INVENTING VIETNAM

The War in Film and Television

EDITED BY

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Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film

Inversions of American Mythology
in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*

CHAPTER 3   Since their respective releases in 1978 and 1979, Michael Cimino's *Deer Hunter* and Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* have enjoyed remarkable popular and critical success. But their wide recognition as contemporary cinematic masterpieces has been accompanied by a corresponding controversy regarding their thematic significance and coherence. In addition, none of the commentaries on either of these two epic-scale films about the Vietnam War has searched for possible connections between them. My first purpose in this chapter is to show that each film draws its design from a popular American narrative formula, with the separate formulas providing the basis for the differences between *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* as interpretations of the Vietnam War. I further wish to demonstrate that a link between those formulas establishes an underlying relation between the two films, embodying their essential aesthetic strategy. The allusion of *The Deer Hunter* to *The Deerslayer* signals the presentation of the Viet-

nam War through the popular genre for which Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales are the prototype: the western. Similarly, the opening scenes of *Apocalypse Now* establish the presentation of the symbolic journey of *Heart of Darkness*, itself an adventure/mystery tale, through the specific conventions of the hard-boiled detective formula. This use of popular genres that are related as central American myths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries connects the two films.

A popular genre, as Stanley Solomon succinctly defines it, is "a certain mythic structure, formed on a core of narrative meaning found in those works that are readily discernible as related and belonging to a group."[1] As the two most enduring genres of American pulp literature, Hollywood movies, and television series up to the time of the Vietnam War, the western and hard-boiled detective formulas provide *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* with a culturally resonant means for interpreting a national experience. And because both formulas are genres of romance, they provide the directors with the "mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms" that Richard Chase has traced as the main strategy of the American literary tradition for encountering the contradictions and extreme ranges of American culture and experience, of which Vietnam is a recent and particularly traumatic example.[2]

Despite its decline in recent years, the western has been the major formula story of American popular culture over the last century and a half, establishing its central significance as American myth. Rather than a single pattern of action, the western is defined instead by the influence of its symbolic landscape, a frontier between civilization and wilderness, upon a lonely hero.[3] The confrontation of these basic forces creates a sharply delineated conflict resulting in a variety of stock characters and plot configurations. With its emphasis on the relation of the hero to a frontier landscape, the western deals with the conflict created by the dominant direction of American experience, the flight from community (Europe, the east, restraint, the conscious) into a wilderness (America, the west, freedom, the unconscious).

With *The Deer Hunter*, Cimino, who in the subsequent *Heaven's*

Gate (1980) turned with notorious ambition directly to the genre, presents America's experience in Vietnam through the conventions of the western. While virtually every commentary on the film has pointed out the connection between the protagonists of *The Deerslayer* and *The Deer Hunter*, to my knowledge only David Axeen and Colin Westerbeck, in separate articles, have gone beyond this to the perception that the film is presented in the terms of the form Cooper invented. But instead of exploring the specific elements involved, both use the observation to dismiss the film for being, as Axeen phrases it, "fatally oversimplified."

> The problem with the Cooper-Cimino Western is that it asks us to suspend our knowledge of history, and ignore the realities of social structure. . . . Neither Cooper nor Cimino wants to consider the people and forces really in control. They want us to identify with their heroes as natural aristocrats in still unspoiled wilderness domains.[4]

This familiar criticism leveled at the romantic tradition of American literature identifies the link between that tradition and Cimino's use of the western in *The Deer Hunter*. As Leslie Fiedler has shown, the "low" forms of fantasy literature, particularly those emphasizing violence and terror, have provided symbolic vehicles for the exploration of basic conflicts within the American consciousness.[5] Although the function of the popular western, as John Cawelti has observed, is "to resolve some of the unresolvable contradictions of American values that our major writers have laid bare," the genre has, in the hands of literary practitioners such as Owen Wister and filmmakers such as John Ford, served as a vehicle for sophisticated popular art.[6] In addition, it has also provided an important influence and impetus for the more disturbing explorations of American culture found in Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner. The western formula affords Cimino the strengths of the central national myth in dealing with Vietnam as a collective American trauma. At the same time, *The Deer Hunter* achieves more than a perpetuation of past myth by its understanding of the essence of the myth and its critical examination of it. Unlike *The Green Berets*

(1968), an unthinking use of the western formula, *The Deer Hunter* is a western affected by the shift in landscape. *The Deer Hunter* is an important artistic interpretation of the war precisely because it so fully comprehends the essence of its source and self-consciously explores its meaning in reference to recent American experience.

In *The Deer Hunter* the actions and character of a lonely hero, Michael Vronsky (Robert De Niro), are closely associated with wilderness landscapes, the basis for a structure of violent conflicts and sharp oppositions. The film turns on such characteristic devices of the western as male bonding, the repressed love of the hero for a "good woman," the terror of confrontation with savage denizens of a hostile landscape, dancehall girls, even a "shoot-out" across a table in a crowded gambling room. But even as Cimino thus sets the Vietnam experience squarely in the context of the dominant American historical/mythic tradition, he stands the genre on its head. Assimilating the Vietnam experience into the American consciousness by embodying it in the western formula, Cimino substitutes for its traditional plot motifs (implying the inevitable triumph of white consciousness) a story of traumatic captivity. The accusations of racism made against *The Deer Hunter* are not correct in a political or social sense; Vietnamese are shown among the victims of the Vietcong in the Russian roulette captivity scenes, a black American soldier without arms in the military hospital is one of the most vivid statements against war in the film, and white Americans are prominently shown placing bets in the final Russian roulette scene. But the film does employ the imagery that has obsessed the romantic tradition of American literature from its beginnings with a violent confrontation between the conscious and unconscious, civilization and wilderness, played out in the white imagination as a struggle between light and dark. *The Deer Hunter*, through the western formula, presents Vietnam as yet another historic projection of an internal struggle of white American consciousness, but one where the dream of mastery over nature and the unconscious, or alternatively of benign communion with them, is turned upside down into a nightmare of captivity.

The defining elements of the western are first presented in *The*

Deer Hunter in a timelessly mythic configuration: the hero, Michael, lives on an edge between civilization and nature. The Pennsylvania steel town named Clairton where he was raised represents both European tradition and modern industrialization, and the surrounding mountain forest embodies the original American wilderness. Cimino has written that he explained to his director of photography "at the beginning my feelings about location, my feelings about the importance of size and presence of landscape in a film—and the statement that landscape makes, without anyone realizing it."[7] His mythic intentions are asserted by his representation of a Pennsylvania steel town with a composite of eight separate locations from Cleveland to Pittsburgh, of the Alleghenies with the Cascade Mountains of Washington state, and of the deer with a stag imported from a wildlife preserve in New Jersey—representations that sacrifice authentic setting for a more powerfully symbolic landscape.[8]

The deer hunter himself has the salient traits embodied in his Cooper prototype and in virtually every western hero to follow. Living on the outer edge of the town in a trailer, he is a part of the community, and yet is clearly separated from it by his alienation from its corruption and by his strict adherence to a personal code closely associated with the uncorrupted wilderness and its original inhabitants. For example, he despises all of his friends except Nick (Christopher Walken) for their inability to understand the ritualistic importance of killing a deer with "one shot." And at the wedding reception he responds to whispers from Stanley (John Cazale) about the actual father of the pregnant bride's unborn child by running down the street stripping off his clothes, a compulsive flight from social corruption. Finding little relevance in the old European traditions of the community, Michael has, like his literary ancestor, turned to nature. In the opening sequence he perplexes his companions by insisting that they go on a hunt that night because the "sun dogs" he sees in the sky are an old Indian sign of "a blessing on the hunters sent by the Great Wolf to his children."[9] And in strong contrast to his detachment from the elaborate rituals of the Russian Orthodox wedding, which he knows are mocked by the pregnancy of the bride, he is intensely involved in the proper preparation, practice, and culmination of the hunt. Finally, the taunts of Stanley that Michael does not take advantage of opportunities with women clearly set Michael in the tradition of the celibate western hero.

Michael is also characterized as separated from his community by the more disturbing traits of the western hero. Suggestively, the characters regard Michael with both respectful awe and uneasy perplexity, finding his omen reading crazy and his hunting prowess extraordinary. From the viewer's perspective also, Michael's characteristics have contradictory significance. His need to prove self-reliant results in reckless activity, as in the scene in which he risks his own and his friends' lives by passing a truck on the inside merely on a casual bet. And his deer hunting, attractive for its skill and sense of value, results in the image of a gutted deer sprawled across his old Cadillac's hood as it speeds down the mountain road to drunken singing. Even Michael's distaste for the practice and consequences of sexual promiscuity is set off against his repressed passion for Nick's girlfriend (Meryl Streep), revealed in his chivalrous courting of her during the wedding reception. Indeed, the narcissistic, promiscuous, and pistol-flashing Stanley, who is Michael's antagonist, is also the dark reflection of Michael's repressed self, just as the outlaw is the mirror image of the western hero. When Michael derides Stanley's obsession with womanizing and carrying a pistol by holding up a bullet and saying "*this* is *this*, this isn't something else," his insistence on the bullet's lack of symbolic significance, while he himself cradles his deer-slaying rifle, must be ironic for the viewer. Michael, like the western hero, is a man of extraordinary virtues and resources, which are dangerous unless properly channeled into a role protective of the community.

While the defining elements of the western, the influence of a frontier landscape upon the character and actions of a lonely hero, are those of *The Deer Hunter*, they are conceived in more complex psychosymbolic terms. The western has conventionally projected the conflicts of the American consciousness in black-and-white characters representing good and evil (hero versus outlaw, lawmen versus rustlers, cavalry versus Indians, noble Indian tribes versus threatening tribes) in a single landscape. Cimino uses the same

psychosymbolic method and terms, but dramatizes the conflicts within the consciousness of the hero and projects them in a division of both characters *and* landscape. The film develops through the stock oppositions and melodramatic confrontations of the western, but they are presented more explicitly as external images of the protagonist's consciousness, projections of his impulses and thus of the national consciousness he represents as mythic hero. As a result, Vietnam functions in the film as a mirror image of America, a dark landscape turning upside down the benign landscape of Cimino's mythic Alleghenies.

This relation of Michael as western hero to the landscapes and secondary characters of *The Deer Hunter* is brilliantly embodied in the remarkable cut with which Cimino abruptly moves the film from America to Vietnam. One moment Michael, after returning to the bar from the mountain hunt, is in a quiet reverie as he listens with his male friends to melodic piano; the next, surrounded by dead American soldiers, he lies unconscious amid the exploding horrors of Vietnam. The effect of the cut is to have Michael wake up from his dream of the deer hunt to a nightmare inversion of the landscape and its relation to the hero and community. The first third of the film shows Michael in flight to nature and away from a strained, corrupt, but strongly bonded community. But, as Michael recovers consciousness, that flight has taken the viewer into hell. The camera shoots Michael from a downward-looking angle showing him struggling to lift himself from the jungle grass, a sharp contrast to the upward-looking angles of Michael against the sky during the deer hunt. The community, a small Vietnamese village, is surrounded not by snow-capped, pine-forested mountain peaks but by dark jungle foliage. In contrast to the opening shots of the film showing Michael and his friends at the mill harnessing fire to make steel, now helicopters destroy the village with incendiary bombs. Steven's pregnant bride metaphorically and his mother literally dragged him from the male haven of the bar; now a grinning North Vietnamese cadre tosses a grenade into a shelter full of women and children. Michael and his friends found satisfaction in hunting and gutting a deer; now pigs fight over the entrails of dead American soldiers.

Nature and civilization are the dominant terms of both the American and Vietnamese settings, but in Vietnam the asylum of nature has become an invading hell.

Yet Michael is revealed as in his element here, for his influence and impulses have been unleashed in this frontier landscape. His countenance immediately verifies this, for the hunter who guided himself by Indian lore now wears a cloth headband and has war paint (for camouflage) streaked on his face. He is, in fact, an airborne ranger, and both his appearance and the term "ranger" link him to the tradition of Indian fighters who used Indian skills, became like Indians, to protect the community from Indians. Michael, who like the Deerslayer and other western heroes could only flee the internal threat of corruption inherent in social relations, responds to the external threat of a darker-skinned man firing on a woman and child by literally purging him from the earth with fire. Michael's intense compulsions in the first third of the film were manifested in reckless driving, excessive drinking, flight from women, and a hunt resulting in the image of a gutted deer. Michael, like the western hero, finds a place for his violent impulses only in a threatened community. This scene classically parallels the image of the frontier hero protecting innocent settlers by killing the savage Indian. But Michael's method, a furious blast from a flamethrower, visually asserts the deeper ambiguity of the scene—it opened with the village being blown apart by American napalm. The North Vietnamese soldier is only an undisguised version of the evil that Michael's "good" forces bring to the community. And both the "evil" North Vietnamese and "good" American helicopters act out the repressed hatreds against community found in the male culture of Clairton's bars and hunts.

This ambiguity, based in a visual presentation of the "good" and "evil" elements of the western in clear mirror relation to each other, is brought to its fullest implications in the central sequence of the film, the forced Russian roulette scenes. This scene has been the focus of the most outraged attacks on the film, for it has to many critics seemed to present white America as innocent victim of the savage Vietcong.[10] And, indeed, it is a portrayal of America's experience in Vietnam out of that earliest source of the western, the

Indian captivity narrative in which innocent whites are subjected to hideous tortures. But there are deep ambiguities within this apparent confrontation between innocent whites and dark savages. The Vietcong, as they grin, drink beer, and bet money while forcing their captives to play Russian roulette, display the same impulse and even the same iconography as did Michael and his friends in the bar in Clairton when they drank and bet on televised football. And the one-shot nature of Russian roulette is a parallel to the one-shot value of Michael's hunt. Finally, just as Michael has been the restrained, intense leader of loutish companions, the Vietcong have the look of grinning, stupid brutes except for the impassive, controlled visage of the leader.

