Any American might recognize the iconic scenes: the slow thump of a helicopter, the tree-line bursting into a hellish blaze, the long march in monsoon rain, the buzz of bullets ripping between trees, and the soundtrack, maybe The Doors or Credence Clearwater Revival. The motifs are so recognizable that they have become fodder for spoof, like in 2008’s *Tropic Thunder*. Yet throughout the duration of the war itself, conventional wisdom in Hollywood was to keep Vietnam at arm’s length. War movies in the 1960s like *Patton* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* looked back to WWII, while the Spaghetti Western dominated the action adventure genre. In 1967’s *The Green Beret*, Vietnam was a backdrop to an overtly pro-war film that followed the conventions of World War era propaganda films. It was not until the late 1970s that the Vietnam War began to be widely portrayed in popular films. Starting around 1978, a series of popular and critically acclaimed movies debuted that upended the genre of the American war story. Together, these films formed a now-familiar genre with consistent and instantly recognizable themes, motifs, and plot devices. In the films of this new genre, the Vietnam War is the context and catalyst for a profound disruption in the American national consciousness.

Not only did the Vietnam War films signal a disruption in Americans’ belief in our nationalist mythic narrative, but they also bely the specific character of the deepening disillusionment of the time. The genre of Vietnam War films established a particular set of themes and plot devices that appear remarkably consistently throughout the eight films surveyed below. All of these films offer a protagonist dealing with trauma. This trauma is tied to a sense of confusion and purposelessness that robs the protagonists of a unifying belief through which they process their terrifying experiences.
Military hierarchy is portrayed as inept, murderous, corrupt, and cruelly out of touch, which feeds the sense of purposelessness. An incomplete solution is offered in the hyper-masculine brotherhood of “noble grunts.” This brotherhood is held together by shared, stoic suffering and the acceptance of violence. These films portray a racialized Vietnamese people who are never given proper consideration, and they all deal in some way or another with the racial make-up of the American forces in Vietnam and the inequality of their burdens. These thematic issues and the consistency with which they operate in these films show the particular ways that the American public had been processing the experience of the Vietnam War. They show not only the disruption of American martial values, but also the personal psychic toll of this disruption on individual lives.

Historians like Tom Engelhardt and Christian Appy have marked the late Vietnam War period as an era of reversal, a seismic shift in the mythic narrative of America. Engelhardt’s *The End of Victory Culture* makes a particularly interesting study of the genre of war stories in American culture that goes all the way back to the portrayal of conflict with Native Americans by the colonial settlers of New England. Others have framed this moment in American popular culture as a collective loss of innocence, or the unraveling of the myth of American exceptionalism. While Engelhardt’s postulation of a “victory culture” at the heart of American mythology is fascinating and convincingly argued, the workings of cultural memory are more complex and inconsistent than such a broad archetype might suggest. By undertaking a deep read of this particular set of Vietnam War representations, it is possible to look past broader mythological narratives and into the confused, disillusioned, and newly cynical attitudes of the American public. This essay examines eight widely popular and critically acclaimed war films starting in the late 1970s. *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1978), *Platoon* (1986), *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) offer a decent cross-section of the first wave of Vietnam War films and represent an immediate and emotive response of the American public to the end of the war. *Forrest Gump* (1994), *We Were Soldiers* (2002), and *Tropic Thunder* (2008) offer a few examples of how the genre progressed and critiqued itself through the 1990s and 2000s. While each of these films offers a unique perspective on the war, they all
share a few important features that are particularly revealing of the issues at the center of the American memory of the war.

