Salazar the film depicts its first incident through a fictional French documentary. This allows de Palma to portray controversial American action from the perspective of a neutral third party that is not directly involved.

The main scene depicted through this French short involves a car attempting to speed through a checkpoint and the shooting of Iraqi civilians by United States Army troops. The narration details their attempts to stop the vehicle with hand signals and warning shots, and clearly states that the soldiers' intent is to stop the "potential threat" from causing any casualties: "Your intent: Stop the potential threat from coming any closer and blowing you up, your unit, or the entire checkpoint" (*Redacted*). As the car is shot at in a hail of machine-gun fire the camera hits the ground. The narrator reads: "Over a 24-month period U.S. troops killed 2,000 Iraqis at checkpoints. 60 were confirmed insurgents. No U.S. soldiers were charged in any of these incidents" (*Redacted*). The film then cuts back to the aftermath of the shooting. A young child and a heavily pregnant woman, both



unconscious, are carried out of the car and rushed away in a pickup truck. The camera shows bullet holes in the windscreen before panning down to a pool of blood on the ground. *Redacted* then cuts to footage from a different source – an Arabic news programme. It picks up the story from the woman arriving at the hospital. The presenter interviews the woman’s brother who says he was taking her to hospital and the U.S. troops waved them through then shot at them. Finally, the film cuts back to Salazer’s unit to reflect the opinions of ordinary American soldiers about the incident. While one man challenges the killing of the pregnant woman another defends the soldier who opened fire as doing his job. This contrast in perspectives provides a background explanation to a horrific incident that would not be conveyed through news reports alone. Simply from considering the broadcast footage the American forces could easily be evaluated as at fault, having acted wrongly or in error. With the presentation of the other sources, however, a different reading is possible and the incident can be considered a misunderstanding in communication. Having provided a plausible explanation for this, *Redacted* paves the way for explanations for other negative stories to emerge from the conflict to be considered.

The film then moves on to depict its main storyline. The audience is further primed to accept the explanation offered as this story begins with an American soldier being blown up by an improvised explosive device. Afterwards, footage from Security Camera 23 reveals the characters’ thoughts about losing their comrade and wanting to wipe out the entire country leaving nothing but scorched earth. Already it has become a mirror image of *Casualties of War* in which Brownie was killed and his comrades talk of burning the Vietnamese village to the ground. The similarity only strengthens when it is suggested that the soldiers go back for a fifteen year-old girl at a house they raided, describing her as a “spoil of war.” Salazer fits a small camera to his helmet to document what is to happen. A small group of soldiers enter the building, take hostages, rape the girl and kill others. Initial attempts by the U.S. military to cover up the true nature of the incident fail when one of the unit who refused to participate in the rape posts an anonymous video online exposing the crime and starting a trial, the videos of which end the film. The two men who led the rape plan are shown trying and failing to defend their actions and the U.S military depicted as trying to cover it up. Through the exposure of these men American audiences can be reassured that these are the exception. In exactly the same way as *Casualties of War*, and following the pattern of other Vietnam War films and later the Gulf War films, *Redacted* addresses American guilt for acts carried out in the conflict but turns the focus of the film towards providing reasons for them as well as isolating agents to blame for them. De Palma’s Vietnam allegory is undeniably present in *Redacted*, it opposes the trend of the

other Iraq War film of the time to avoid such controversial issues while the conflict still continued. *Redacted*'s commercial failure should not be surprising. Such a negative portrayal of American soldiers while they were still risking and losing their lives was always going to provoke disgust, perhaps more so at the filmmakers than the depicted perpetrators, irrespective of the list of excuses made for their actions. *Redacted*'s storyline and its Vietnam allegory was perhaps brought to cinema screens some years too early.