The effect is that the Vietcong function as demonic images of the latent impulses of the American culture, particularly as embodied in the western hero, Michael. The Indians and other darker races, closely associated with the wilderness landscape in which the white culture confronts them, have functioned in the myth and literature of American culture as symbols of forces in the unconscious. The larger symbolic design and implications of the film are a continuation of those elements of the western: the Vietnam jungle and its savage Vietcong denizens are the nightmare inversion of the American forests and beautiful deer. Nightmare and dream, both landscapes and their inhabitants are projected aspects of the unconscious, a region beyond the confines, restraints, and limits of the conscious mind embodied in the community. The captivity scene, as did the Puritan narratives of Indian captivity, embodies a nightmare journey into the darker implications of wilderness. If the wilderness landscape (the unconscious) is a place to which the hero goes in order to dominate his passions without external restraints, it can also be the place where he may find himself captive to those same passions. The hunter becomes the hunted, the one shot of complete control an emblem of self-destruction.

By making a captivity narrative the central episode of the film, Cimino inverts the terms of the western formula. While the captivity narrative was a major nonfiction genre of early American writing, the western employs its horrors only to set the revenge/quest plot in motion: in effect, the western substitutes a fantasy emphasizing the eventual assertion of white power and value for a genre of historical narrative that had emphasized the dilemma posed by the experience of complete passivity before an alien culture. Conceiving of the Vietnam War as a western in which the captivity experience is the pivotal episode, Cimino makes *The Deer Hunter* deeply disturbing on the most resonant level of cultural myth.

The final third of the film develops the consequences of the captivity experience. *The Deer Hunter* presents Vietnam as a frontier landscape so hostile that America, having come as hunter with dreams of omnipotence, is held captive in it and forced to confront the full implications of its own impulses. There is no revenge/quest in *The Deer Hunter* because it would be beside the point; the point is to determine how a culture proceeds once it has experienced the inversion of its central assumptions about itself. Michael's resourcefulness as western hero enables him and Nick to kill their captors, but not before they have suffered the experience of being held captive to unrestrained violence. Nick, who called Michael a "control freak" and resisted his obsession with killing the deer with "one shot" in favor of "thinking about the deer" and "the way the trees are in the mountains," is psychologically destroyed. In the Puritan narratives of Indian captivity, as Richard Slotkin has pointed out, "captivity psychology left only two responses open to the Puritans, passive submission or violent retribution."[11] Nick in effect follows both courses. He first has to be restrained by Michael from repeatedly beating a Vietcong corpse, but then turns the unleashed impulse to destroy back upon himself. Unable to call Linda, then lured into the Russian roulette of Saigon, fading into dope and finally death, Nick embodies an innocent acceptance of nature that cannot survive the dark revelations of Vietnam. Michael, the hunter who dominates nature (his unconscious) through controlled violence (repression), discovers in captivity that he cannot be omnipotent.

For both of these Adamic characters Vietnam is a "fall," but for Michael it is a fortunate one. In the second deer hunt of the film, which follows the Vietnam captivity experience, he does not shoot the deer, despite his increasingly frantic pursuit of it. Instead, when

the deer faces him, he shoots into the air and says "okay," then sits by a stream and angrily shouts the word, which is this time echoed back by the mountains. "Okay" is of course an expression of acceptance, and Leo Marx identifies the echo as a standard device of pastoral literature representing the establishment of a reciprocal relationship with nature, the "pastoral ideal" of locating a "middle ground somewhere 'between,' yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and [primitive] nature."[12] When at the climax of the film Michael once again faces Nick across a table at a Russian roulette game, he is desperately attempting to bring Nick back from his captivity in the violent compulsions once latent but "controlled" in Michael and subsequently transferred to Nick in the first Russian roulette scene. While Michael has responded to the trauma by moving toward a cautious version of the acceptance of nature that Nick had, Nick has become the alienated nihilist Michael had seemed potentially. Nick had abandoned the "one-shot" obsession of Michael for simple primitivist communion with his benign ideal of nature, but the traumatic experience of captivity has turned his innocence into the opposite extreme of an obsession with a "one-shot" submission to passivity. The same experience has led Michael to abandon his "one-shot" obsession with control, instead accepting a balance, or "middle ground," between the conscious and the unconscious.

A common device in such Hollywood westerns as *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), perhaps originating in Cooper's use of Natty Bumppo and Duncan Heyward in *The Last of the Mohicans*, is the "doubling" of the hero.[13] Typically, the experienced hero rides off at the end, free but alone, and the "novice hero" settles down with a woman, domesticated but "happy." This gives both forces of American consciousness mythic affirmation and thus avoids a cultural choice. Cimino has reversed the usual fates of the two heroes, with the experienced hero giving up his freedom in order to "settle down" in the community and the novice hero now finding himself unable to return to it. In addition, he has substituted for the ambiguous image of riding off into the sunset a clear image of self-destruction in an alien landscape.

In settling down, Michael does not abandon the personal code of the western hero based on the hunter myth.[14] He instead brings it to the preservation of the community. After accepting the freedom of the deer, a recurring symbol for the feminine principle of the unconscious,[15] he returns to his male companions that night to find Stanley, in response to sexual taunts, pointing his pistol at their friend Axel. In a rage at this mirror image of the compulsion he has just thrown off, Michael purges Stanley through Russian roulette of his dark obsession with male sexual power. With this purgation of his darker self, Michael is able to overcome his initial confusion and passivity upon his return to go back down into town and join Linda, who embodies the feminine values of love and compassion and the possibility of a stable relationship. He also brings the crippled Steven home from the machine-like institution at the veterans' hospital, and then returns to Vietnam in an attempt to bring back Nick. Michael's return is set against the background of America's flight from Vietnam during the fall of Saigon. His agonized failure is nevertheless a crucial journey *The Deer Hunter* suggests America must make, a return to its Vietnam experience to face the fact of its destroyed innocence. When he holds Nick's blood-soaked head Michael faces, and thus can fully recognize, the result of his prior obsession.

The controversial ending of the film is thus neither jingoistic absolution for America's Vietnam involvement nor an ironic commentary. All the surviving characters, male and female, have been brought together by the hero to a table in the former male haven of the bar. Close shots of the table being set, chairs lifted, and characters squeezing in around the table emphasize the daily heroism involved in preserving a community. Accepting loss and trauma, the western hero has taken a place in the community. In joining in the spontaneous singing of a tearful "God Bless America," finished by a smiling toast to Nick, Michael also joins it in asserting the continuing value of the ideal embodied in a simple love for America, for the dream of a benignly magnificent landscape, but with a full awareness both of the dangers of chaotic nature and of a person's, or society's, obsession with control. The basic impulse of the western

has been the concept of regeneration through violence. In *The Deer Hunter* this concept is stood on its head, for the regeneration results from the response of the hero to violence turned back on him. Purgation is replaced by shock, and then acceptance. Vietnam is viewed as the self-projected historical nightmare through which America can awaken from its dream of innocence into a mature consciousness.

The opening scenes of *Apocalypse Now* quickly disabuse the viewer of any expectations that the film will attempt a faithful adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. Instead, they signal the development of the broad symbolic outline of Conrad's classic novella through the specific ethos, imagery, and pattern of the hard-boiled detective formula. Many commentators have noted a similarity between the voice-over narration spoken by Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) and the narration of Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe, but Veronica Geng, while not perceiving the full use of the formula, has identified the most explicit particulars of this source in the film.

> Willard talks in the easy ironies, the sin-city similes, the weary, laconic, why-am-I-even-bothering-to-tell-you language of the pulp private eye. . . . Our first look at Willard is the classic opening of the private-eye movie: his face seen upside down, a cigarette stuck to his lip, under a rotating ceiling fan . . . , and then the camera moving in a tight closeup over his books, snapshots, bottle of brandy, cigarettes, Zippo, and, finally, obligatory revolver on the rumpled bedsheets. This guy is not Marlow. He is a parody—maybe a self-created one—of Philip Marlowe, Raymond Chandler's L.A. private eye.[16]

Geng sees these private-eye elements as vaguely functioning to transform the film into a black comedy with overtones of pulp literature and comic books, but they more specifically signal the use of the hard-boiled detective formula as the structural, stylistic, and thematic center of the film, the specific source by which Coppola presents the Vietnam subject through the broad symbolic vision of

Heart of Darkness. Once this is perceived, elements of *Apocalypse Now* that formerly appeared confused or at least puzzling and gratuitous become apparent as aspects of a complex presentation of one source in the terms of another.

The hard-boiled detective genre, originating in the *Black Mask* pulp magazine in the 1920s, is a distinctly American version of the classic detective story, raised to a high artistic level by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in fiction, and by John Huston and Howard Hawks in film. The private eye, rather than the brilliant mind of the classic detective, is a twentieth-century urban, and thus more sophisticated and cynical, descendent of the western hero, combining the tough attributes necessary for survival in his environment with a strict integrity based on a personal code of ethics. The setting is a modern American city, most often in southern California, embodying an urban wilderness or "neon jungle" that is geographically, historically, and mythically correct for the genre, because the hard-boiled detective moves through a corrupt society that has replaced the frontier.

There are important similarities, reflecting their common source in quest myths, between *Heart of Darkness* and the hard-boiled detective formula. Both have isolated protagonists on a mystery/adventure who are in the employ of others while actually preserving their personal autonomy of judgment. In both works the protagonist encounters revelatory scenes of the depravity of his society in the course of his journey. And the final apprehension of the criminal, while on the surface restoring moral order, actually ends in dissolution, with the protagonist more cynical about his world than before. Thematically, both Conrad's novella and the hard-boiled detective genre are generally understood to be journeys through a symbolic underworld, or hell, with an ultimate horror at the end providing a terrible illumination. In method both combine the classic quest motif of a search for a grail with a modern, geographically recognizable locale. And while the clipped, slangy style of the hard-boiled genre has on the surface little in common with the obscure, evocative style of *Heart of Darkness*, they pursue similar purposes in the dreamlike (or nightmarish) effect with which they render reportorial

detail. The one crucial distinction between *Heart of Darkness* and the hard-boiled genre lies in the relation of the protagonist to the criminal. The detective, despite his similarity to the underworld in speech and appearance, remains sharply distinct from the murderer, for in not only exposing but also judging the murderer he embodies the moral order of the ideals of his society not found in its reality; Marlow, in contrast, comes to identify with Kurtz, finally admiring him as much as he is repelled by him, thus making *Heart of Darkness* ultimately a psychosymbolic journey within to the unconscious. As a result, while the hard-boiled formula posits an individual integrity as an alternative to a corrupt society, Joseph Conrad's novella implies a universal darkness in man.

In *Apocalypse Now* Coppola uses the hard-boiled detective formula as a means for transforming the river journey of *Heart of Darkness* into an investigation of both American society (represented by the army) and American idealism (represented by Colonel Kurtz [Marlon Brando]) in Vietnam. The river journey in *Apocalypse Now* is full of allusions to southern California, the usual setting of the hard-boiled genre, with the major episodes of this trip through Vietnam centering around the surfing, rock music, go-go dancing, and drug taking associated with the west coast culture of the time. As a result, the river journey drawn from *Heart of Darkness* takes the narrative and viewer through Vietnam as a separate culture, but through Vietnam as the resisting object of a hallucinatory self-projection of the American culture. Captain Willard's river journey is both external investigation of that culture and internal pursuit of his idealism. Willard is a hard-boiled detective hero who in the Vietnam setting becomes traumatized by the apparent decadence of his society and so searches for the grail of its lost purposeful idealism. Kurtz represents that idealism and finally the horrific self-awareness of its hollowness. If the hard-boiled detective, denied by his pervasive society even the refuges of nature and friendship with a "natural man" available to the western hero, is forced by his investigation of a corrupt society to retreat into his own ruthlessly strict moral idealism, *Apocalypse Now* forces the detective into a quest for that idealism itself.

From the beginning of the film it is clear that Willard lacks the genre detective's certainty of his own moral position. Willard has already been to Vietnam, and upon leaving has found that home "just didn't exist anymore." Further, his return to Vietnam is without clear purpose: "When I was here I wanted to be there, when I was there all I could think of was getting back into the jungle." While the opening imagery establishes Willard's identity as hard-boiled detective, it also asserts his diminished version of that figure. The close-up shots of a photograph of his ex-wife and of letters from home represent what he has had to abandon. His drunken practice of Oriental martial arts, as opposed to the controlled drinking and solitary chess playing of Philip Marlowe, represents a shift from tormented purpose to self-destruction. And Sheen's taut characterization generally embodies this deterioration of the detective's cynical armor for his personal idealism into the explosive alienation of a James Dean. Similarly, the narration written by *Dispatches* author Michael Herr and spoken by Sheen in voice-over, widely derided as a banal parody of Raymond Chandler, evokes the sardonic perspective of a Philip Marlowe without the strong sense of personal identity conveyed by Marlowe's penetrating wit. Willard takes the mission to assassinate Kurtz as a murderer despite his feeling that "charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." Willard could also be called a murderer, for he has a record of unofficial assassinations. When the soldiers come with his orders he responds drunkenly with "What are the charges?" And in the voice-over narration he says of Kurtz, "There is no way to tell his story without telling my own, and if his story is really a confession, then so is mine." Willard's quest, as that of a hero figure of a central American mythic formula, becomes an investigation of not just corrupted American reality but of the American view of its ideal self.

In melding *Heart of Darkness* and the hard-boiled detective formula, *Apocalypse Now* owes more of its particulars to the latter. Willard, having been summoned from his Saigon quarters, an equivalent to the private eye's seedy downtown office, receives his assignment from a general who clearly evokes the manager in *Heart of*

Darkness by speaking of "unsound" methods while engaging in the brutal exploitation of a country. The specific development of the scene, however (as the general tells Willard that Kurtz disappeared with his Montagnard army into Cambodia when he "was about to be arrested for murder"), is made in the terms of a conventional episode of the hard-boiled formula. Sitting over an elegant lunch in the elaborately furnished trailer serving as his headquarters, and with a melancholy expression listening to Willard's record as an assassin before having him assigned to "terminate" Kurtz, the general is, in the context of the Vietnam War, a military version of the powerful client who receives the detective with palpable distaste in his impressive mansion. Marlow's private aloofness from his employers in *Heart of Darkness* is portrayed in *Apocalypse Now* as the hard-boiled detective's retention of his self-reliance and judgment while ostensibly working for his client: "I took the mission. What the hell else was I gonna do? But I really didn't know what I'd do when I found him."