In these films, the setting of Vietnam is dark and chaotic. The Vietnamese are rarely in view and when they are, they are often faceless, unnamed, and inscrutable. Instead, the films focus squarely upon the character of the American soldier, usually in a small platoon of draftees. The main character typically goes through some sort of initiation, sometimes set in stark contrast with an introductory scene of domestic tranquility, sense, and order. The protagonist either survives a life-altering trauma like the Russian roulette game in *The Deer Hunter* or suffers a slow descent into madness like Martin Sheen’s journey upriver in *Apocalypse Now*. The military hierarchy is either charmingly incompetent, like Robin Williams’ polka-loving supervisor in *Good Morning Vietnam*, or murderously cynical like Charlie Sheen’s commander in *Platoon*. These characters display a specific vision of American masculinity rooted in brotherhood and violence. A few of these films comment more openly about race relations within that brotherhood, usually through the resigned cynicism of black platoon-mates. Almost none of these films have significant female characters with the exception of *Forrest Gump*’s Jenny, whose character arc traces the counter-culture and anti-war movement as the reverse side of the Vietnam War coin. Some take a wider lens and critique specific war policies and politics, others are more interested in the traumatic transformations of individual soldiers, but taken together these films represent a consensus about the character of the American memory of war.

The way that producers of popular films chose to frame narratives of the war and characterize their protagonists suggest that the 1970s and 1980s was in fact a period of profound disruption. This disruption affected not only popular conceptions of the American national narrative, but also the personal meaning of American national identity, the relationship of trust between citizens and their government, and beliefs about the role of the United States in the world. Crucially, films on the Vietnam War portrayed this disruption through the trauma, disillusionment, confusion, and fear of individual soldiers: characters whose lives would be forever darkened by the experiences of the war. The Vietnam War films of the late 1970s and 1980s represent a critical blow to the mythology of American expansionism and
martial prowess that resonated with the American public. The consistent thematic treatment of this mythology throughout these eight films shows the specific character of American disillusionment in the war and the traumatic effects of the war on the people whose lives were touched by it.

Christian Appy and Tom Engelhardt have both pointed to this era of Vietnam War films as evidence of a turning point in American nationalist narratives. Engelhardt’s *The End of Victory Culture* proposes that these films are a significant marker of the death of a genre of American war stories that began with the earliest European colonists. The “American War Story,” as Engelhardt calls the genre, takes two forms: the “free story of America” offered to every American child at school, and its retelling in popular media.¹ In the first version, the story is told through classroom history and emphasizes a sense of expansive, national destiny. In the second, a belief in the inevitable expansion of American liberty is transmitted through war stories. These stories originated in capture and rescue narratives from the earliest contacts between European settlers and local native Americans. The genre is marked by a set of motifs—the circling of the wagons against screaming Indian warriors, the lone settler fighting for his life, the rescue of captured women in daring, murderous raids—that reinforced an American frontier ideology in which we conquered the west through a series of righteous, defensive wars.² As the genre evolved alongside the progress of American history, the characters changed but the victory story remained the same.

Appy makes a similar argument, but instead frames the story in terms of the dismantling of our faith in American exceptionalism. He describes this belief as “The broad faith that the United States is a unique force for good in the world, superior not only in its military and economic power, but in the quality of its government and institutions, the character and the morality of its people, and its way of life.”³ The Vietnam War, in Appy’s argument, was a moment of reckoning in which Americans had to confront


their collective belief in their own superiority and righteousness.

As cultural historians, Appy and Engelhardt both trace the American exceptionalism theme through popular media narratives. The key feature of this methodology is the reciprocal relationship between authors, broadcasters, and filmmakers and their audiences. Popular stories both produce and reflect popular beliefs. In both arguments, the Vietnam War marks an end, or at least a crucial turning point in Americans’ conceptions of their national identity. Because their arguments are broad and trace this victory discourse over the whole course of American history, they both rely on general themes from a wide range of elite cultural narratives. This study takes their argument one step further by looking at representations of the Vietnam War in closer detail. The films on the Vietnam War fit nicely into Appy’s and Engelhardt’s frameworks. The general themes of the disruption of an orderly world, the chaos and madness of war, and the lost faith in American righteousness run through all eight of the films surveyed. Beneath the disruption of our national narrative, however, is the disruption of individual, human narratives. Not only are the characters in these films confronting the hollowness of the American mission in Vietnam, they are confronting their own consciences, their own psyches, and their own relationships to their comrades at arms and their families and communities at home. This link between the personal and the national is the stuff of art, and the ability of cinema to examine these themes in messy human detail is one part of what makes film so influential in American public consciousness, and so enjoyable.