Although it is too early to chart the development of the Iraq War film or of any "Syndrome" that can be associated with the cinematic representation of the conflict, the films discussed in this chapter already exhibit signs of moulding the collective memory of the war. There are also clear signals that the "Vietnam Syndrome" has carried through to Iraq in the strength of the need to address the negative issues surrounding it. There is evidence of denial and efforts to expunge guilt or blame associated with the American-led operation, and already early signs of remythologizing events surrounding the conflict, particularly through the closer equation of Iraq and the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.

This chapter has exposed undeniable similarities in the way in which these early films are trying to represent the Iraq War – both with Vietnam and Gulf War films as well as with each other. There is a particular move to reframe the conflict as moral and just, or at least to re-frame American intentions in it as moral and just. This can only aid the argument of a prolonged "Vietnam Syndrome" – evidenced in a cinema striving to counteract negative attitudes towards American foreign military intervention, damaged national self-image and the trauma of defeat, or, in this case, a seeming inability to win. It is possible that given the resilience of this "Vietnam Syndrome" in American culture it has itself become a part (albeit unwanted) of the national identity and the denial of it or counter-argument against it now part of the genre of post-Vietnam War films.

One major difference between the representation of Vietnam in film and that of Iraq is that the Iraq War films began to emerge while the conflict was still being fought. In the case of both Vietnam and the Gulf there was very little cinematic attention to the conflict while the guns were still firing. The abundance of films available at this early date indicates a culture eager to forget Iraq before they have fully been given the opportunity to regret it and seeking a solution to the "Vietnam Syndrome" with this conflict before it has reached its peak. Given that these Iraq War films are examples of rewriting whilst fighting still continues, it will be necessary to examine texts of the post-Iraq War era to gain a better understanding of its representation, therefore it will be some time before a thorough

analysis of the conflict in film can be attempted. In the future, however, the Iraq War films produced should provide a means by which greater evidence of the development process of a “Vietnam Syndrome” in American culture can unearthed.

In the next, and final chapter, the Iraq War films discussed in this chapter shall be placed alongside the Vietnam War films and Gulf War films analysed in this research project to reach final conclusions regarding collective American attitudes towards conflicts and to debate the existence and condition of a post-Gulf War “Vietnam Syndrome.”

## Thesis Conclusion

The selection of films analysed in this thesis cover three decades following the conclusion of the Vietnam War. During this time American attitudes towards the conflict and more generally towards American foreign military involvement repeatedly shifted, affected by the passage of time and various contemporary events. One of the most significant events to have had an effect was the Gulf War of 1991, proclaimed a resounding victory and declared by President George Bush to be the antidote to the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Reading films depicting the Vietnam and Gulf Wars produced in the years following 1991, and through the use of collective memory theory to explain how the attitudes expressed in films are reflective of those held in society, this thesis has examined collective attitudes expressed through cinema to identify the changes in these attitudes and how the “Vietnam Syndrome” has been reflected in the post-Gulf years. This thesis argues that the “Vietnam Syndrome” has only ever been temporarily displaced by subsequent events and that it continues to be an ingrained, though unwanted and contested, feature of the collective American psyche in current times. The aim of this thesis has been to analyse the concept of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in post-Gulf War American society to and study the variation in approaches to the depiction of post-Gulf War attitudes, in particular with reference to the “Vietnam Syndrome,” in films.

The use of collective memory theory in this thesis was considered the best method by which such attitudes could be extrapolated from films and analysed. This was due to collective memory’s characteristic construction and reconstruction of memories which produces a cultural reflection of that society. From multiple sources, sometimes mutually-supportive and sometimes contradictory, memories are shaped and formed over time and information and images are absorbed. Cinema is one of these sources. It is particularly important as films are more retrospective than many other cultural sources, continuing to depict issues long after the newspaper or television interest has receded. They are also widely distributed throughout American society. Cinema is made by groups of creative people who are trying to communicate stories that members of their society will relate to, be this for artistic or economic purposes. They are specifically catering to a market of those who experience a need for meaning (Heller, 2006) and who crave the repetition of images of an event in order for the meaning to be absorbed into that society’s culture. As was discussed in detail in Chapter 1, Halbwachs (1992) claims memories have to be within the bounds of certain commonly held frameworks in order to survive within a group and that without the support of such frameworks would not be sustained and would disappear