Likewise, while the journey upriver in *Apocalypse Now* adopts the parallel development in *Heart of Darkness* of the protagonist's growing repulsion from his society and increasing attraction to Kurtz, this pattern is once again specifically presented according to the hard-boiled formula. In that formula the detective, while pursuing the murderer, uncovers such pervasive corruption in the society that his final isolation and judgment of the criminal is undercut. George Grella identifies the portrayal of the official representatives of society, the police, in the detective genre as "brutal, corrupt and incompetent."[17] These traits are consecutively the point of the three major discoveries Willard makes on his journey about how the army is "legitimately" fighting the war. Witnessing Colonel Kilgore's use of overpowering technology to decimate a Vietcong village full of women and children in order to capture briefly a surfing beach, Willard is shown with expressions of puzzlement and disgust, saying: "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz. It wasn't just insanity and murder. There was enough of that to go around for everyone." After leaving the USO show where he has seen profiteering and dehumanized sex,

the glamorous corruption typical of the detective novel, he comments in voice-over: "The war was being run by a bunch of four-star clowns who were going to end up giving the whole circus away." And his reaction to the futile and apparently endless battle of the Do Lung bridge, fought merely so the generals can say the bridge is open, is a disgusted "There's no fuckin' CO here." These scenes develop vague parallels from *Heart of Darkness* through the specific terms of the detective formula.

Similarly, Marlow's attraction in *Heart of Darkness* to the hearsay he encounters concerning Kurtz is developed in *Apocalypse Now* through a stock device of thrillers: a dossier full of fragments of evidence that the detective must study and interpret. Willard, repelled like Marlow and the hard-boiled detective by the depravity of his society, recognizes in his "investigation" of Kurtz that this "murderer" is the embodiment, in vastly larger scale, of his own inner ideals. Kurtz has openly asserted the purposeful action, unhypocritical ruthlessness, autonomy from considerations of personal gain, and adherence to a personal code that are the hard-boiled characteristics of Willard. As a result Willard, like Marlow, finds himself attracted to the murderer. In the voice-over narration, as he looks through Kurtz's dossier, Willard speaks of how the more he learns of Kurtz the "more I admired him," how Kurtz made a report to the Joint Chiefs and Lyndon Johnson that was kept classified because he apparently saw the developing failure of the American approach to the war, and how Kurtz ignored his lack of official clearance to order effective operations and assassinations. Here again Coppola follows the hard-boiled formula while altering its plane to the symbolic investigation of the self adapted from *Heart of Darkness*. The detective often has a friend or is attracted to a woman who turns out to be the murderer, but he discovers this later and is only then confronted with the dilemma; Willard is attracted to Kurtz *after* society has identified him as a murderer. Like Marlow, he consciously moves away from a corrupt, inefficient society toward an idealistic, efficient outlaw. By the time he approaches Kurtz's compound Willard has made Marlow's "choice of nightmares":[18] "Kurtz was turning from a target into a goal."

This identification of the detective figure with the murderer, never allowed in the hard-boiled formula, is brought to its disorienting climax in the scene that Coppola has called the most important in the film,[19] the shooting by Willard of the wounded Vietnamese woman, followed with Willard's explicit explanation: "We'd cut'em in half with a machine gun and give'em a Band-Aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies." Just before Willard later kills Kurtz, Kurtz says that there is nothing he "detests more than the stench of lies." By developing *Apocalypse Now* according to the defining elements of the hard-boiled formula, but extending the investigation into the self, Coppola shocks the audience from a moral witnessing through the detective figure of the external horror of his society into a questioning of the formula's normal source of order: the moral idealism, the uncorrupted honesty, the purposeful efficiency of the detective himself. This scene prepares the viewer to experience the confrontation between Willard and Kurtz as a meeting of the detective figure with the final implications of his moral idealism. Thus *Apocalypse Now* shows Vietnam forcing the hard-boiled detective hero into the investigation of his unconscious provided by the symbolic motif of *Heart of Darkness*.

The final scenes of the film, set at Kurtz's compound in Cambodia, represent the most visible use in the film of Conrad's novella. Here again, however, the particulars owe considerably more to the hard-boiled detective formula. In many works of the genre the murderer turns out to be what Grella calls a "magical quack," a charlatan doctor or mystic presiding over a cult or temple.[20] Free of social restraint, Colonel Kurtz has, like his literary namesake, set himself up as a god among primitive tribesmen, becoming a ghastly figure of evil. The Russian "fool" in *Heart of Darkness*, now a countercultural American photojournalist (Dennis Hopper), still praises Kurtz mindlessly in mystic terms. But these elements are presented within a more detailed portrayal of Kurtz as the "magical quack" the hard-boiled detective tracks down to his southern California headquarters, a significance first suggested by allusions to Charles Manson in a newspaper story about the Sharon Tate slayings

and in the similarity of the "Apocalypse Now" graffiti to the "Helter Skelter" scrawled at the LaBianca home. This portrayal is even clearer in the plot development, for whereas Marlow confronts a pathetic Kurtz crawling away in the grass, this Kurtz, if psychologically "ripped apart," is nevertheless still a powerful, controlling figure who has Willard brought to him. Like the magical quack in the hard-boiled detective formula, he sneeringly taunts, tempts, and intimidates Willard. The murderer often scorns the detective for his low socioeconomic position and quixotic quest (Kurtz tells Willard, "you're an errand boy sent by grocery clerks to collect the bill") and has him held captive and drugged or beaten (Kurtz has Willard caged, brutalizes him by leaving him exposed to the elements, and drives him into hysteria by dropping the severed head of a boat crewman into his lap). Grella identifies one function of the "magical quack" device in the hard-boiled formula to be an emblem of the desperate search of the faithless for significance in a dispirited world (the worshipping photojournalist and Willard's converted predecessor on the assassination mission, the zombie-like Captain Colby, embody this trait). Even more important in Grella's view:

> The bizarre cults and temples lend a quasi-magical element of the Grail romance to the hard-boiled thriller—the detective-knight must journey to a Perilous Chapel where an ambivalent Merlin figure, a mad or evil priest, presides. His eventual triumph over the charlatan becomes a ritual feat, a besting of the powers of the darkness.[21]

The explicit use of Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (shown by the camera as one of Kurtz's books) in the final confrontation between Willard and Kurtz involves precisely the ritualistic pattern described above, though once again with the implications of a confrontation with the self brought from *Heart of Darkness*.

While the hard-boiled formula is completed by Willard's rejection of his attraction to Kurtz when he sees that Kurtz is indeed a murderer without "any method at all," and by his resistance to Kurtz's intimidation and brainwashing in order to fulfill his mission,

he himself knows that his slaying of Kurtz is at the latter's direction: "Everyone wanted me to do it, him most of all." The ritualized confrontation further suggests that the detective figure is in fact killing not an external evil, but his unconscious self.[22] Willard's discovery of the moral chaos that has resulted from Kurtz's pursuit of a moral ideal has led him to see the darkness that pervades not only the hypocrisy of the army, but also the darkness at the heart of his own pursuit of an honest war. The indulgence in death and depravity, of total power, that Willard finds in Colonel Kurtz's display of severed heads, his reading of selected lines from Eliot, and his parable of a Vietcong atrocity is a devastating illumination of the same hollowness, the darkness, that in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow finds in the figure of Kurtz. Here the Vietnam context and hardboiled detective persona of the protagonist give it a specific commentary on the American identity: not just the corrupted American reality, but the American self-concept of a unique national idealism is itself a fraud, a cover for the brute drives for power that dominate Americans as much as any people. Just as Marlow discovers in Kurtz the essential lie of European imperialism, Willard as hardboiled detective finds in Colonel Kurtz the essential lie of his own and his nation's Vietnam venture.

Both Willard and Kurtz, discovering the inherent weakness and corruption of their society, have turned mentally to the enemy. Willard speaks admiringly during the film of "Charlie's" purity and strength, observing that the Vietcong soldier "squats in the bush" and does not "get much USO." Kurtz tells Willard that his illumination came when he realized "like I was shot with a diamond . . . bullet right through my forehead" that the Vietcong's cutting off the children's arms he had inoculated was a stronger act: "If I had ten divisions of those men then our problems here would be over very quickly." This motif has been mistakenly interpreted as the film's view that America was defeated by its reliance on technology and by its conscience.[23] Viewed in the context of the detective formula, it is properly understood as a critique of the hollowness of a "mission" that is based on an illusory abstraction as much as is the redeeming "idea" of Conrad's imperialism. The pure pursuit of an ideal, the

obsession with efficient method, becomes the lack of "any method at all," the moral chaos Willard finds at Kurtz's compound, and that dark illumination causes him to draw back from his grail.

In the river journey Willard uncovered the corruption of the actual American mission: in Kurtz Willard finds the emptiness even of the ideal. This is the significance, a virtually explicit reference to the role of the genre detective, of Kurtz's telling Willard "you have a right to kill me . . . but you have no right to judge me." Willard acts out the reassuring action of an agent of moral order, but in doing so realizes that he is judging himself, taking a moral stance toward his own unconscious self. When Willard leaves with Kurtz's book (a report on which Kurtz has scrawled "Drop the bomb" and "Exterminate them all!") and Lance, the surfing innocent traumatized into acid-dropping acceptance of the surrounding madness, he duplicates Marlow's lie to Kurtz's "Intended." 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. Willard departs a hard-boiled detective who has made an investigation down the ultimate mean streets, his soul: "I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service. It was a real choice mission, and when it was over, I'd never want another."

The different interpretations of the Vietnam War provided by *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* result logically from the different meanings of the western and hard-boiled detective genres. Since the western is a nineteenth-century myth looking forward to a new civilization, and the detective formula a twentieth-century myth looking around at a failed society, the visions that *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* bring to the Vietnam experience are literally a century apart. In *The Deer Hunter* Cimino transforms Vietnam into a regenerative myth that makes the traumatic experience a conceivably fortunate fall for the American Adam; in *Apocalypse Now* Coppola presents Vietnam as a nightmare extension of American society where only a marginal individual may preserve the American ideal. Beyond the implications of the separate use of the two

formulas is the different relation of each film to its formula. *The Deer Hunter* stands the western myth on its head, retaining its central elements while showing that the Vietnam landscape inverts its meaning; *Apocalypse Now* follows the pattern of action of the detective formula but extends the area of investigation to the self, merging the genre with the theme of *Heart of Darkness*. The result is that *The Deer Hunter* insists that Vietnam can be encountered in strictly American terms, while *Apocalypse Now* undermines the one dependable source of American order, the idealistic self-concept embodied in the "pure" motivation of the formula hero. Cimino sees the Vietnam involvement as a projected mirror where Americans can recognize their darkest impulses, but in response return once again to the original promise Cooper had recognized in the precolonial days of the young Deerslayer. Coppola views Vietnam as the projection of southern California into an alien landscape where even American idealism stands at last exposed.

The *Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, while presenting distinctly different interpretations of the Vietnam War based on the separate formulas shaping their structures, also have an underlying relation resulting from their common use of major formulas of American popular romance that are themselves linked by the relation between their central heroes. The major criticisms leveled at the two films, their implausibility and ambiguity, are essential aspects of the romance mode by which the major American narrative tradition has dealt with extreme experience revealing basic cultural contradictions and conflicts. Both *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* avoid the limits of naturalistic, fragmented, or personal approaches to the war (found respectively in James Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*, Michael Herr's memoir *Dispatches*, and the film *Coming Home* [1978]) by couching the terror of Vietnam in American myths. Each of these two films takes a hero who is a version of the national archetype, thus embodying the essential longings and anxieties of the American psyche, and sends him on a quest conveying the aberrant, fragmented, hallucinatory Vietnam experience while giving it a familiar, meaningful structure. Within the generic confines of the western and hard-boiled detective formulas, Vietnam may be con-

templated, the terror reenacted, and the meaning probed. These formulaic genres, comprising central moral fantasies of American culture, provide collective dreams through which the trauma of the Vietnam War may be reexperienced, assimilated, and interpreted. Further, since these films significantly invert or undercut the implications of their mythic sources, they suggest the significance of Vietnam as a pivotal experience for American consciousness.

Notes

Acknowledgments: I thank Stephen Tatum, James Machor, and Robert Schulzinger for helpful suggestions.

1. Stanley Solomon, *Beyond Formula: American Film Genres* (New York: Harcourt, 1976) 3.

2. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957) 13.

3. For my definitions and discussions of the characteristic elements of the western and hard-boiled detective genres, I draw largely on Solomon's *Beyond Formula* and John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). My discussion of the hard-boiled detective genre also draws on George Grella's fine essay, "Murder and Mean Streets: The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel," in *Detective Fiction: Crime and Compromise*, ed. Richard Stanley Allen and David Chacko (New York: Harcourt, 1974) 411–29.

4. David Axeen, "Eastern Western," *Film Quarterly* 32.4 (1979): 17. Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr., calls the film a western, but only to attack it as a simplistic and "sickening" cowboys-and-Indians melodrama. See his "Peace with Honor: Cowboys and Viet Cong," *Commonweal*, 2 March 1979: 115–17.

5. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1975) 142–82.

6. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 194.

7. Michael Cimino, "Ordeal by Fire and Ice," *American Cinematographer*, October 1978: 1031.

8. Ibid.: 965, 1006–7.

9. Dialogue has been transcribed from the films.

10. See, for instance, Marsha Kinder's "Political Game," *Film Quarterly* 32.4 (1979): 13–17, and comments in "Vietnam Comes Home," *Time*, 23 April 1979: 23.

11. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 145.

12. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 23.

13. See Michael D. Butler's "Narrative Structure and Historical Process in *The Last of the Mohicans*," *American Literature* 48 (1976): 117–39.

14. For a discussion of the relation of the hunter myth to the code of the western hero, see "Book Two: The Sons of Leatherstocking," in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950) 49–120, and "Man without a Cross: The Leatherstocking Myth (1823–1841)" in Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* 466–516.