Stanley Kubrik’s *Apocalypse Now* opens with an iconic and haunting sequence. Set to the song “The End” by The Doors, the opening shot lays fixed on the tree-line, filtered in a brownish orange, as a helicopter slowly thumps and the guitar builds up to a crescendo. As the climax of the song hits, the trees burst into towering flames. Kubrik cuts to Martin Sheen’s character in a grungy hotel room. “Saigon… shit.” Captain Willard (Sheen) is somewhat of an exception in the Vietnam War movie genre. Willard is not a draftee thrust unwittingly into a chaotic hellscape, he is a grizzled veteran, a special forces officer who specializes in black ops assassinations. Without a mission, Willard is already lost, drunk, and deranged in the opening scene.

The initiation here is not for the character, but for the audience. Willard’s journey up river begins a bit later when he meets up with his riverboat captain and Colonel Kilgore’s 9th Armored Cavalry.

In *Full Metal Jacket*, *Forrest Gump*, and *We Were Soldiers*, the initiation and home constructions are set at boot camp. Here, the brotherhood is trained, enforced, and welded through shared hardship. In *Full Metal Jacket*, the brotherhood is forged by the characters’ shared terror of the drill sergeant. In *We Were Soldiers*, Mel Gibson’s Lt. Col. Hal Moore describes a Sioux custom of nursing boys by every woman in the village so the grown-up warriors would fight for every woman as if they were their own mothers. Gibson’s character urges his trainees to fight as a family. The films that utilize boot-camp scenes to introduce their characters share familiar motifs – the screaming drill sergeant, obstacle courses where trainees climb over walls and crawl through mud, and the cynical masculine banter of young platoon-mates. All these motifs derive from earlier war film conventions, but they take on a more sinister connotation when used to introduce ideas about the Vietnam War.

One common plot device of the Vietnam War movies surveyed here is the initiation. At some point in each of these films, the main characters get their first taste of the war that opens a huge crack in the façade of whatever idealism they carried with them into Vietnam. In *The Deer Hunter*, the initiation is sharp and traumatic. After the end of the first act, the director Michael Cimino abruptly cuts to his main characters in their first battle. Michael (Robert DeNiro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Steven (John Savage) fight bravely, appearing to exhibit some of the ideals of heroic combat they had expressed in the opening act. Their heroic ideals are short lived after their capture, and the experience of the three best friends as POWs is the central trauma of story.

In Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, the main character Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) enters the war as a volunteer, leaving his university to enlist. When his platoon-mates ask him why, he answers by arguing that the draftees

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are disproportionately poor and non-white and everyone should share the burden of the war. His black platoon-mate replies, “You have to be a rich kid to think that way. Everyone knows the poor are always getting fucked over by the rich.”7 This does not dissuade Chris from his views, but combat does. The platoon runs into a village that they suspect is harboring Viet Cong and Chris gets caught up in a tense sequence where he nearly participates in a massacre. The initiation device is a useful stage setting. In each film, the introductory scenes set a pre-combat status quo in the identities and ideas of their characters that the war will shatter. The “baptism by fire” motif sets up the thematic progression in these stories, introducing the set of events that will unravel each of these characters.

The films of this genre all use the same narrative structure that sets up characters with a sense of order, patriotism, or idealism that is immediately challenged upon setting foot in Vietnam. One way that these films prepare this conflict is by starting their character arcs at home. The Deer Hunter devotes its whole first act establishing the characters’ relationships to each other and their industrial Pennsylvania town. Michael, Nick, and Steve are best friends who work together in the same factory, and share a love of deer hunting. The opening act takes us through the final days of their domestic tranquility. They are all getting together for a friend’s wedding, a beautiful and extended scene filled with dark foreshadowing. The scene lavishes in specificity, from the Russian immigrant wedding rituals to an emerging love triangle between Nick, Michael, and Meryl Streep’s Linda. At one point, a drunk Michael approaches a veteran at the bar, wishing to introduce himself and ask about what it’s like over there. The soldier clearly does not want to engage in this conversation, and replies to Michael’s prodding with a repeated, muttered, “Fuck it.” The character of this soldier sharply contrasts with the merriment of the wedding and the stubborn idealism of Michael and Nick. After the wedding, the friends all go up to the mountains for one last hunting trip. Before they go up, Nick and Michael banter about their theory of “one shot” – a clean, honorable kill. Nick and Michael are clearly the talented hunters, and Michael stalks a buck up the side of the cliff in a stunning series of shots that portray some kind of spiritual transcendence. After Michael’s kill, the camera pans back, setting the character at the foot