from collective memory. This links closely to the work of Marita Sturken who identifies a culture of amnesia (Sturken, 1997) and Samuel Hynes (1999) who suggests that the survival of some memories and death of others is based on a need to conform to a myth. Michael Scudson, too, offers a description of the process by which a standard version of a collective memory is produced through the repetition and integration of an accepted story. In this way a number of collective memory theories come together to offer an explanation for similar memories of social events that are held by a number of people within a society and to offer cultural products such as films as a reflection of this collective memory.

Cinematic evidence examined over the course of this thesis concurred with the multi-sourced premise of collective memory theory of complementary or contested sources on which the thesis was based, as opposed to theories of memory having being produced solely or predominantly under the involvement of a dominant ideology. It was through the medium of cinema that themes of the “Vietnam Syndrome” were repeatedly raised. This shows collective memory theory to have been a viable method of reading the selected films to discover attitudes among the general public.

The theories concerning frameworks and the acceptance or disappearance of collective memories have proved especially relevant to war films concerning Vietnam. As the film analysis in the previous chapters has shown, the Vietnam War was constantly revised and mythologised over the decades in American fictional cinema following that conflict’s unsuccessful conclusion for the United States.

The theoretical limitations of the study were clear from the outset and ought to be referred to here. A single, unified narrative on the later perception of the Vietnam War would not be derived from a reading through a multi-sourced collective memory theory. The American nation does not remember in complete unison. In a cacophony of voices and a perpetual cycle of recycling the products of collective memory in which cultural products fulfil their dual purpose of reflecting and moulding society (McQuail, 2005), it becomes almost impossible to track down a definitive narrative and a definitive source. Yet, as was stressed in Chapter 1, this is in itself a benefit of the collective memory approach. The research undertaken has identified key attitudes and perceptions that have a strength of support within American society for them to be represented in mainstream cinema, in many cases to feature repeatedly in different productions and in films about different conflicts. The further circulation of key ideas and tropes in turn presents the representation to ever-greater audiences whose values and desires they may also affirm and the attitudes

can be strengthened in this way. As has been shown in the texts examined, cinema does not always represent conflicts from positions advantageous to political or financial power, instead following the economics of the industry and supporting popular views, indicating that in a free society memory cannot easily be controlled completely – that groups will retain the memories of events to have affected them.

Research into references to the “Vietnam Syndrome” in press and academic analysis from its emergence in the wake of the Vietnam War to the current day in Chapter 2 informed the definition of the “Vietnam Syndrome” as a flexible and altering national psychological issue that was characterised in its earlier days as a simple aversion to military engagement, but that rapidly grew to include collective feelings of shame, guilt and a desire to rewrite history. Thorough analysis of the articles and reports identified the use of Vietnam as a frame of reference for subsequent conflicts and argues Vietnam’s continuing relevance to American foreign policy and national self-image, irrespective of the outcome of other conflicts. It also argues that experiences in other conflicts are incorporated into the “Syndrome” and that the “Vietnam Syndrome” is actually a compound of issues from Vietnam and conflicts since. This chapter also argued the “Vietnam Syndrome” is an increasingly media-constructed and media-sustained concept through the circulation of images and references through the mass media and various cultural texts.

The fictional American war films analysed conveyed much information through their narratives of conflict to inform a study of attitudes and beliefs surrounding military operations and specifically referring to Vietnam. As the primary aim of the research was to examine the post-Gulf War “Vietnam Syndrome,” the main features to be discussed in these later texts were readily identifiable in the earlier post-Vietnam films. As discussed in Chapter 3, these were: 1) A reluctance to engage in or support foreign military intervention; 2) Use of the “good war” discourse and reference to America or Americans fighting for a “noble cause;” 3) Evidence of a collective national trauma of defeat; 4) Expressions of guilt for the consequences of American actions and failings of policy; 5) Attempts to restore the national self-image.