15. See Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* 429, 490.

16. Veronica Geng, "Mistuh Kurtz—He Dead," *New Yorker*, 3 September 1979: 70.

17. Grella, "Murder and Mean Streets": 414.

18. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 63.

19. Greil Marcus, "Journey Up the River: An Interview with Francis Coppola," *Rolling Stone*, 1 November 1979: 55.

20. Grella, "Murder and Mean Streets": 422–23.

21. Ibid.: 423.

22. See Garrett Stewart, "Coppola's Conrad: The Repetitions of Complicity," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): 455–74.

23. See David Bromwich, "Bad Faith of *Apocalypse Now*," *Dissent* 27 (1980): 207–10, 213.

David Desser

"Charlie Don't Surf"

Race and Culture in the Vietnam War Films

If it wasn't for the people, [Vietnam] was very pretty.
—LIEUTENANT COKER in *Hearts and Minds*

CHAPTER 4 Since the late 1970s, Hollywood has made a significant effort to portray America's Vietnam experience. Yet the films produced, beginning in 1978, something of a watershed year for films about the Vietnam War, hardly present a unified, coherent vision. If we take these films as a group, we find contradictions and ambiguities throughout, while many individual works are similarly conflicted in what they are trying to say about the Vietnam War and America's involvement in it. ~~films have at least one overriding commonality: a vision of the war as a problem within American culture.~~ The reasons the United States entered the war, the response of American soldiers to the war, and the effects of the war on returning veterans and on the larger American society dominate the discourse of films about or inspired by the Vietnam War.

One of the more memorable sequences in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) can be taken as emblematic of the way Hollywood films have seen the war in specifically American terms. Captain Willard, our stand-in for the journey into the heart of

darkness that was Vietnam, comes into contact with Colonel Kilgore, the Air Cavalry madman memorably enacted by Robert Duvall. Kilgore determines to take a coastal village less for its strategic value or as a suitable site for Willard's boat to enter the river than because Lance, a champion California surfer, accompanies Willard, and because "Charlie don't surf." It is not so much the absurdity of bringing down the might of American technology on the "primitive" combatants of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or the Vietcong (VC, alias Charlie) merely for an opportunity to surf, although that is the operative analysis that Willard undertakes: thinking that Kilgore risks his own men and slaughters the villagers near the shore merely to surf, Willard wonders why Colonel Kurtz is thought mad in the face of psychopaths like Kilgore. It is, rather, as screenwriter John Milius recognized, that America tried to import and impose its own culture into Vietnam and that cultural differences and prejudices underlay many of our government's more outrageous, thoughtless, violent, and tragic actions.[1]

But it goes even deeper than that. America *always* saw the war only in strictly American terms. Even the critiques of the American involvement in the war see it as a flaw in American society, a defect of character, culture, or metaphysics. And, as we shall see, the misguided entry into the war was condemned later for its effect on America, on veterans, and on the American soul. The official discourse justifying our entry into the war, as well as the discourse of many antiwar activists, reveals the cultural blindness that got us into the conflict in the first place—a cultural blindness, revealed especially in the *retrospective* films and television shows, that plagues us still.

That most Americans always saw the Vietnam War as an American war can be recognized, first, in what we might call the "benevolent theory" of United States involvement. This theory is best explicated by Loren Baritz in *Backfire*, where he proclaims that there is a "benevolence of our national motives, the absence of material gain in what we seek, [and] the dedication to principle."[2] It is the notion of the New World, America as the City upon a Hill, a light unto the nations, the new Israel. Thus, in this conception, America's foray

into Vietnam was underlaid by essentially idealistic notions, a mythology of America as the leader of the free world, obligated to help others. This obligation may be a heavy burden, may come at a high price, but as Lyndon Johnson is shown saying in *Hearts and Minds* (1974) "there is no one else who can do the job," no one else who can defend the freedom and aspirations of other peoples. Baritz quotes from LBJ's inaugural address: "We aspire to nothing that belongs to others."[3] In this respect, Americans were different from the French, who fought (with U.S. monetary and military help) merely to maintain the remnants of their colonial empire. Or, as LBJ expressed it in April 1965, "We fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies."[4] And there was John F. Kennedy, proclaiming to the world, "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it."[5] Or we find Richard Nixon stating that "never in history have men fought for less selfish motives—not for conquest, not for glory, but only for the right of people far away to choose the kind of government they want."[6]

Retrospective critics of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, like Baritz, see this idealism as mistaken, or as outdated, or as a misunderstanding of the original Puritan myth, whose corollary was that we should *not* involve ourselves in the affairs of others but merely provide an example, a beacon light, for those who choose to follow it. But such critics do not doubt that this idealism was a genuine structural component of America's entry into Vietnam. Moreover, this vision, not only of American uniqueness, but of America as world leader, as moral center, was common to both liberals and conservatives. In fact, anti–Vietnam War rhetoric in the late 1960s as often as not revolved around how America's entry into the Vietnam War was a betrayal of *American* ideals.

A corollary of this idealism, this mission to the world, as Baritz notes, is a belief that the rest of the people of the world want to be like Americans, want to be Americans.[7] As a gung ho colonel tells a bemused Joker in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987): "Inside every gook there is an American trying to get out."[8] That the United States was trying

to impose Americanism on another culture, another people, was simply never considered, since Americanism was *a priori* a desirable state to be in.

Of course, there is also a simpler explanation for America's entry into Vietnam: anti-Communism. Vietnam was merely an extension of the Cold War, a fight against Communist aggression. America had fought in Korea to preserve democracy, and America created and defended South Vietnam for the same reason. The anti-Communist crusade (with all the moral and religious overtones implicit in the term) saw South Vietnam as menaced by North Vietnam, which wanted to impose a Communist dictatorship. This dictatorship took its orders from Moscow, and the anti-Communist crusaders knew that the Soviet Union (Russia, really) was the leader of the "evil empire." Cold War rhetoric abounded throughout the Vietnam era, beginning with Eisenhower, who claimed that "the forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history," and that "freedom is pitted against slavery; lightness against the dark."[9] By now in our history, we understand clearly the anti-Communist fears of the Cold War era and can recognize the (seeming) irony of Democratic presidents (Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson) involving us in worldwide anti-Communism in general, and in Vietnam in particular.

On the one hand, we can see this anti-Communism as part of American benevolence and the belief in American chosenness and uniqueness. But we can also see how the Democratic presidents used anti-Communism as a sop against the Republicans and the forces of conservatism. Thus it is no surprise that the illegal and immoral activities of the so-called HUAC hearings began to flourish while Truman was in office. And think how much worse, how much more tragic and venal, the McCarthy hearings would have been had not a Republican former army general been in the White House. Anti-Communism is also sometimes seen as a paranoid response to America's perceived decline as a world power and the need to find a scapegoat for this event. We can point to the first "Red Scare" in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I, where our emergence on the world scene was threatened by an economic

revolution abroad and increased unionizing activities at home; and then to the post–World War II era, where the mightiest nation on earth was threatened by the second mightiest nation on earth. The Cold War continued throughout the postwar era, justifying our Korean and Vietnam involvements, our Latin American forays, and even some of our Middle East commitments. And then we can even see how the abatement of the "Communist threat" in the Gorbachev era necessitated (necessitates) a new scapegoat for perceived American decline or threats to our power—the shift from the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" to (or back to) Japan, a point to which we shall return.

Juxtaposed to the theory of America's benevolent Vietnam intervention (even allowing paranoid anti-Communism a benevolent side) is a theory in which the United States is guilty. That this explanation for the war is a given among leftists may be indexed by the mere sketch such an explanation receives in Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica*: "Liberals usually avoided the broader implications of the war, its origin in a desire to maintain access to Third World labor, markets, raw materials, etc. and to forestall the rise of noncapitalistic sociopolitical systems."[10] That "etc." is a wonderful rhetorical move, as it elides any real analysis on their part while constructing the reader as a right-thinking person willing and able to fill in details of the party line.[11]

In a more serious challenge to the benevolent view, Marilyn B. Young notes that Loren Baritz's *Backfire* "ratifies the claims of the very war presidents he elsewhere opposes."[12] Although she is speaking about Baritz's views of the NLF (National Liberation Front, the Vietcong as they were called), her critique stands in for the larger problem of accepting the benevolent theory, a problem not simply of the NLF, but of the role of the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War. For what is striking about the rhetoric of the post-Vietnam era across political boundaries is the absence of the Vietnamese as a factor in the Vietnam War. One of the most common litanies heard, in fact, is how *American* culture was responsible for the Vietnam War. 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.

Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the shift in the terms of discussion since 1975. Suddenly, it is not that the U.S. presence in Vietnam was misguided or simply wrong, but that the *character* of how America fought the war was misguided.[13] Thus we find American politicians, soldiers, and critics beating their breasts over American cultural blindness and insensitivity. On this score, Loren Baritz quotes from American generals who state, "we never took into account the cultural differences," or "we erroneously tried to impose the American system on a people who didn't want it [and] couldn't handle it."[14] Is the notion here that if we Americans understood that it was okay for Vietnamese men to hold hands we would have understood them better and hence fought for and with them more effectively?[15] Apparently so: "America fought the wrong war in Vietnam, and almost everyone in Washington knew it."[16] Thus even many well-intentioned critics of the Vietnam War fall into the same trap that, among other things, got America into Vietnam in the first place: the absence of the Vietnamese as factors in the war.

"Let smiles cease," Converse said. "Let laughter flee. This is the place where everybody finds out who they are."
    Hicks shook his head.
    "What a bummer for the gooks."
— ROBERT STONE, *Dog Soldiers*

The two dozen or so significant films made about the Vietnam War (all of which were made in the postwar era)[17] are by no means unified in their vision of it. Critics have attempted to divide these films broadly into "liberal" and "conservative." Yet no matter how a particular film is categorized, what is apparent is that in virtually all of these films about the war "except as targets, the Vietnamese scarcely exist; they are absent as people."[18] Among the few critics to comment on this absence, Ryan and Kellner praise the documentary *Hearts and Minds* for the way in which "what other films pose as an object [the Vietnamese], this film grants some subjectivity."[19]

Similarly, Terry Christensen faults *The Deer Hunter* (1978) for its obliviousness "to the impact of the war on the Vietnamese."[20] In most Vietnam War films, the enemy is barely seen, only always *out there* in the jungle. They are seen literally as targets in *Apocalypse Now*, targets that occasionally strike back; or in *Platoon* (1986) via a few shots taken from the enemy's point of view, but without any real subjectivity; or in *Hamburger Hill* (1987), where they are acknowledged as fierce fighters but never personalized.

On the one hand, we should not be surprised at this. How many World War II combat films personified the enemy? Or how many personified the enemy in a *positive* way? It was not until after the war that the United States could undertake a reconsideration of its opponents. Thus we find, years later, films that attempt to separate the *Wehrmacht* officer from his Nazi superiors, with such figures as Erwin Rommel emerging as ambiguously tragic heroes. And, although it is significant in terms of how racism found its way into the Vietnam War era, and into Vietnam War films, that we find more portrayals, more personifications, of our European former antagonists than our Asian enemies, we can still point to such films as *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), *Midway* (1976), and even the more recent *Farewell to the King* (1989) as endowing some human subjectivity to the Asian objects of America's aggression and blood-lust.

Even twenty years after the Vietnam War, few films deal with, or even acknowledge, the Vietnamese as subject. The Left automatically condemns films that criticize the enemy, or, as we have just seen, condemns in part those films that do not personalize the enemy. This is, however, extremely revealing, extremely indicative of how we still see the Vietnam War in terms of *American* culture and how critics have not recognized the significance of this view. For instance, Ryan and Kellner condemn liberal vet films that focus on personal issues at the expense of the historical and the global (condemn, that is, such films as *Coming Home* [1978], *Cutter's Way* [1981], *The Deer Hunter*, etc., for being American films) and that criticize the Vietnam War "for what it did to good, white American boys, not for what ruin it brought to innocent Vietnamese."[21] Thus,

it is *Americans* who are victimized by the war, an image portrayed most especially in *Coming Home*, among other returning-vet films. Even here, however, in the concept of victimization, we find ambiguity and ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the victimization of the vets who fought *in* the wrong war; but, on the other, there are the vets who fought the wrong war, who were prevented from fighting the war in the *right* way—John Rambo's notorious, overdetermined "Do we get to win this time?"

But seeing the war through how *we* were victimized, that is, how it affected the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, not how it affected the Vietnamese, as individuals, as a nation, as a culture, is also nothing new, nothing for the Left to be surprised at. Such postwar Japanese films as *Harp of Burma* (1956) and *Fires on the Plain* (1959) use the victimization of the Japanese foot soldier to condemn not Japanese culture for the Pacific war, but the Japanese militarists. Similarly, the West Germans manipulated the Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan, into participating in the "victimization" of German soldiers by the "Madman" theory of Hitler and the Nazis.[22] Ella Shohat seems to be surprised at how new Israeli films examine the theme of that country's occupation of the West Bank from the point of view of its effect on the occupiers themselves.[23]

The absence of the enemy, or the relative absence at least, is indicative of how we still see the war as a function of American culture, how the war was a product of a sickness within American society, or how the war led to a sickness within American society. This is the operating metaphor of *Dog Soldiers*, and the underrated film version of it, *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978). Albert Auster and Leonard Quart see both book and film as "a metaphor for the war's corruption of American society [and] for America's capacity for violence and self-annihilation."[24] Or, as Oliver Stone's Chris has it in *Platoon*: "We did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves and the enemy was in us."[25] But of course we did fight the enemy, or fought something, *someone*, and the failure to acknowledge this is indicative of a larger failure to examine the Vietnam foray in the first place and a continued failure to come to terms with it.

The few cinematic portrayals of the enemy, then, are revealing. Sketchy characterizations of the VC and the North Vietnamese, as seen in *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *Apocalypse Now, Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), and *Off Limits* (1988), among others, and more detailed, highly negative characterizations in such films as *Rambo* (1985), *Hanoi Hilton* (1987), and *Missing in Action* (1985), not to mention the controversial, highly charged, but ultimately ambiguous portrayal in *The Deer Hunter*, tell us much about America's attitude toward its former enemy, an attitude that still prevails. But portrayals of America's allies, the South Vietnamese, are equally shaped by cultural prejudice and racism.