of towering mountains and punctuated by angelic music. The scene cuts abruptly to combat, beginning the second act.\(^8\)

The Deer Hunter’s central theme is the bonds of brotherhood and the masculine friendship between its three main characters. The movies on the Vietnam War are all deeply interested in this portrayal of American masculinity. Unsurprisingly, there are very few named female characters in any of the films surveyed here. Vietnam is portrayed as an exclusively male space. The kind of masculinity on display in these films is based on the brotherhood of shared suffering, the acceptance of and use of violence, and the distant cynicism that allows these men to process the horror and grief they all share. In Platoon, a major theme of Charlie Sheen’s character Chris is his search for acceptance within his platoon. Chris starts the film as an outsider, a naïve idealist and a rich kid in a community of cynical realists from the lower classes. Chris gains his acceptance into the community through violence and drug use. He loses his rookie status during his first village raid. His first instinct is to try to help, but when the villagers don’t cooperate, he gets frustrated and angrily fires his rifle at their feet. By opening up his dark side, Chris gains the respect of some of his peers. The pivotal male-bonding scene occurs at base, when Chris joins his platoon-mates for some weed and opium after hours.\(^9\) This is the context where the soldiers’ feelings come out, where they are free to express their sadness, frustration, and anger (but not fear) in the safety of a drug-induced haze. Outside, especially in combat, it is all machismo all the time.

The thematic portrayals of home and masculine friendship sets up the ordered world that the war will unravel. In this world, family, friendship, patriotism, idealism, and a belief in the heroic American warrior form the foundation of a pre-war status quo: a foundation that appears ordered and stable but contains hidden cracks. The war exposes these cracks through either a single life-changing trauma or a slow descent into chaos and madness. In The Deer Hunter, the trauma occurs at the beginning of the second act. Michael, Nick, and Steven have hardly been shown in battle before they appear in a Vietnamese POW camp. The conditions are horrific:

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the prisoners are kept in partially submerged bamboo cages under a hut, with one cage reserved for misbehaving characters that leaves only enough space above water to gasp for breath. The true horror, and the experience that propels the rest of the story, is the Russian roulette game. The prisoners are forced by a maniacal Vietnamese captain to play against each other. Sitting across a table, with screaming guards pointing rifles in their faces, they take turns gathering the courage to pull the trigger. The tension in these scenes is relieved either by the click of an empty chamber or the ghastly explosion of a shot to the head. Michael coaches his friends through the game. He persuades Steven to take his shot, which hits but glances against his skull, earning him solitary confinement in the penalty cage. Michael convinces Nick to abandon Steven with a terrifying plan to volunteer for the game with higher stakes: three bullets in the six-round revolver. Nick and Michael take turns gambling with their lives and hit three empties in a row before Michael uses the remaining three to kill the guards, rescue Steven, and escape the camp.10