All of these were identified across the range of films. An anti-war attitude is widespread among them. It is first, and most obviously, identifiable in the “war is hell” theme of the psychological horror representations of Vietnam that first emerged in the initial wave of Vietnam War films in the late 1970s and continued throughout the decades of the genre. These included *Taxi Driver*, *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Birdy*,

*Jacob's Ladder* and *Apocalypse Now Redux*. The ideology also continues through a number of other Vietnam films through the representation of the characters' experiences in combat, for example *Platoon*, *Go Tell The Spartans*, *84 Charlie MoPic* and *Heaven and Earth*, or afterwards as in *First Blood*, *Born on The Fourth of July* and *The War*.

The two Gulf War films included in this thesis, *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*, also exhibit anti-war attitudes in their depictions of the effects of the American operations on the Iraqi people and on the soldiers around them. By the time *Jarhead* was produced, more than a decade after the war, the "war is hell" theme of the 1970s Vietnam films a generation before had even been resurrected with reference to the Gulf.

More closely compared to the Vietnam War due to the controversy surrounding it and the increasing length of time American forces were involved, the Iraq War took anti-war sentiments to greater levels than the Gulf War, with its swift conclusion, ever did. The Iraq War films carried a notably more political approach. While *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* promote the general anti-war messages of the destruction caused by the conflict and the lack of benefits of it, many of the Iraq War films produced to date touch upon the ethics of the individual conflict itself. Through exceptionally supportive of American efforts on the ground, *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* nevertheless questions the purpose of the war itself as one soldier asks why they are fighting the war when Iraq had not been involved the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and the expected stocks of weapons of mass destruction had not been uncovered. The issue may not be developed further than this simple enquiry buried in the intense pro-American ideology but its presence is certainly notable in such an early Iraq War film, released only in 2005 amid raw feelings surrounding the continuing military action.

Only two years later *Lions For Lambs* took the war almost completely off the battlefield and into the politician's office, although its display of anti-war sentiments, while certainly identifiable, are shrouded in a confusing debate and presented alongside pro-war arguments. Leading the viewer through a maze of questions and answers throughout conversation between Janine Roth and the Senator, the film leads to no firm conclusions. Plausible arguments and valid criticisms are made on both the pro- and anti-war sides – the Senator argues for the necessity of stopping terrorism and stresses the validity of the military action while Janine pursues the truth behind the story and exposes the ulterior motives of the politician. While a brave introduction to the issues the film ultimately fails

to make the strength of criticism it had suggested there would be, but nevertheless contains some of the anti-war element being discussed here.

Meanwhile in the same flurry of early Iraq War film releases *Home of the Brave* and *Stop Loss* further exemplified the psychological drama of the returning veteran. These films follow perfectly the established templates of those created in the aftermath of Vietnam, although taking care to be fully supportive of Americans serving in the conflict, while depicting the grim effects such actions cause and evaluating the benefits of the operations against the human cost. *Home of the Brave* stresses the overwhelming number of casualties that the war generated as well as the lack of any real change.

The second of the indications of the “Vietnam Syndrome” identified in the films, the “good war” discourse, is another strong feature displayed in many films across the years. The promotion of the noble intentions behind the Vietnam War began with the first film to directly portray the conflict, *The Green Berets*, and continued right through to the post-Gulf representations. *The Green Berets’* depiction of the American troops fighting for the freedom of the appreciative South Vietnamese people may obviously differ from the conventions of the decades of films to follow it in the sense that it is thoroughly pro-war but it sets the continually re-emerging standard of portraying the conflict as a fundamentally laudable venture and the men fighting in it as heroic soldiers. The trend was continued with ardour in the “Missing in Action” sub-genre of films that were hugely popular in the 1980s, as well as many of the returning veteran films and the realist films that focused on the character depictions of typical grunts on the battlefield.