Recent Vietnam War films portray the South Vietnamese as objects of misguided good intentions (*Good Morning, Vietnam*), or as victims of an unintentionally corrupting influence that they justifiably resent (*Off Limits*). Two earlier films betray more ambiguous attitudes toward America's supposed allies. Both *The Boys in Company C* and *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) indict the corruption of the South Vietnamese officer corps, who seem more interested in preserving their troop strength and ammunition in case of a coup than in defending an embattled group of American Army advisers and South Vietnamese soldiers in the field. The U.S. Army command in Vietnam and, by implication, the politicians in Washington are portrayed as cynical about the South Vietnamese attitude toward the U.S. soldiers—in the climax of *The Boys in Company C* the American platoon is ordered to lose a soccer match to a South Vietnamese team under penalty of returning to the jungle. As Auster and Quart point out, "given a choice between release from a war they don't like and their self respect and pride, the Americans opt to win." For Auster and Quart, the "hardly subtle message here is that whatever the particular realities of the war, GI Joe is still a hero and winner."[26] But why should an American team be ordered to lose to its allies? The implication of the order is that the Oriental team would be embarrassed by a loss; a win would convince them that they are as good (or better) than the Americans. The order proceeds from the assumption that the Americans would otherwise win, and that they must placate their "allies," fool them, treat them like children, and

give them a sense of self-respect the Americans know to be false. Baritz notes how in Vietnam it was common for the grunts to respect the enemy, respect Charlie, far more than their own South Vietnamese allies.[27] As we shall see, respect for Charlie did not mean admiration or understanding, nor did it mean a genuine sense of who the enemy actually was. But it did mean that the VC and the NVA were held in more esteem than the ARVN. *Go Tell the Spartans* even more clearly enables us to see the essential ambivalence the United States as a culture felt for Vietnam and the Vietnamese, the dislike of its alleged allies and the grudging respect for its erstwhile enemies.

I also wish to express my thanks and affection to (then) First Sergeant Alva (said to have been a full-blooded Navaho Indian), who called me into his Orderly Room office the day I left for overseas and told me "remember, this is not a white man's war."
— L A R R Y   H E I N E M A N N , *Close Quarters*

Under the credits of *Go Tell the Spartans* a South Vietnamese Raider, prominently wearing a Stetson, can be seen mistreating a Vietnamese POW. This Vietnamese Raider is nicknamed Cowboy, and he is told by Major Barker, a tall, commanding American Army officer, to stop torturing the prisoner. The major can only shake his head in dismay that an ally can act in this manner. Later, this well-built, multilingual, highly skilled Vietnamese mercenary will behead a captured VC, which will cause the green second lieutenant nominally in command of a unit en route to garrison Muc Wa to throw up. The sympathetic draftee who volunteered to join the Raiders and serve in Vietnam will then be told by the battle-weary Korean War veteran to remember: "It's their war, Courcey." Set in 1964 (although made in 1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* reminds us that, in fact, it was not to be their war, it was to be America's, tragically so for both countries.

Auster and Quart credit the film for its "dark portrait of inept, poorly trained South Vietnamese soldiers; decadent and cor-

rupt French-speaking province chiefs; and vicious, anti-Communist South Vietnamese noncoms"; they praise the way "it succeeds in conveying much of the futility and absurdity of the Vietnam experience."[28] In fact, one must pay tribute also to Daniel Ford, whose novel, *Incident at Muc Wa*, written in 1967, provides the source material for the film.[29] Although in most respects the film is superior to the novel (it wisely eliminates a subplot focusing on Courcey's relationship to a coed turned radical journalist who eventually shows up in Vietnam doing a story, and gives more thematic weight and pathos to Major Barker in the casting of a powerful, commanding Burt Lancaster), the novel sees the American foray into Vietnam as misguided, misdirected, and mistaken. It is the novel that recalls the French experience in Vietnam and the reference to Herodotus's account of the Battle of Thermopylae (from whence the film takes its title), and it is the novel that provides many prophecies of the tragedies to come, mainly the sentiments by General Hardnetz that the "only way we're going to win this war is to get American ground troops in here." But it is the film that best reveals America's ambivalence toward the Vietnamese.

The emotional center of the film is Courcey, the draftee corporal played by Craig Wasson, and his attitudes toward the Vietnamese and the war stand in for ours. As Rob Edelman notes in a short article written some years after the film's release, "Unlike all the other Americans, who constantly refer to the Vietnamese as 'goddamn gooks' and 'stinking dinks,' Courcey sees them as human beings."[30] Even before Courcey's arrival, we have seen Cowboy hanging a prisoner upside down in a water barrel, and we are repelled with Courcey by the beheading (although fans of the Japanese samurai film must take note of Cowboy's skill); the portrayal of other, more overtly sympathetic allies is no less problematic.[31] A telling scene, for instance, finds a Vietnamese Ranger wounded during a VC attack, lying just outside the perimeter of the defended camp. None of the ARVN Rangers or mercenaries will go to get him. But the American lieutenant, diarrhea and all, goes out. The ARVN soldier is dead already, and the lieutenant only gets himself killed in discovering that. We take away from this highly charged scene not

necessarily the fact that the ARVN soldiers are cowards (although we could think we are asked to conclude that), but rather that it illustrates General William Westmoreland's sentiment, expressed ingenuously in *Hearts and Minds,* that "the oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner." Or, in the South Vietnamese soldiers' apparent callousness toward death in combat, we might recall the "insane" admiration expressed by the renegade Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now,* who marvels at how the VC hacked off the newly inoculated arms of South Vietnamese children. Even if we recognize the lieutenant's actions as sentimental, amateurish, foolish, and wasteful, we are still asked to sympathize with the American—his ideals and essential good-heartedness.

A scene shortly after the lieutenant's death must also be read in light of American in contrast to Vietnamese attitudes. The battle-hardened, battle-weary, burnt-out Sergeant Oleonowski (called "Ski" in the novel but, in deference to Polish-American sentiments no doubt, called "Oleo" in the film) does not want to hold a burial service for the lieutenant. But Courcey angrily insists. As the still-idealistic corporal leaves the sarge's tent, a gunshot rings out—Oleo has shot himself. It is a puzzling scene in that Oleo's reaction is, shall we say, highly theatrical and overdetermined. It can be understood to have multiple root causes. Oleo is already an alcoholic by the time he joins Major Barker's command. This Korean War hero has obviously been battered by Vietnam, which is interesting in itself, considering the ubiquity of comparisons, in this film and in numerous other films and novels, to World War II. Even Korea, we are to take it, had a purpose, made some sense, which Vietnam clearly lacks.[32] But why does it lack a purpose? Of course, it lacks a purpose to us, to the viewers, because we know that the Vietnam War lacked a purpose. But to Oleo, *in this film,* the purposelessness is the sacrifice of U.S. soldiers to defend an unworthy ally. Oleo's refusal to hold a burial service was his implicit acceptance of the Vietnamese code; realizing that he had lost his essential Americanness, his idealism, his respect for life, and his honor as a soldier, he had no choice but to kill himself.

But if the film sees America's allies as, in many ways, unworthy

of American support, undeserving of American deaths, it is also cognizant of how America betrayed them. In a scene that clearly alludes to the famous network television news shots of the fall of Saigon, with Vietnamese frantically and desperately trying to grab onto the skids of departing helicopters, the U.S. Raiders bug out of Muc Wa, denying the Vietnamese Raiders transport, the helicopter pilot and gunner even threatening to shoot any Vietnamese who try to get on board. Both Major Barker and Corporal Courcey stay behind to try and "exfiltrate" through the jungle with the Vietnamese Raiders. Thus, official U.S. policy cynically betrayed America's allies (who were never especially worthy of support in the first place), but there is still something decent and noble in the American soldier, who dies for his nobility. (At least Major Barker dies—the World War II veteran who did not play by the army's rules in the postwar period, and who tragically sacrificed himself in "the wrong war.")

Images of the South Vietnamese also slip over into images of the enemy. The VC here are called "Charlie," as they typically are in other films, and as they were by the grunts in the field. (In the novel, the VC and the North Vietnamese Army are called "Charlie Romeo," reflecting the military argot of the period.) Oleo early on exclaims that "any place we turn up, Charlie turns up"; the Americans complain that whereas "Charlie always knows what we're going to do, we never know what Charlie is going to do." Charlie thus has almost magical powers (or a network of spies, which is also a possibility, as we shall see). This near-mystical ability is most evident in the mysterious figure "One-Eyed Charlie," who turns up on three separate occasions in the film, a VC soldier who materializes out of the jungle and silently, effortlessly disappears into it.

Such characterizations of Charlie are common elsewhere. In *Dispatches,* for instance, we are told that "Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC were everywhere all at once like spider cancer."[33] Or in *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo we learn that "there was no enemy to fire at, there was nothing to retaliate against. . . . Phantoms, I thought, we're fighting phantoms." Or the complaint rendered in Mark Baker's *Nam:* "I could deal with a man.

That meant my talent against his for survival, but how do you deal with him when he ain't even there?" Or as neatly, paranoically, summed up in James Webb's *Fields of Fire*: "They were nowhere. They were everywhere."[34]

Another aspect to Charlie, however, is even more sinister: the way in which in *Go Tell the Spartans* Courcey is duped by a group of VC posing as refugees. Again, the film is ambivalent on the score—perhaps "balanced" is a better word. For while Courcey rescues them, and insists on treating them as refugees against Cowboy's initial willingness to kill them and in the face of his continued insistence that the family, including an attractive adolescent girl, are "Communist people," the family does betray Courcey and the garrison. On the one hand, this reflects what Lloyd Lewis calls the "VC's remarkable success at infiltration." It was this tactic, he claims, that made the Vietnam War "cognitively insufferable to the Americans."[35] This is the simple but painful refrain heard time and again from veterans, in novels and in films: that they could not distinguish ally from enemy, friend from foe. The Occidental, racist cavil that all Orientals look alike became painfully all too true in Vietnam. In *Go Tell the Spartans*, the VC are condemned, for the warfare they wage is a betrayal of common standards of decency. Courcey saved their lives and offered them American hospitality. They repaid him with their betrayal.

We are to be outraged at this, a reflection of American cultural insistence (molded by the media) that there is something in warfare called "fair play." Time and again, American soldiers complained at the way the VC constantly did not play by the rules.[36] On the other hand, Courcey himself is apparently spared by the VC—he is left alive at the end, his fellow combatants, Major Barker and the South Vietnamese Rangers, dead and stripped naked on the battlefield. We saw the adolescent girl among the VC company that attacked the Rangers, and we might conclude that she spared Courcey's life, although he is wounded. On the other hand, we might conclude that Courcey was well hidden from view, as he was helped into the jungle by Corporal Old Man, who then returned to the fighting to die. Or we might believe that he is apparently mortally

wounded.[37] In Ford's novel, Courcey is wounded after the fierce fight to bug out; he then returns to Muc Wa, only to be shot dead by the novel's equivalent of One-Eyed Charlie. In the film, however, upon returning to Muc Wa Courcey is spared by this character, leaving his fate ambiguous.

Yet for all of the ambiguity, including the possibility of seeing a kind of backhanded gratitude on Charlie's part, we are left with the sensation of moral confusion and bitterness. Courcey is never able "to penetrate the protective masks of the Vietnamese or comprehend the implacability of the Vietcong."[38] Moreover, the use of an adolescent girl, replete with the veneer of Oriental sexuality, to characterize the perfidy of the VC represents an imposition on the film's part. Earlier (before we learn that the refugees are really "Communist people") Courcey leads a platoon against a mortar nest. He grenades it and is then surprised to see a woman's body among the dead. This represents merely the manner in which, we are told by memoirs, novels, and films, the VC recruited anyone, regardless of age or gender, to fight. (We might recall Kilgore's assault on the village in *Apocalypse Now*, when a young woman tosses a hat that contains a grenade into a grounded chopper.) But the character of the young woman, named Butterfly in Ford's novel, but unnamed except for the end credits in the film, who is attracted to Courcey (but whom he resists sexually) is *not* a VC spy or sympathizer in the book. In fact, she becomes Ski's (Oleo's) wife, and she is pregnant by him and rescued by the chopper when Muc Wa is exfiltrated (Courcey gives her his place, as in the novel the South Vietnamese are similarly not permitted the ride out). The film's transformation of Butterfly from refugee into VC thus participates in a common literary and cinematic image of the enemy-as-woman. "There was no reliable criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one and the same person."[39] Yet we should acknowledge not only the recurrence of female VC, here and in *Full Metal Jacket* most spectacularly, but also the rhetoric surrounding both enemy and ally as "feminized." This motif is taken up again in a powerful way in *Casualties of War* (1989), where the twisted logic of Sergeant Meserve allows him to kidnap,

rape, and murder a Vietnamese village girl to avenge what the VC did to his platoon.

In fact, the image of the VC-as-woman, the ubiquity of women who are VC, is a near-hysterical reaction to the shock to the (masculine) American psyche that this physically smaller, technologically inferior race could defeat the hypermasculinized, hypertechnologized American soldier.[40] And while it is of primary significance to acknowledge that the enemy-as-woman also easily translates into, or is reflective of, rather, the woman-as-enemy, the best we can do in the present context is to acknowledge that misogyny also underlay America's Vietnam foray, as well as the manner in which the war was fought. One condensation of misogyny and anti-Vietnamese sentiments can be found in the psychopathic actions of the murderer in *Off Limits* (1988). Although this film is a structural and generic mess, it does detail the corruption that America wrought on urban Vietnam (Saigon) and the way in which sexism and racism were important undercurrents of American attitudes toward the Vietnamese.