The experience leaves all three men utterly broken. Steven’s legs are amputated and his psyche irrevocably damaged, but his wounds earn him a ticket home to a VA psychiatric ward. Nick can barely remember his own name and spirals into a wild depression that sends him seeking an underground Russian roulette gambling ring in Saigon where he can relive his brush with death over and over again. Michael also finds himself in the Saigon gambling dens, but leaves Vietnam with at least some hold over his own sanity. When he returns home at the beginning of the third act, he finds that he cannot relate to his old community. He doesn’t show up to his welcome home party, distances himself from Linda, and reaches out to Steven and Nick, both of whom remain lost to him. He manages to force Steven to return home from a psychiatric ward against his will, but he is unable to rescue Nick. Michael returns to Saigon to find his friend playing Russian roulette one final time, unable to convince him to come home or even recognize his former best friend. Nick’s last gamble is a loser and ends with a suicidal shot to the head, punctuating the tragedy

of this film in one horrifying scene. The Deer Hunter’s portrayal of its characters trying and failing to deal with their trauma is a fascinating but deeply disturbing commentary on the experience of the Vietnam War. Far from the heroic sacrifice of previous iterations of the war film genre, The Deer Hunter confronts trauma and PTSD with all its suffering, horror, and destruction.

All the films in this genre deal with the theme of trauma in one way or another. In Apocalypse Now, the trauma of war is displayed not through one singular event but a slow descent into madness. Martin Sheen’s Captain Willard sets out armed with a sardonic acceptance of his new mission, to assassinate the rogue Colonel Kurtz who has adopted “unsound methods” and established a cult-like unit of loyal soldiers operating in Cambodia. The journey upriver to find and kill Kurtz drives the plot forward. The first episode in the journey upriver is an encounter with the 9th Armored Cavalry, led by the enigmatic character Col. Kilgore. These are some of the best and most iconic scenes of the film. Willard just needs the mouth of the river accessible so his patrol boat can pass upstream, but Kilgore is not convinced until he recognizes Lance, a member of the captain’s party and a famous surfer from Southern California. Kilgore happens to be a surfing enthusiast, and agrees to attack the village at the mouth of the river so that he can watch Lance surf on a nearby beach. Kilgore is a fascinating character. When we first meet him, he is striding confidently through the aftermath of a battle dropping “death cards” on the bodies of the Vietnamese villagers so the Viet Cong would know who killed them. He dons a traditional cavalry hat when he steps out of his helicopter, evoking the memory of American cavalry commanders like Custer who were heroicized in American popular retelling of the Indian Wars. He waxes philosophically on the pleasures of warfare: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning... It smells like, victory.” In this world, Kilgore represents the “victory culture” that Englehart proposes as the unifying feature of the American war story. In his climactic scene, Kilgore leads a helicopter assault on the village at the mouth of the river with characteristic flair. He insists on playing Wagner’s “Flight of the

Valkyries” over loudspeakers as the gunships approach, ostensibly to terrify the enemy but actually to stoke his own ego. Regardless, the music makes for a marvelous soundtrack, setting the senseless violence of the attack in juxtaposition with traditional martial values. Kilgore’s cavalry hat and Wagner’s classic song allude to values of militarism and masculinity from earlier eras – courage, chivalry, patriotism, and honor – that contrast sharply with the chaotic violence on display in Vietnam.

Cpt. Willard’s episodic journey upriver gets increasingly dark, violent, and chaotic. Any sense of order and mission progressively breaks down with each stop along the way. The characters on the patrol boat gradually get killed or descend into drug-induced stupors. The USO show featuring Playboy girls of the month gets overrun by horny soldiers, and the bunnies reappear further upstream as sex slaves to be bartered for fuel. No unit Willard comes into contact with seems to have any commanding officers. The cinematography gets increasingly more stylized and abstract, and director Francis Ford Coppola uses steadily darker filters to shoot each episode. When Willard finally reaches Kurtz, he finds a hoard of painted Cambodian tribesmen guarding a ruined Angkor-like temple littered with dead bodies and severed heads on spikes. Kurtz’s troops appear to have “gone native” and follow their god-like commander with religious devotion. Kurtz himself, played by Marlon Brando, is a fallen character. Once a model soldier marked for swift promotion to high command, Kurtz became disillusioned with the American mission in Vietnam. His main critiques are the military’s lack of understanding of the Vietnamese motives of the war and the lack of political will to do what needs to be done to “win.” In the end, Kurtz had accepted his fate, but simply wanted to be understood, and to die like a soldier, not at the hands of a political assassin. Kurtz’s character represents and critiques the arguments of U.S. military commanders who would insist throughout the war that all they needed was more men and weapons in order to finish the job.