The failure of the Vietnam operation was attributed to various factors from the military command or political policy to a lack of support in Vietnam or a lack of support back home. Even anti-war films tend to maintain a positive portrayal of the intentions behind America’s actions in Vietnam, or at the very least of the average American serving there. *The War*, for example, depicts the madness and the negative aspects of the war. The children are shown to hurt each other and themselves as well as destroying everything they had been fighting for, displaying the futility of their conflict, running parallel to Steve’s descriptions of his time in Vietnam that lead to his strict anti-war views. Yet alongside this is also the assertion that the war in Vietnam was intended by those who fought in it as a mission to assist the South Vietnamese whose independence was being threatened by the Communist North Vietnam. It is also expressed through the metaphor of Stu and Lidia’s



fight for the tree house that the war was entered into only as a last resort and that it simply got out of control.

The greatest post-Gulf War reassertion of the “good war” discourse in a Vietnam War film, however, was found in *We Were Soldiers*. Reminiscent of *The Green Berets*, the film reasserts the purpose of the war in Vietnam was to protect people. This is done clearly in the church conversation between Hal and one of his young men and in the dialogue between Hal and his daughter when he explains his role as a soldier simply as being to stop people who try to take the lives of other people. Further evidence of the “good war” discourse is presented through the bravery of the soldiers on the battlefield.

When it came to the reflection of the Gulf War in cinema a similar version of the “good war” discourse was expressed in both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* through reference to the moral underpinning of the conflict and the upstanding nature of the men who fought in it. By the time the Iraq War film *American Solders: A Day in Iraq* was made the tone had been firmly set. Once again a morally debatable military venture was repackaged as a war of good intentions with the rescuing of an Iraqi child from an improvised explosive device and the removal of insurgents from a prison in which they were tortured. In *Lions for Lambs*, the Senator excuses the conflict on a political level as the product of fear, claiming “who could have known what to do or when to do it after watching our jets fly into our buildings?” *Lions for Lambs*’ greatest criticism is against apathy, stating that the war, however bad it might be, is better than doing nothing and letting Rome burn. The promotion of conflicts as morally virtuous acts in response to controversy has therefore been identified as a feature running through Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq War representations and across the years.

The third feature of the early Vietnam War films analysed was evidence of the trauma of defeat, one of the earliest identifiable aspects of the “Vietnam Syndrome” following the conclusion of the conflict. It was also found to have strength of presence in post-Gulf films, not just the earlier cinematic offerings. The most obvious representation of this was through the trauma of the individual. The trauma of the Vietnam veteran, such as Steve in *Heaven and Earth* and Stephen in *The War*, is a direct representation of the national trauma through a single character. The trauma is also manifest in the act of replaying the war, often with the result of a degree of success this time around. Again, this is most strongly displayed in *The War*.

Another approach to the trauma of defeat was applied in *We Were Soldiers*, which, upon analysis, was both a transportation back to the time before the defeat and an attempted explanation for it in the depiction of a conflict that turned out to be so greatly different from the ones before it that no one really knew how to fight it.

These themes are an extension of those observed in the psychological dramas from *Apocalypse Now* to *Jacob's Ladder*, and the revisionist films, most notably the *Rambo* series. Displaying the trauma of the Vietnam War they are a method by which society can attempt to provide an acceptable understanding of the undesirable outcome of the conflict and try to achieve catharsis for it. The fact that Vietnam War films tend to be presented from an American perspective reinforces the consideration of the war as an American-centred traumatic experience. As has been argued throughout this thesis, the continued representation of this trauma indicates that understanding and catharsis have not yet been achieved. This suggests that Vietnam remains an unresolved issue within the American collective consciousness, and one that requires further cultural definition to fit agreeably within the nation's group identity.

The Gulf and Iraq War films also depicted certain levels of trauma. With those portraying the earlier Gulf War this was largely confined to the mental state of the troops fighting or who had fought in the conflict, as displayed most strongly in *Jarhead*. This is largely to be expected as the Gulf War, unlike Vietnam, was declared a military victory.