Even without the image of the enemy as feminized, and the hysterical sexism that it implicates, we do find a disturbing racist undertone to much of the unconscious rhetoric of many (most) of the Vietnam films, as I have indicated above. But these attitudes extend beyond Vietnam, and reveal more deep-seated hostilities and ambiguities in American culture. Consider the following characterizations of our enemy: "universally cruel and ruthless" and "tough but devoid of scruples." Or that we fought "a war against an enemy whom Americans at first underrated," a fighting force perceived as "scrawny, near-sighted, and poorly trained and equipped," people whom Americans regarded "as not quite human, endowed with a strange mixture of animal cunning and ability to live in the jungle, and [a] superhuman devotion" that rendered them fearless in battle with a willingness to commit suicide for the cause.[41] Accurate descriptions of American sentiments about the VC and the NVA, to be sure, except in this case all drawn from the anti-Japanese rhetoric of World War II. As John Dower notes, in an analysis equally applicable to our conceptions of the VC, America was torn between two opposed images of the Japanese: "From subhuman to superhuman, lesser men to supermen. There was, however, a common

point throughout, in that the Japanese were rarely perceived as human beings of a generally comparable and equal sort."[42] Sheila Johnson notes the manner in which stereotypes of Asians "can be pasted like labels onto either the Japanese or the Chinese (or the Koreans or Vietnamese) as the occasion warrants" and how "during the Korean War and again during the Vietnam War, all the old World War II epithets applied to the Japanese resurfaced: gooks, slope-heads, slant-eyes, yellow devils, and so on."[43] That there was an element of race and racism in the U.S. entry into and combat strategies in Vietnam is undeniable and crucial.

Further, all of America's combat forays since World War II have been essentially against non-Europeans and nonwhites (Korea and Vietnam, obviously, but also our various Caribbean and Central American expeditions, not to mention the Middle Eastern disasters of the marine barracks in Lebanon, the muscle flexing of the Libyan bombing, and the massive troop presence in Saudi Arabia following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and culminating in Operation Desert Storm). But it is the utter lack of recognition of "others"—that there are people not like us, who do not want to be like us, who do not, in fact, like us, and a moral and ethical blindness masquerading as moral certitude (Americans as missionaries of the one true way)— that involved us tragically in Vietnam. And even the retrospective dramatic analyses of the Vietnam War focus on *us*, on what the war did to us, on how we entered Vietnam with either good or bad intentions, but never on Vietnam as a historical site, never on the Vietnamese as genuine subjects, as people with a culture, a heritage, a political agenda, even a cultural and political confusion all their own.[44] We need to come to terms with not simply how race and culture colored America's Vietnam excursion, and led to the entirely preventable tragedies of the war, but as well with how an essential cultural myopia got America into the war in the first place and clouds Americans' vision still.

Notes

1. I deliberately attribute this insight to John Milius, as the surfing sequence appears in his original screenplay (written in 1969). Many of the

ambiguities of *Apocalypse Now* can be credited to the three "authors" involved in the film: Milius, Coppola, and Conrad. The importance of surfing, as life and as metaphor, appears prominently in Milius's *Big Wednesday* (1978—the watershed year for Vietnam films). And while it is fashionable to condemn Milius for his neofascist leanings, with some justification in light of *Red Dawn* (1984), we should not overlook the progressive, critical elements that he is also capable of communicating.

2. Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow, 1985) 29.

3. Ibid. 37.

4. Quoted in ibid. 38.

5. Quoted in ibid. 42.

6. Quoted in ibid. 43.

7. Ibid. 30.

8. Also quoted, in another context, in James A. Stevenson, "Beyond Stephen Crane: *Full Metal Jacket*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 242.

9. Quoted in Baritz, *Backfire* 42–43.

10. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 199.

11. A more complex vision of how the United States entered the Vietnam War through a series of gradual steps, seen primarily (but not exclusively) in economic terms, may be found in Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). Rotter does, in part, support the benevolent theory of our Indochina intrusion, when he notes some of the key features of "the ideology of American diplomacy . . . : (1) the belief that people have the right of self-determination; (2) the belief that no people truly exercising self-determination will choose communism or authoritarianism because all people desire representative political institutions; (3) the belief that economic progress and political freedom can exist only where the means of production are, for the most part, privately owned . . . [and that] behind these ideas is a faith that America's moral rectitude is absolute and a confidence that American power is sufficient to persuade the unconvinced" (3). Unfortunately, these ideals, especially the economic components of them, had by the late 1940s "been hopelessly compromised" (4).

12. Marilyn B. Young, "Review of *Backfire*," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 8.3 (1986): 61.

13. In an article cowritten with Gaylyn Studlar, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo*'s Rewriting of the Vietnam War," *Film Quarterly* 42.1 (1988): 9–16, we make the point that the question "Were we right to fight in Vietnam" has shifted to "What is our responsibility to the veterans of the war" as a means of rewriting our initial involvement. We might take such a shift toward questioning *how* we fought the war, instead of *why* we did so, as a variation on this mythic process.

14. Quoted in Baritz, *Backfire* 40.

15. Ibid. 22.

16. Ibid. 233.

17. I am here eliminating *The Green Berets* (1968) from "significance" primarily because what significance it has is a perverse one—the only film actually made in *favor* of the war.

18. Michael Pursell, "*Full Metal Jacket*: The Unraveling of Patriarchy," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 222. Pursell is speaking primarily of *Platoon*, but the quote can stand for many Vietnam War films.

19. Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica* 197.

20. Terry Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 152.

21. Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica* 198.

22. For this whole question of victimization, see Studlar and Desser, "Never Having to Say."

23. Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) 241. Even much of the political discourse in Israel and the United States among Jews condemns the occupation of "Palestinian" territory for its effects on the nature of Zionism and the soul of Israel.

24. Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988) 57–58. I would say, however, that Stone's novel sees America as *already* corrupted, as indicated by the shift in the character portrayed by Tuesday Weld. In the novel, she works in a pornographic movie theater; in the film she works with her father in a Berkeley bookstore. This fact, combined with the *deserted* former hippie commune of the climax, gives the film a "death of the sixties" flavor—Vietnam as the end of innocence and utopia—that the more cynical novel does not possess.

25. Also quoted in Christensen, *Reel Politics* 208.

26. Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 56.

27. Baritz, *Backfire* 30.

28. Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 54, 54–55.

29. Daniel Ford, *Incident at Muc Wa* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

30. Rob Edelman, "A Second Look: *Go Tell the Spartans*," *Cineaste* 13 (1983): 18.

31. Edelman claims that "Cowboy is no freedom fighter, just a sadist who relishes torturing and murdering his countrymen. It is poetic justice that he is nicknamed Cowboy, a symbolic token of America's presence in Vietnam" (ibid. 19). But this gloss on the name strikes me as insufficient. First of all, why do we need a "symbolic token of America's presence" when the American presence is overt, there in the flesh, in the form of U.S. advisers (who are, in fact, combat troops). It overlooks the sense of American perceptions of the cruelty of the Oriental, the links between this Vietnamese soldier and the Japanese samurai. But most significantly, his analysis underrates the influence of American culture on Vietnam—that Cowboy has reformulated an image of himself based on American cinema.

32. The use of references to World War II is virtually ubiquitous in all of the discourses surrounding the Vietnam War, including, and especially, novels, films, and television, and is too complex to go into here. In *Go Tell the Spartans*, Major Barker experiences World War II nostalgia—the longing for the sense of a clearly defined right and wrong, and for the (European) landscape on which the war was fought, interestingly enough. In addition to the obvious references U.S. soldiers make to John Wayne movies (as in *Full Metal Jacket*), we should also note how World War II *movies* functioned as a kind of myth for arriving American soldiers in Vietnam, the shattering of which myth is alleged to be the root cause of so much of the disillusionment and alienation of the U.S. grunt. For an in-depth discussion of how the "John Wayne Wet Dream" created by World War II movies "served to initiate young American males into the mysteries of war, the purposes that war is intended to accomplish, and the role one is expected to adopt within that war," see Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985) 22, and 19–37 generally.

33. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) 74.

34. Excerpts from *A Rumor of War, Nam,* and *Fields of Fire*, quoted in Lewis, *The Tainted War* 91.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid. 31.

37. Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered* 54.

38. Ibid.

39. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* 119, quoted in Lewis, *The Tainted War* 93.

40. Susan Jeffords, in "Women, Gender, and the War," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 6 (1989): 87, makes the point that "dominant representations of the Vietnam War should . . . be read as cultural responses to changing gender relations in the United States." She challengingly accuses not only what we have above termed as "right-wing" Vietnam films, like *Rambo* and *Uncommon Valor,* but also those more typically thought of as "leftist" films, including *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket,* of participating in "efforts to reestablish the social value of masculinity and restabilize the patriarchal system of which it is a part."

41. Sheila K. Johnson, *The Japanese through American Eyes* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988) 19–20. The idea that the Japanese were poorly equipped was a constant in the early phase of the Pacific war. We simply did not believe that their technology was as good as ours, even in the case of the Zero fighter plane, generally accepted now as the finest of World War II. This notion that Japanese technology was inferior to ours found a resonance in the Vietnam War, except our enemies were devalued for their (alleged) total *lack* of technology. Thus we still shake our heads in wonderment at how we lost the war in Vietnam to a nation without technology.

42. John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) 99.

43. Johnson, *The Japanese through American Eyes* 8–9.

44. Although it was fashionable among some members of the counter-culture and the New Left to side with the North Vietnamese, to praise Ho Chi Minh at the expense of LBJ or Richard Nixon, the antiwar forces never had much knowledge of the North Vietnamese; for instance, comparing their situation, albeit in a sympathetic way, with that of Native Americans. I do not think you can find a genocidal imperative in the American involvement in Vietnam, as you can, of course, within Manifest Destiny and the European response to native peoples. (Michael Pursell, in the article "*Full Metal Jacket,*" cited above, does think there was a genocidal undercurrent, and he links it to a "gynocidal" impulse within patriarchy; see especially 221.) Moreover, even acknowledging that the governmental and social system of contemporary Vietnam (the unified Vietnam since

1975) is hardly the model of democracy one might wish for does not negate the anticolonialist imperative of North Vietnam and the VC, or the attempt to establish nationhood and national identity. One is reminded of some right-wing discourse in the wake of the revelations of the horrors committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (the killing fields)—that their actions retrospectively justified our Indochina involvement. That is the equivalent of saying a major European power would have been justified in occupying the U.S. during our Civil War on the basis of what the North did to the South in the Reconstruction period!

Ellen Draper

Finding a Language for Vietnam in the Action-Adventure Genre

CHAPTER 5 In *Swimming to Cambodia*, Spalding Gray reworks two maxims concerning the American involvement in Southeast Asia:

> How does a country like America, or rather how does America, because certainly there's no country like it, begin to find a language to negotiate or talk with a country like Russia or Libya if I can't even *begin* to get it with my people on the corner of Broadway and John Street?

> It was a kind of visitation of hell on earth. Who needs metaphors for hell, or poetry about hell? This actually happened here on this earth. Pregnant mother disemboweled. Eyes gouged out. Kids, children torn apart like fresh bread in front of their mothers. And this went on for years until two million people were either systematically killed or starved to death by the same people. And no one can really figure out how something like that could have happened. [1]

Women Next Door to War
China Beach

CHAPTER 10 Vietnam was the first television war, one brought to the dinner table each evening in graphic detail. Images from its verité coverage influenced the iconography associated with the ensuing genre revision of combat war films focusing upon the Vietnam experience. Yet *China Beach*, shown on the very medium that brought the war so close to the millions of Americans who had little other access to its "reality," seems to displace the entirety of the Vietnam nightmare into the realm of romanticized fantasy, one in which historical, political, and social implications are all but erased. Instead one is offered the stuff of which nostalgia is made, in which roles are defined by gender alone and ultimately the heroics of previous war genres are evoked in place of any constructive criticism. In presenting a "female perspective," *China Beach* contributes to a larger attempt to recoup or reconstruct the meaning of heroism and hence offers its audience a referent in the "real" discourse of the U.S.–Vietnam War. A primary goal of *China Beach* is to construct the Vietnam vet as hero in a traditional sense, to attempt to imbue this war with a purpose that history in fact

denies it, so as to continue to ease the national guilt and irresolution concerning U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

China Beach centers on women's involvement in Vietnam and is set primarily during 1967–69 at the U.S. military recreational facility of the same name and the neighboring Ninety-Fifth Evacuation Hospital (510 Evac Compound) located on the shore of the South China Sea in Da Nang. Unlike *Tour of Duty*, which is modeled after the film *Platoon* (1986) and such earlier television war series as *Rat Patrol* and *Combat*, *China Beach* adopts the structure, style, and tone of melodrama, focusing upon domestic and love-story aspects rather than those issues usually foregrounded in the action-adventure genre. In a highly emotionalized approach to the problem of everyday life next to a war zone, the stories are those of the "woman's film" and soap opera, in which the experiences of women are drawn more in terms of their sexual interactions and social concerns than the actuality of their military/volunteer duties and the importance of those duties for the war effort. The portrayal of these women highlights their "lack"—both in terms of gender and its concomitant roles in war—dramatizing their inability to gain access to either the physical activity or the specific discourse of combat.

As with its predecessor, *M*A*S*H* (1970), *China Beach* constructs characters who represent differing military and moral positions, often sketched in stereotypical, gender-based strokes. The cast includes a range of American female military and volunteer personnel—a dedicated and martyrlike head nurse, Red Cross volunteers (otherwise known as "Doughnut Dollies"), a base prostitute and black marketer, a special-services career officer, USO entertainers, an aspiring film journalist (also a senator's daughter), and an enlisted servicewoman. This last character is perhaps most emblematic of the American woman's position in the Vietnam discourse, in that she has no specific single duty but rather is given a series of odd-jobs for which she is ill-suited or ill-prepared but to which she manages to adapt despite adverse conditions. This and the tongue-in-cheek names of the characters—Cherry White, a naïve nineteen-year-old, who is the first of two "Doughtnut Dollies" promi-

nently featured—is only in part an indication of the series' somewhat carefree attitude toward its representation of women and their experiences. The representation of Vietnamese women suffers even more; despite the fact that "round-eyed" women were the smallest minority in Vietnam, Vietnamese women are significantly underrepresented in the program. Even in the episodes in which they are featured, they seldom speak for themselves; their actions are interpreted by Americans, much as American women's experiences are defined by men. The program implies that women's accounts can only be told in relation to the men who served in Vietnam, but Kathryn Marshall's book *In the Combat Zone* and Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* speak otherwise.