*Apocalypse Now* is a highly stylized and meticulously crafted film. Its storyline is an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a classic novel about the Belgian colonial regime in the Congo. Conrad’s story is also driven forward by a journey upriver that parallels its main characters’

confrontation with chaos and madness. The analogy between Conrad’s Belgian Congo and Vietnam is a thorough critique of the American war effort as an imperialist, colonial enterprise, a critique that is absent from the other films surveyed here. The director Francis Ford Coppola succeeds in putting an analytic context on his portrayal of the war that historicizes his representation in a way the other films do not. By tying his story to a classic critique of colonialism, Coppola suggests one root of the futility and senselessness of the war is in the fundamentally flawed ideology of the American military and political elites. There is no hint of communism in any of these representations, and any references to domino theory are made ironically, but Coppola suggests an alternative framework of colonialism through which his audience can understand the war. This underlines key features of the American memory of the war: its lack of a clear organizing mission, its faceless inscrutably enemy, and the breakdown of patriotic martial mythology. *Apocalypse Now* casts the war as an imperialist venture, which offers some meaning to why the troops on the ground felt so aimless and cynical. The representation of military policies and hierarchy in the Vietnam War genre gets at the core of why the patriotic mythology of the American soldiers broke down. The terror and tragedy of war is a universal experience, but the specific character of this terror in the Vietnam War experience was compounded by a sense of purposelessness.

In Engelhardt’s study, previous American wars were characterized by a culture of triumphalism and a unifying mythology of heroism and patriotic sacrifice in the inevitable defeat of a savage enemy. America had never “lost” a war before Vietnam, but it is not just the winning or losing that drove American disillusionment, it was the breakdown of the credibility of the unifying mythology behind previous wars. In World War II, the whole nation mobilized for war. Unified by a common sense of purpose in opposition to German fascism and Japanese imperialism, catalyzed by the Pearl Harbor attack on American soil, the entire American public rallied together to struggle for victory. Throughout the Cold War, the American public remained unified by political rhetoric encouraging the fear of communism, the clear big bad enemy in the Soviet Union, and the patriotic ideology centering the defense of democracy and American values. Engelhardt argues, however, that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima
and Nagasaki dealt a fatal blow to the foundation of Americans’ beliefs in the righteousness of their common cause. In the Vietnam War films, this common cause is a cynical joke and portrayed as empty and powerless.

In *Apocalypse Now*, this discord is present in Cpt. Willard’s initial orders—the military wants Kurtz dead for political, not military reasons. The soldiers he meets along the river almost universally lack commanding officers and display a total breakdown in unit cohesion. In *Good Morning Vietnam*, Robin Williams’ Adrian Cronauer runs up against his humorless commanders who are bent on censorship and repressing Cronauer’s lively personality. In *Platoon*, the main character’s platoon commanders argue over whether to massacre a village they suspect is collaborating with the Vietnam, leading Tom Berringer’s Staff Sergeant Barnes to murder Sergeant Elias, played by Willem Dafoe. The leadership is not just incompetent, it sets the soldiers up for failure. The “search and destroy” mission is deceptively simple: find the enemy and kill him. But in the context of the Vietnam War, where village women drop grenades into helicopters and have weapons stores under their huts to supply guerillas, finding the enemy is a subtle and difficult exercise for which the soldiers are not trained. The search and destroy missions lead these platoons of draftees, regular American men dropped out of their ordinary lives and into the fierce jungle, into terrifying firefights against a faceless enemy. All the noble grunts can do is struggle on and try to survive a confusing and chaotic world on their own.