The fighting in the Iraq War raged on far longer, even after the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, and American lives continued to be lost. The trauma of the ongoing conflict is represented in *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* through the scarcely believable relentless attacks, highlighting the near-impossible conditions faced by American troops and explaining why the mission had not resulted in the clearly defined and swiftly executed victory Americans might have been looking for. *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* provide the traditional accounts of individual traumas in Iraq. *Lions for Lambs*, however, makes the firmest statement of a denial of defeat in any of the early Iraq War films when the Senator directly states that America "took Iraq... militarily" (*Lions for Lambs*) and the current battle was only for "hearts and minds" (*Lions for Lambs*).

The fourth indication found in the films was the expression of guilt for American actions and failings of policy. Relating to the "good war" discourse and the expression of trauma of defeat, this aspect also tends to be shrouded in explanations – the sign of movements

within a society towards attempting to reconcile the behaviour and forgive itself. This guilt was expressed in the vast majority of Vietnam War films and remains intense in the all of the post-Gulf War representations involved in this research. *Heaven and Earth* depicts cruel acts being committed by American soldiers against South Vietnamese civilians. The United States military is seen to preside over Le Ly's interrogation and torture and her husband Steve suffers terrible psychological torment over what he has seen and done. *The War* conveys guilt even more strongly. Stephen's torment is predominantly based on guilt, and the metaphor of the children fighting over the tree house is used as a metaphor for excusing collective American guilt over acts in Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now Redux* excuses them in a similar manner by reflecting the madness and otherworldliness of the war. *We Were Soldiers*, on the other hand, attempts to convey the difference in the fundamental nature of the Vietnam War from other wars before it, and noticeably transports the viewer to the period in the fighting before guilt became a major issue. When an incident does occur those involved are reminded that it is not their fault and that everyone is doing their best and motivated by the best reasons.

One of the ways in which the two Gulf War films compared most closely to their Vietnam War counterparts was in the expression of this guilt. *Three Kings*, though it predominantly deviated stylistically from the Vietnam War films, contains a particularly strong theme of guilt for American actions and policy concerning the conflict. The sanitised vision portrayed in the media is counteracted as the consequences of the war on the human body are graphically depicted. This is reinforced with images of Iraqi civilians begging for food and medicine, and being held captive and tortured by Saddam's supporters. Gates' explanation for this leaves no doubt of whom the film blames for this as he claims, "Bush told the people to rise up against Saddam. They thought they'd have our support. They don't. Now they're getting slaughtered." (*Three Kings*). Again, corresponding to many Vietnam War films, *Three Kings* allows the small group of dissident soldiers to rectify this morally and help in the alleviation of the collective guilt surrounding it. *Jarhead* also introduces the graphic depiction of civilian casualties, and both films refer to oil as a motive for the American involvement in the region – another controversial factor surrounding the war that was promoted as moral and just. The Iraq War film *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* counteracts the guilt in a similar manner to *Three Kings* with its story of the rescue of the tortured prisoners. *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* portray characters' personal guilt, while *Redacted*, in a mirror image of *Casualties of War*, explains acts of cruelty as rare incidents committed by a few rogue individuals.

When acts or aspects of the conflicts that are associated with American guilt arise the predominant way for them to be addressed in cinema is to depict acceptable explanations behind them, distance the perpetrators from the majority of American society or re-write the story more favourably. All of this is connected to the fifth and final feature of a society trying to reconcile the “Vietnam Syndrome” through these war films – attempting to restore the national self-image. Deriving from Rodney Bruce Hall’s “will to manifest identity” (Hall, 1999, p.6), this involves the creation and promotion of an acceptable or favourable self-identity by a nation. All of the revisionist elements of the cinematic presentations of the Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq Wars are arguably created for this purpose. In repeatedly re-examining and re-scripting the conflicts in the cultural sphere, American society has attempted to address and mould its own collective memory of those wars, to present to itself and the rest of the world a portrayal of the nation and its military as both moral and strong that achieves general acceptance within the social sphere and reject those depictions that do not. Ultimately, as is indicated by the continued need to do so, the depictions in the films failed to serve their purpose and achieve total restoration of the national self-esteem.