Despite the touted goal of the series, which, according to Mark Morrison of *Rolling Stone,* is "to see what Vietnam meant to the women who were there (an estimated 50,000 nurses, entertainers, Red Cross volunteers and others served in Vietnam)," the actual representation and discourse of the series are not always controlled by women.[1] Even though the title song is "Reflections" by Diana Ross and the Supremes, it is the actions of men and their visions that are reflected upon the women of China Beach. As well, the inclusion of current contextual references marks a deviation from the solely nostalgic and reminiscent mode of representation. Just whose reflections are these? The question one might ask is why, in exploring the memory of wartime experiences, is *China Beach* about the experiences of predominantly white, American women, who represent a relatively small percentage of women's experiences in the U.S.–Vietnam War? Why use female characters to come to terms with what many see as the worst military experience in U.S. history, especially given the overwhelming male presence in the planning and the execution of the war? Is it only a strategy to include an absent female viewership in a genre dominated by male discourse?

Susan Jeffords suggests that some Vietnam films use a feminized perspective in part to ready audiences for a revisionist attitude toward Vietnam veterans and current military conflicts.[2] She defines a feminized audience as one that is made passive and embraces behavior conducive to functioning in mainstream, nonviolent society; it is one in which the visualization of violence is acceptable but violent action itself is not. Jeffords discusses *Coming Home,* referring to Bill Nichols's argument that "cinematic narrative[s] . . . resolve contradictions and provide models for action in the present," and asks "who was this film's audience?"[3] The same question might be asked of *China Beach,* which in turn raises additional questions. In view of the fact a male Vietnam combat veteran created the series, how should the text be read in the context of the entire Vietnam War genre, both filmic and televisual, which upholds combat experience as the standard for authenticity? What are the expectations of a series conceptualized and produced by a male veteran for a potentially female-dominated audience? What is the significance of telling a story controlled by male "experience" through the eyes of female observers?

China Beach does not simply invert the established conventions in order to regenerate the genre, since the roles of American men and women were not the same during the U.S.–Vietnam War. The series is not the female complement to *Tour of Duty* in the same manner as *Big Valley*'s matriarch stands in for *Bonanza*'s patriarch. But *China Beach* does attempt to regenerate the idea of individual heroism. *China Beach* went into production at the height of the U.S. debate about aid to the "Contras" of Nicaragua. The Reagan administration's argument, framed in notions of heroism and moral obligation, was constructed to persuade the American public to support the government's decision without questioning the political ethics of the decision or the ultimate consequences of providing such support. The figure of the hero, the meaning of heroism, and the matter of justifying heroic actions through their results were at the forefront of a protracted series of televised investigative hearings. Key to the media's construction of Oliver North as a hero was not only the public statements issued by the great mythmaker and male storyteller of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan, but also the testimony of Fawn Hall, North's secretary, who stressed the importance of North's family in his daily life. While her testimony did not directly affect the amount of coverage North received, it shifted the matter from being about only

political issues into being about personal concerns as well. His positive role as a family man balanced his tarnished role as a military officer, thus humanizing and individualizing his plight. This strategy sheds some light on the choice by William Broyles, Jr., producer of *China Beach*, to position women as sympathetic and supportive observers of combat. In part to remythologize his own war experiences, about which he had already written both a novel and numerous articles, Broyles ultimately works to remove the individual human soldier from the responsibility for action taken by a large, impersonal military machine—"I was just following orders"—and allowing the concept of heroics to reenter the genre.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*'s Mark Morrison, Broyles indicates why this shift is not so simple, revealing what is perhaps most disturbing about the recent wave of revisionist approaches to the U.S.–Vietnam War. Discussing both the television series and his novel, *Brothers in Arms*, Broyles says:

> I was able to look at [Vietnam] as a setting and not a story itself. I also thought, most important to me seemed to be the story of the women who were there. No matter how involved you get with the tangled purposes of the war and its moral confusion and its unhappy end, what they did was purely heroic. Not in a sentimental, sappy way. But in a concrete, day-to-day, real-people-in-extraordinary-situations kind of way.[4]

The notion that Vietnam is just a setting, a backdrop against which to tell any number of stories, is as disturbing as Broyles's monolithic notion of the "purely heroic." While Broyles claims that his project is not sentimentalized, the very nature of melodrama, the dominant mode of fictional television, is to reduce various conflicts to an emotional continuum.

To say that the makers of *China Beach* posit a concept of "pure heroics" and insert it into an essentializing melodramatic format does not sufficiently account for how the series works. For one thing, as Lynne Joyrich argues in "All That Television Allows," television melodrama is not a distinct genre but rather a pervasive and dominant mode of many television forms.[5] Certainly, it is the nature of

television to create simplistic oppositions and facile solutions in place of complex and vague conflicts. Joyrich concludes that much of current television's varying format is a hybrid between established television genres and the general aesthetic and thematic concerns of melodrama; more specific melodramatic conventions are lost amid the distinguishing features of other genres, but the overall emotional tone remains. Thus *China Beach* can be considered part of a genre of Vietnam texts and yet not wholly adhere to the war-genre format. Perhaps even more significant than changes in generic convention, however, is the new relationship between the spectator and the Vietnam War discourse. In bringing the war into the realm of fictional, serial television, *China Beach* becomes part of television's inherent melodramatic format, in which the audience, already constructed as passive by the medium, moves closer to a feminized position, and an otherwise problematic representation is made consumable and, ultimately, unquestionable.

A "special" episode of *China Beach*, which aired toward the end of the 1988–89 season, specifically addressed how actual women veterans functioned during wartime in South Vietnam. This episode, "Vets," focused upon the narratives of "some of thousands of men and women who served in Vietnam telling their stories in their own words"; the episode begins with this statement in voice-over by the series' lead actress, Dana Delany. This single program attempts to validate the series' own fictional representation as somehow being "truthful," a historically accurate representation. "Vets" intercuts fictional images from the series with excerpts from interviews with a variety of female and male noncombat veterans. Images drawn from earlier episodes often depict events referred to in the immediately preceding or following interview segment. In some instances, the interview serves as a voice-over to a fictional sequence from the series, blurring the boundaries between "documentary," or fact, and fiction. Toward the end of the program, the lack of visual reference to a specific speaker makes it difficult to match the voice-over with an interviewee and allows the dialogue to be linked to a fictional character depicted on the screen. The distinction between what is recounted as truth and what is imagined as truth seems to disappear

altogether, especially as reinforced by the uncanny facial resemblance between Delany's character, Colleen McMurphy, the head nurse, and one of the veteran nurses being interviewed.

Howard Rosenberg, entertainment critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, seems to reflect the desired response in a review concerned with both this episode and the series as a whole.

> Their living transcript also affirms the basic truth that "China Beach" has presented during its 10-month run, for it's amazing the way these actual war memories and scenes from the series track and fit together like pieces of a puzzle. A surgeon recalls removing an unexploded grenade from a soldier's chest. Then we dissolve to a scene from a past "China Beach" episode that is almost identical to the surgeon's story, a scene that might otherwise have been dismissed as bizarre fantasy.[6]

The correspondence between fact and fiction is not, however, simple coincidence; the series' producers revealed in a public interview during a March 1989 Broadcast Museum special screening of "Vets" that they had spoken with many of the interviewees, as had the actors, before beginning the pilot episode of *China Beach*. Rosenberg's use of the phrase "bizarre fantasy" does provide a clue, nevertheless, to the program's highly stylized visuals, which distinguish it from the more documentary-like aesthetics of *Tour of Duty* or from actual news footage with which one might associate a more "real" perspective.

"Vets," with its classical narrative structure, presents a clearly organized story with which the viewer can engage. Starting with the recollection of one nurse's departure from the States and subsequent arrival at China Beach, and ending with another nurse recalling her anticlimactic departure from Vietnam after a year's tour of duty, the episode reinforces its strong sense of closure and resolution through its visual presentation. The visuals mirror the narrative structure of the piece as the program begins and ends with the beachfront view of China Beach set against the backdrop of a red sunset.[7] Authentic pictures of nurses, soldiers, and Red Cross volunteers at locations resembling China Beach and its compound link the fictional charac-

ters visually with the veterans who are seen and heard reminiscing. The interviews are highly emotional, with some of the women being overcome by tears. With the exception of the male doctor and one nurse, all the veterans' experiences emphasize the roles of the women through their emotional relationship to "the men" more than through their specific duties. These women functioned as surrogates for loved ones left far behind back "in the world," reminders of a soldier's mother, sister, wife, or girlfriend, family, and home. So, for example, a Red Cross volunteer, as a woman, might better explain a "Dear John" letter to an angry and hurt soldier. In another case, a woman's positive reaction to a wounded man, it is suggested, could make or break his recovery; says veteran Jeanne ("Sam") Bokina Christie, "We were their first tests; we were American, we were home, we were family." As might be expected, fictional images are provided that match these and other testimonies; Cherry attempts to console a "Dear John" recipient, while the USO character, Laurette, finds her picture in a dying stranger's pocket, an occurrence that an actual USO entertainer recalls as her most memorable moment in Vietnam.

The frame of reference for the viewer, then, is how these women related to soldiers and how "the men" responded to them. The focus is more on the nurturing aspects of their experience than on the difficulty and enormity of their jobs. Rather than sharing in what these women may have thought of their responsibilities and of the war effort overall, one shares instead in the somewhat glamorized depictions of romantic and family concerns. In positioning the spectator to identify with predominantly female veterans, whose function is defined simply as being next to the soldiers, next door to the war, *China Beach* offers the viewer the opportunity to identify herself or himself as a surrogate family member. The viewer is then able, if not to understand, perhaps to have compassion for the veteran combat soldier in a personalized, intimate manner. Both the "Vets" episode and the series as a whole use a lingering, static close-up that hovers for emotional impact, working at an intensified level to emphasize intimate moments. Thus, what was previously foreign and inaccessible to the majority of the American public

becomes more familial and more readily consumable. In presenting the experiences of veterans on television, not only in the documentary fashion of "Vets," but also in the more mediated form of fictional narratives, *China Beach* works to bring the war back into the living room, into the realm of the personal, in a way contemporary films cannot, and at the same time takes a significant step toward refiguring the war's impact on the psyche of the American public.

The program presents some of the women in archetypal roles most often associated with femininity in Western ideology—the mother (both Lila Gerraeu, the base commander and career special-services officer, and McMurphy) and the whore (K.C. in particular, together with a number of faceless Vietnamese female characters). In their role as surrogate family, the women often serve a maternal function, emphasizing not only their duty as caregiver but their "instinct" as caretaker. In separate episodes, Lila mothers an orphaned leopard cub, while McMurphy oscillates between being a fantasy mother and acting as a mother to Dodger, a severely wounded infantryman who is a regular in the series. In "Afterburner," Lila agrees to take care of a package for a young soldier bound stateside until it can be shipped to him. The package turns out to be a wildcat, and Lila displaces her maternal affection for the absent soldier onto the young, orphaned feline, becoming more attached to it than she would have liked. During a monologue, overheard by the head surgeon, she addresses her maternal instinct; she apologizes to the cat for her necessary abandonment of it, speaking of her loneliness and how the cat reminds her of that fact. The surgeon remarks on the betterment of the cat's life through Lila's intervention and acknowledges the difficulty of seeing them "grow up." Lila has sublimated her maternal instinct for the sake of her career, making the army a replacement family for which she cares. Her promotion to base commander during the second season prompts Lila to fuss about the appearance of the base, as it seems to reflect directly on her abilities as a caregiver. She demands that the base be in "tip-top shape" and that those on leave there behave themselves properly.

"Limbo" is the second of three episodes that deals with Dodger's

near-fatal injury and resulting paralysis. As the title implies, in this episode Dodger, a mysterious figure who lurks on the perimeter of the camp, hovers between life and death while McMurphy obsessively watches over him. Included in the visual imagery are a number of flashbacks that show Dodger being injured as a child. In these scenes, the actress who plays McMurphy is also cast as the boy's mother. One of the flashbacks ends with Dodger's mother leaning over him; as Dodger comes to in the army hospital, McMurphy duplicates this action, blurring the distinction between herself and the mother. The viewer is left to wonder if it is McMurphy who has cast herself in the mother role, causing Dodger to dream of her as his mother, or if, through the process of displacement, Dodger has come to identify McMurphy as his substitute mother. It is McMurphy, however, who is traumatized when Dodger is temporarily evacuated to another hospital.

For Lila and McMurphy, the process of letting go is difficult. Mary Ann Doane, in *The Desire to Desire,* writes of motherhood as being "conceived as the always uneasy conjunction of absolute closeness and a forced distance."[8] The separation trauma experienced by these female characters is clearly a maternal one. It is also not unlike the process that hundreds of thousands of mothers underwent during the war, nor is it very dissimilar from the experience both veterans and the American public are undergoing in recovering from the scars of the U.S.–Vietnam War.

In addition to the process of healing, the series initially explored just where the Western woman's place, both her emotional and physical space, was in Vietnam. At the end of the debut episode, McMurphy is left in the first of a series of emotional and physical quandaries. Having finally decided to stay on for another year's tour, she finds that an enemy strike has destroyed the hut she had been living in. In the following episode, "Home," she is caught between homes: she will not return to her home in the States and cannot return to her "home" in Vietnam. As she reluctantly bunks in cramped quarters with Laurette, space becomes a crucial issue not only for McMurphy but the other women as well. A search for a space where the women can commune becomes a running plot line

for the remainder of the first aired season after a haphazard night is spent in an underground bunker where the women find themselves alone for the first time since they all arrived. Because they are rigidly defined by the space they work in, providing for the various needs of the men—whether physical (nurse, prostitute), emotional ("Doughnut dolly," USO showgirl), or military (base commander)—the women seek refuge from men in order to be "themselves." On the eve of her departure, in the "Chao Ong" episode, Laurette finally succeeds in constructing a special place for the women called "This is It!" On the walls are painted the names of the women who remain behind. "For women only!" "no makeup!" "no men!" remark the women as they toast her ingenuity. This, however, is the first and last time the room is shown.