The “faceless enemy” is the racialized Vietnamese, repeatedly referred to as “gooks” “Charlie” or “Viet Cong,” none of which carry any real meaning into the characterization of the Vietnamese enemy. The portrayal of the Vietnamese in this genre of films is deeply problematic and underscores another key feature of the American disillusionment in the war: the total lack of understanding of the historical and nationalist context of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle. The Vietnamese are barely represented in these films. Of the eight films surveyed in this essay, the only two named Vietnamese characters are in *Good Morning Vietnam*: Cronauer’s young friend Tuan, who turns out to be a Viet Cong agent, and his love interest Trinh. The Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* are represented by the Russian-roulette loving captors in the POW camp and the participants in the underground gambling ring, also centered on the ghastly
game. This connection between the Vietnamese and Russian roulette in *The Deer Hunter* is strange and deeply unsettling. In an otherwise carefully considered and marvelously crafted film, the Vietnamese appear only as vicious and maniacal gamblers. In *Platoon*, the Vietnamese are mainly represented as dead villagers or screaming soldiers sprinting out of the bush. *We Were Soldiers* represents a North Vietnamese Army commander in occasional cutaway scenes primarily as a chess opponent for Mel Gibson’s character to defeat in a battle of tactical wits. The title character in *Forrest Gump* makes the unwittingly ironic observation: “We were looking for some guy named Charlie, but we never found him.” Robin Williams’ character in *Good Morning Vietnam* makes a similar joke: “We’ve realized that we’re having a very difficult time finding the enemy. It isn’t easy to find a Vietnamese man named ‘Charlie.’ They’re all named Nguyen, or Tran, or…” This is a joke with deeper layers of meaning. On the surface, it’s a riff on the military convention of code names. Underneath, it’s a critique of the yawning gulf between the military’s understanding of the Vietnamese and the reality of the Vietnamese people.

The character of the Vietnamese in these representations is highly racialized. Watching these movies involves an endurance of the unproblematic and prevalent use of racial slurs reducing the Vietnamese side of the conflict to inscrutable, dehumanized enemies. The fact that Cronauer is eventually betrayed by his Vietnamese friend and cannot connect with his Vietnamese love interest adds some darkness to an otherwise uplifting comedy that defies general comedic conventions. This difficulty in identifying the enemy, whether amongst villagers or supposed South Vietnamese allies in the big cities, led to a situation where soldiers could not distinguish between combatants and civilians. *Platoon* in particular deals with this problem head on—one of the main conflicts for Chris is a moral quandary over whether or not to massacre a village. Chris’ naïve idealism is challenged by his encounter with the villagers and he cannot understand why they don’t see that he is there to help. This fundamental


lack of understanding of the Vietnamese people and of what their stakes were in this war is not only present throughout the films in the Vietnam War genre, but also through the execution of the war itself. As portrayed in these films, without a clear understanding of the purpose of American involvement in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people disappear. In the imaginations of both soldiers and filmmakers, the complex motivations of the Vietnamese actors in this war were reduced to racial stereotypes.

The portrayal of black soldiers in the conflict must also be viewed through a racial lens. In some cases, the racial dynamics are discussed explicitly: in Platoon, Chris has an open discussion with a black platoon-mate about the economic and racial makeup of the American forces. In We Were Soldiers, a conversation emerges among the army wives about the injustice of segregation in comparison to the black soldiers’ sacrifices for the war. In other places, race is not openly discussed but represented intentionally through the depiction of black soldiers and their relationships with their white comrades. All of these films have black characters, not as main characters but in important supporting roles. A common theme running throughout these depictions is the stoic, if ironic, bearing of the racial burden by the black soldiers. The message is surprisingly consistent: of course, the black soldiers are going to get the dirtiest and most dangerous assignments, of course they’re going to be overrepresented among the draftees. This component of Vietnam War films is hilariously critiqued in Tropic Thunder. Robert Downey Jr.’s character is a white Australian Oscar-winning method actor in black face, or in other words, “a dude playing a dude disguised as another dude.”16 Downey Jr.’s character is confronted about his representation of blackness several times over the course of the movie by his costar Alpa Chino, an actual black dude. Comedy can sometimes offer cultural criticism with greater self-awareness than drama. The satirical black characters in Tropic Thunder critique the way that black characters are portrayed in this genre. Although race relations formed a crucial lens through which minority soldiers became disillusioned with the war, Full Metal Jacket, Apocalypse Now, and especially Platoon offer overly-simplistic and problematic portraits of black soldiers.