The intention of this study was not only to evaluate the extent to which aspects of the “Vietnam Syndrome” persist in films, but to discuss the variation in depictions of it. The film analysis chapters were structured as case studies of ways the “Syndrome” is communicated in films.

Chapter 4 analysed *Heaven and Earth* as a revolutionary depiction of the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese depiction. This was compared to the representation of Vietnamese in *Go Tell The Spartans* and *Casualties of War* to conclude that *Heaven and Earth* is less revolutionary than it first appears and often regresses to the consideration of American issues and avoids wider contexts of the conflict in much a similar way to these previous texts. The revolutionary perspective of the film concealed a classic response inspired by reactions against the “Vietnam Syndrome” of remythologizing the war.

Chapter 5 presented *The War* as an example of a neo-revisionist Vietnam film. The reading of the film revealed it fought a moral rather than a military battle and provided moral catharsis and exclusion from blame for its characters and, by implication, America.

*Apocalypse Now Redux* was analysed in Chapter 6 for its unique status as a revision of a vision. The analysis of the additional scenes indicated that films trying to comprehend

America's war in Vietnam benefited from the passing of time by being more reflective and less constrained in their exploration of political and historical debate

In the analysis of *We Were Soldiers*, in Chapter 7 the film was discussed with reference to post-September 11 American society and the dormant period of the "Vietnam Syndrome." The film's patriotic underpinning realigned the Vietnam War with the "good war" discourse of the Second World War. This was achieved by transporting the audience to the beginning of the Vietnam War before defeat, and promoting the myth of innocence. In this respect it was compared with the similar approach in *The War*.

*Three Kings*, the focus of Chapter 10, may have rejected Vietnam comparisons but is still another neo-revisionist text, employing its narrative of a quest for gold as a modern-day fable of refighting and claiming a victory in America's war of morality in the Gulf, thus realigning the Gulf War with the desired American self-identity.

Chapter 11 introduced *Jarhead* as an example of a new concept of reframing the Gulf War in the context of Vietnam through media templates. The employment of these direct references mark the appropriation of Vietnam as a metaphor for the "bad war," in direct contrast to the use of the Second World War as a metaphor for the "good war." In doing so *Jarhead* is passing comment on both wars through their comparison and demonstrates the relevance of them both.

The epilogue on Iraq War films in Chapter 13 primarily concluded that not enough time had passed for these to form a major branch of this research as they generally avoid making significant statements. Notable features were defined in them though. The jingoistic script of *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq* reinforces the American self-image through the positive portrayal of troops and their actions. *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* resurrect the coming home theme thereby depicting the Iraq War within a Vietnam War template. Questions, if not always answers, were raised in the debate in *Lions for Lambs*, while the avoidance of such issues led to the success of *The Hurt Locker*. Finally, *Redacted* provided another depiction in the Vietnam War template through the deliberate analogy to a Vietnam film.

From the analysis of these films it can be concluded that there are a number of recurring attitudes and motifs that span years of representations of a conflict and cross over between portrayals of different conflicts. These films have been addressing deep-rooted and long

held issues resulting from Vietnam as part of a long, ongoing and cumulative healing process. Despite the variety of approaches to this, there are a few basic concepts that are employed in the majority of them. Primarily revisionism, which has developed to a more complex form than originally in the 1980s, and remythology that promotes innocence or good intentions are used to reframe the three conflicts within the “good war” discourse and establish the desired national self-identity.

It was the first conclusion of this study that the “Vietnam Syndrome” did continue past the Gulf War of 1991 and also on through the Iraq War and its aftermath. Whether with direct or indirect reference to Vietnam or through reference to other conflicts, the war films analysed in this research were all found to suggest that America had neither “kicked” nor “buried” the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the desert of the Gulf as President Bush had suggested, but that it was still very much alive and well, and in the hearts and minds of large sections of the public of United States of America as they sought to reconcile it with their national self-image. The attitudes identified in texts examined in this thesis display clear continuations and variations in the representational trends structuring cinematic depictions of the Vietnam War and other subsequent conflicts. The discussion of the films has allowed these to be identified chronologically, and therefore contextually, and facilitated the evaluation of the presence of the “Vietnam Syndrome” in American society in the post-Gulf War years.

This thesis has demonstrated and confirmed a number of premises surrounding collective memory. It has shown that memories reflected in culture are derived from a multitude of sources – including both official sources and ordinary members of society – and has illustrated the use of cinema as a cultural tool (Wertsch, 2002) by which these memories are created, acquired and altered within society. It has particularly supported theories of cultural amnesia (Sturken, 1997) and the adoption of popular or acceptable narratives that express the national self-identity in a favourable way. It had hitherto been argued that memory is concerned with the present, and not the past, but over the course of this thesis it has been shown that it is also heavily concerned with the future, in the formation of an agreeable group identity to take the society forward. This is particularly marked by increasing consideration of such matters at pivotal moments such as the turn of the millennium and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The research process, therefore, has also highlighted that the need to remember is driven by the present; and added that the need to forget is driven by the past which haunts the present and inhibits the future. This renders

collective memory a curious phenomenon that amalgamates these three temporal states at a single point of reference.

More importantly, however, the research has presented case studies from a substantial range of post-Gulf War Vietnam War films, Gulf War films and early Iraq War films which have not been widely studied, particularly in relation to each other. In light of the Gulf War victory these films provide significant new interpretations of Vietnam in the post-Gulf era that can indicate the depths of the effects of the Vietnam War on American society to begin with and the impact of the Gulf War on changing these.

All of the film texts analysed present the conflicts as an American experience and are interpretations of the conflict in terms of the American identity, regardless of any concessionary representations of others alongside them. The “Vietnam Syndrome” is strongly reflected in post-Gulf War depictions of the three conflicts discussed in this thesis. This is in a variety of forms, although many share underlying themes or interconnected concepts. It is clear that the “Vietnam Syndrome” reflected in the later films does not take the same form as the “Vietnam Syndrome” reflected in the earlier Vietnam texts. The “Vietnam Syndrome” in the post-Gulf War texts is more reflective, less reactionary and more complex. This suggests that while the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still relevant to American society, it is relevant in a different context. Subsequent events and interpretations have reshaped the “Vietnam Syndrome” so it is no longer just about Vietnam. It now incorporates issues surrounding other conflicts and events that renders its description as the “Vietnam Syndrome” a convenient umbrella-term referring to a range of conflict-related neuroses.

There are some significant avenues of research to be explored in the wake of the findings here. It would be highly desirable to quantify the amount of people for whom the “Vietnam Syndrome” is still an issue, building on the qualitative assessment and claims here to provide a more statistical basis for argument. This could be achieved through the use of methodological processes like surveys, focus groups and content analysis. Two more areas of textual analysis which it would be valuable to pursue are a deeper examination of Iraq War films – although this may be more fruitful if left until more time has passed, a greater number have been produced and more themes have been explored – and whether the representation of the Vietnam, Gulf and Iraq Wars on television, as a similar but smaller and differently franchised medium, supports these findings. Finally, despite the wealth of recent research in collective memory, theorists have yet to establish

firm claims as to the methods by which the collective memory of significant events has been able to affect and be affected by society, how it is appropriated into groups through texts in practice and the value of these texts as historical evidence. This branch of enquiry, however, may be best undertaken by someone specialising in history rather than film analysis, due to their much greater familiarity with the methodology of investigating historical sources, or in sociology.



## Filmography

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