Platoon gives a superficial nod to the struggles of black soldiers

while centering the story on its white main characters. Even *Forrest Gump* plays with this critique with Bubba, Gump’s departed best friend from his war service and fellow shrimp company namesake. Bubba is in many ways an exaggerated version of the black supporting character common to most of the first wave films. Bubba is portrayed as a simple southern kid (a perfect match for Forrest) with a huge lower lip and an obsession for shrimping. Bubba dies in the war and Forrest takes it upon himself to carry on their dream of captaining a shrimp boat together. Bubba’s exaggerated features and the characterization of his Louisiana family both critique the portrayal of black characters in Vietnam War films and allude to a deeper racial history of the war.

*Good Morning Vietnam* works somewhere in between the first wave war movies and the later, more self-critical entries in the genre. The film came out the same year as *Full Metal Jacket* and shares some of the thematic elements and character types of the war movies, but at its core, *Good Morning Vietnam* is a romantic comedy that is mostly interested in spotlighting the energetic and endearing personality of Robin Williams. And yet, Robin Williams’ character has a black best friend played by Forest Whitaker, runs up against an obstinate and confused military hierarchy, and must face hard truths about his role in Vietnam after his traumatic experience from the bombing of his favorite café. In these ways, *Good Morning Vietnam* participates in the conventions of the genre even while it uses Saigon and the Vietnamese people as a backdrop.

The eight films surveyed here are remarkably consistent in their deployment of particular thematic, plot, and character constructions. They share an overarching narrative of patriotism, idealism, or nationalist mythology swiftly collapsing when confronted by the reality of the war. Their characters undergo a traumatic experience or a slow decent into madness in reaction to the breakdown of their mythologies. They find some meaning in the masculine brotherhood of soldiers through shared hardship and confronting chaotic violence. These films share a stinging critique of military policies, command structures, and politics. They cast Vietnam as an exotic place of darkness and chaos and they show the Vietnamese as faceless, inscrutable savages. They highlight the race and class tensions

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within the US military and the raw deal offered to black soldiers. They try to rationalize atrocity by casting the American GI as a noble grunt, a victim placed in an unwinnable situation and abandoned by military and political hierarchies. They depict the tragic disconnect between veterans of the war and their old lives and communities back home.

Taken together, these thematic elements paint a picture of the American historical memory of the Vietnam War that emerged in the late 1970s. In combination with the media coverage of the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon’s resignation, the American public underwent a crisis of confidence in the nationalist narratives and mythologies that justified the Vietnam War. The draft meant that the war touched the lives of Americans in every community, but particularly in low-income communities and communities of color in which the American war narrative already held a more problematic meaning. Engelhardt describes the change in the genre of war movies as an “end of victory culture,” and these movies certainly support his thesis, but it doesn’t describe the depth of the American historical memory of the war. These movies show a sense of loss, a personal suffering that connects the changing discourses in media narratives and political ideologies over the 1970s to the lived experiences of the communities whose members fought on the front lines. These movies show an attempt at rationalizing the senselessness and brutality of the war by casting blame on a corrupt and incompetent military and political structure. While a primary critique of the political and military leadership is the lack of understanding of the Vietnamese people and the history of their nation, at no point do these movies offer evidence that the American public had any understanding of Vietnam either. This might be the crucial disconnect, and the reason why the Vietnam War is such a tragedy in American memory. The folly of containment doctrine and domino theory, the abrupt destruction of nationalist martial mythologies, and the disconnect between political objectives and facts on the ground all stem from a lack of understanding of what the Vietnamese stakes were in this conflict. Without this understanding, the American public had little ability to make sense of the war, and framed its memory in terms of chaos, disillusionment, and cynicism. Instead, Americans projected their own image onto the conflict and emphasized the trauma, suffering, confusion, and racism that defined their experiences.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