The series is slippery about the issue of women's solidarity. The uniting of disparate personalities, who are thrown together by circumstances, is a combat-film convention addressed both in the "Vets" episode and in the series in general. As with World War II films that look at women in the combat zone, such as *Cry Havoc* and *So Proudly We Hail* (both 1943), attempts are made to give communion among the women a positive representation; yet the result is merely a displacement of the male bonding necessary in the male combat genre onto women, with a little hysteria thrown in for good measure. The issues discussed and the tone of specific conversations either imitate male discourse or are projections of male fantasies about women, as in the episode "Hot Spell," in which the women talk about their first sexual experience. This is not to say that women do not speak about their sexuality, but rather to suggest that the dialogue in this instance smacked more of the locker room than of the intimate confiding experienced in feminine discourse. Furthermore, much of their coming together is undercut by plot lines in which the women are consistently separated and subsequently brought back together over various, and sometimes rivaling, romantic involvements. There is no equivalent to this dynamic in the male combat film, although it is seen to a lesser degree in the other television series set in Vietnam, *Tour of Duty*. In later episodes, the women find comfort in a man's arms, in a bottle, or out on the beach,

away from the compound. (Needless to say, lesbianism is never even hinted at.) The bottom line for the women is that their solidarity is tenuous; they cannot achieve a permanent bond of trust as long as they are heterosexually competitive—not a terribly positive message about women who made severe sacrifices to be in Vietnam.

In the first season, for instance, both the USO singer, Laurette, and the base prostitute, K.C., vie for the attentions of the beach lifeguard, Boonie. Both women are redheads, and in the "Chao Ong" episode, as Laurette readies to leave China Beach and go on tour, both women appear wearing the same short-cut, Chinese-style, blue silk dress, a gift from Boonie to each at separate times. Their appearance underscores their reduction to substitutable objects of Boonie's sexual desires. To him they are interchangeable, yet they are strikingly different in personality and physicality. Important to this triangle is that Boonie receives a medal for valor, creating the "hero" as the women's object of desire. In a later episode, Wayloo Marie Holmes, a film journalist introduced in the second season, K.C., and Lila all desire the attentions of the same man—a visiting officer who is a decorated war hero. Lila's eventual winning out over the other two women has an additional dimension, as she is undergoing the first stages of menopause and being desired by an eligible man somehow alleviates her anxiety.

What is emphasized in the series, then, whether the women are vying for the attention of the same man, or displacing their maternal instincts into their careers, is that these women are caring for men, who, by the very act of being involved in an absurd war, are heroes. What women do in their jobs and in their private lives is important *because* of the men with whom they interact. *China Beach* constantly refigures the idea of the hero and notions of the heroic; despite what Broyles claims to be heroic, the activity of men and their ability to comprehend and adapt to their situation makes it all the more apparent just how out of place the women truly are. "'Nam" is presented as a combat experience that, according to the male characters, they, unlike the women, did not choose to be a part of; yet they are the only ones who can understand it. Women cannot speak to this part of their own history because there are no books,

movies, songs, or stories about combat in Vietnam that can accurately or fully place them within the grasp of the male experience, and there are fewer means in which their own experiences can be truly represented.

Most emblematic of how outside of events, how next door to war, these women are is Cherry, who has come to Vietnam as a Red Cross volunteer to find her missing brother Rick, who apparently has gone AWOL. In the episode "Brothers," Cherry turns to Dodger for help in locating Rick. Dodger informs her that she is unsuccessful because she *looks* wrong—Cherry cannot "walk the walk" or "talk the talk." This use of the word "look" not only implies that her appearance makes her stand out but also suggests, as feminist theorists argue, that because she is a woman she is not allowed within traditional male-dominated representation to be other than the object of the gaze; she herself cannot do the looking nor enter the discourse of combat soldiering in Vietnam. Instead, she must rely upon Dodger to interpret what is going on around her. He becomes the strong yet silent active figure in the search for Rick, and only when Cherry and McMurphy dress seductively and deliberately attract the male gaze does Cherry succeed in finding her brother. Even then, Dodger is needed to decode the events. Like great war heroes before him, Dodger can survive because he has the experience of combat behind him.

The result of these narrative choices is to return the soldier to the realm of hero, hence bringing the war as well to a redefined arena of Western myth. The U.S.–Vietnam War continues to become more completely contained within the confines of a dominant discourse, and its deeply troubling and disruptive reality is rendered essentially impotent. The potential for a minority experience to speak outside of or in contradiction to a majority voice is denied. One wonders whether Le Ly Hayslip will also remain voiceless once Hollywood's most prolific Vietnam storyteller, Oliver Stone, brings her memoir to the screen. Instead of allowing women to tell their own story in their own words, *China Beach* draws upon a camouflaged generic experience to affirm what has already been said and what is already known.[9]

Notes

1. Mark Morrison, "*China Beach* Salutes the Women of Vietnam," *Rolling Stone*, 19 May 1988: 76.

2. Susan Jeffords, "Friendly Civilians: Images of Women and the Feminization of the Audience in Vietnam Films," *Wide Angle* 7.4 (1985): 13.

3. Ibid.: 19.

4. Morrison, "*China Beach*": 79.

5. Lynne Joyrich, "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture," *Camera Obscura* 16 (1988): 131.

6. Howard Rosenberg, "Viet Vets Add Drama to *China Beach, Nightline*," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1989: 6, 1.

7. This image has been adopted as the program's logo, rendering the Vietnam experience ironically beautiful. The remainder of the credit sequence draws the viewer in with images of Delany sunbathing and playing volleyball. The approach of a med-evac helicopter from around a hill brings in the horrific reality of the war, from which there is no true escape. The women, like the beach, are things of beauty amid the ugliness of wounded and dying young men and are, themselves, also an ironic presence.

8. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 76.

9. This chapter was first presented at the 1989 Society for Cinema Studies conference in Iowa City, Iowa. Subsequently, *China Beach* brought a number of talented and versatile women to its staff who functioned as writers, directors, and producers, notably Mimi Leder and Lydia Woodward. Carol Flint, who began as a production assistant, wrote, directed, and produced, and served as executive story editor. These women, along with writer-producer Georgia Jeffries, had an enormously positive influence on the series' representation of women, in contrast to the first, abbreviated season (1988–89), with which this chapter deals.

In January 1991 *China Beach* was put "on hiatus," although production continued. New episodes included material that dealt with post-traumatic stress syndrome as experienced by female veterans. However, the series never touched upon the issue of rape or other acts of violence against American women by American troops, documented in Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone*. In the spring of 1991, *China Beach* was cancelled.

Male Bonding, Hollywood Orientalism, and the Repression of the Feminine in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*

Nature was miraculously skilful in concocting excuses, he thought, with a heavy, theatrical contempt. It could deck a hideous creature in enticing apparel.

When he saw how she, as a woman beckons, had cozened him out of his home and hoodwinked him into holding a rifle, he went into a rage.

He turned in tupenny fury upon the high, tranquil sky. He would have like to have splashed it with a derisive paint.

And he was bitter that among all men, he should be the only one sufficiently wise to understand these things.
— STEPHEN CRANE, *The Red Badge of Courage*

CHAPTER 11 *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) was marketed as a traditional war film, basking in the reflected glow of Kubrick's ambiguous reputation as an eccentric genius. Like most war movies, this film is, at least superficially, unconcerned with the representation of women. However, in the Warner Brothers press kit, the reviewer David Denby articulates a return of the issue of femininity repressed from the film's manifest content.[1]

> The first law of moviegoing happiness in the eighties is this: *Anticipate nothing*. Because if you dream about an important upcoming movie, if you expect it to save your life or even the movie season, the picture will turn out to be *Dune* or *The Mosquito Coast* or *The Mission*. Burned, you'll feel like the high school nerd who gets his hands on the class cheerleader only to discover she's wearing falsies. Which serves you right for caring so much about boobs, you boob.[2]

There is here a curious coincidence between Denby's critical approach and the male fantasies both made available by and powerfully critiqued by this film text—as I hope to begin to make clear in what follows. And yet this passage from Denby's review also, despite itself, echoes a deep suspicion toward the film medium that is one of the most profound meditations carried out by this film: you cannot any longer use film as a simple facilitator of fantasy, especially fantasies about women. If you do, you will get burned. A detail from *Full Metal Jacket*: in one of the many "metacinematic" moments in the film, a Vietnamese whore is taken for sex into a gutted movie theater that is advertising a Vietnamese feature as well as a rerun of *The Lone Ranger* (1956).

Like *2001* (1968) and *Barry Lyndon* (1975), Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* divides into two distinct parts, punctuated (in the latter film) by a fade to black and a drastic change of location: from the Parris Island boot camp that is the setting of the first half of the film, to Da Nang and then Hue City during the 1968 Tet offensive. Both parts feature a timeworn combat-film formula—the adaptation of the individual to the demands of a ritualistic male group.[3] In both cases that adaptation fails spectacularly, though for radically different reasons. In the first instance this failure stems from what is termed, *pace 2001*'s Hal computer, a "major malfunction" in the brain of Private Leonard Lawrence (Vincent D'Onofrio), otherwise known as Private Pyle (as in "Gomer Pyle, U.S. Marine Corps"), who becomes a suicidal maniac at the end of his humiliating boot-camp experience. The second failure of adaptation concerns the film's protagonist, ironically named Private Joker (Matthew Modine) by the foulmouthed Sergeant Hartman (Lee Ermey) because of his imitation of John Wayne. This reference to John Wayne is hardly a casual one in a movie set during the days when *The Green Berets* (1968) was a gung ho promotion for the U.S. Army.[4] Clearly, Joker is easily influenced by the movies, despite his semblance of being a freethinker. At the end of the film Joker is marching into the reddened Vietnamese night, speaking in voice-over of his "homecoming fuck fantasies" and joining in as the troops sing the "Mickey Mouse" theme song after a full day in the urban trenches.[5] Joker is

lost in the masses of men marching against a backdrop of burning ruins, whose towering shapes call to mind the McGuffin of Kubrick's *2001* (a film released in 1968)—the monolith from outer space was there the emblem or figure of a peculiarly human enigma that might be expressed by means of one haunting question: What is human violence? Are we, as Joker's helmet claims, "Born to Kill"?

In this final scene, as he sings along with the gang, Joker has accommodated himself to the group, all right. But Kubrick seems to be implying that the "major malfunction" is no longer—or perhaps never was—an individual one. The men, renamed, repackaged, and, as the sergeant puts it in boot camp, "born again hard," now move as one, as devoid of what we ordinarily call human response as are the bullets encased in the "full metal jackets" that give the film its title. Even Hal singing "Daisy" at the moment of his greatest verbal regression was more human. One could go even further and say that Kubrick in that film as in this one is breaking down any simple binary opposition between the technological and the human, showing rather how man has produced himself as inextricably technologized and violent.[6] And this production of man is, at least in *Full Metal Jacket*, as concerned with gender as it is with species. Having passed through the unholy waters of masculinization—the construction of a masculine identity—where anything infantile, female, or homoerotic is expelled with horror, Joker now finds himself deep in a "world of shit" (one of the catchphrases of the film) joining in a celebration of mass infantilism and reveling in Technicolor fantasies about "Mary Jane Rottencrotch's" breasts. Such are the contradictions of masculinity.[7]

The violent rejection of the female, of the racially "other," and of anything reminiscent of infantile susceptibility to maternal mastery is spelled out in the scapegoating scenes that structure this film. From his first encounters with Sergeant Hartman, the woefully inept Private Lawrence fails to measure up to the standards of male behavior as gauged by the bodily disposition required of a marine. Overweight and incompetent, he is verbally abused as a "disgusting fat body" and linked by the sergeant through his name to that Middle Eastern "faggot," Lawrence of Arabia.

HARTMAN: "What's your name, fat body?"
 PRIVATE: "Sir, Leonard Lawrence, sir!"
HARTMAN: "Lawrence? Lawrence what? of Arabia?"
 PRIVATE: "Sir, no sir!"
HARTMAN: "That name sounds like royalty. Are you royalty?"
 PRIVATE: "Sir, no sir!"
HARTMAN: "Do you suck dicks?"
 PRIVATE: "Sir, no sir!"
HARTMAN: "Bullshit. I'll bet you could suck a golf ball through a garden hose. I don't like the name Lawrence. Only faggots and sailors are called Lawrence. From now on you're Gomer Pyle."

Although the other men (specifically Cowboy—Arliss Howard) are also abused as "queers and steers," Pyle's limpid demand for love from Joker, his masochistic enjoyment of the first harsh words from the sergeant, reflect his unique inability, in this group, to shake the menace of the unmasculine.

The name Gomer Pyle is, of course, another timely detail in this film narrative: the television show of the same name was at the height of its popularity in 1968.[8] It featured the antics of the incompetent but lovable Private Gomer Pyle, played by the actor Jim Nabors (whose alleged homosexuality was a topic of pervasive rumor during that period), forever consigned to boot camp under the irascible eye of his drill instructor, Sergeant Carter. One of the subtly disturbing elements of *Full Metal Jacket* is its rewriting of canonical cultural texts such as this television program: here we are forced to acknowledge both the pathological nature of the private's ineptitude and the repressed homoerotic desire that serves to shape these men in the image of the lackeys of the "beloved Corps." (One might note, in this context, the scatological connotation of the name "Pyle.")[9] In the television show, Pyle's bumbling continually arouses the infuriated though distinctly maternal, even loving ministrations of Sergeant Carter, who, to be sure, keeps the proper male perspective through his relationship to his hyperfeminine girlfriend, Bunny. In both the

film and the television program, to be part of the Body (the Corps) one must shape oneself in its image. One's body must not be disgustingly or alluringly "other." The Corps is both mother and father, functioning according to group dynamics that fall distinctly within the Imaginary order as Lacan describes it, with the consequent aggression directed toward the body itself insofar as it is the threateningly powerful maternal body; this aggression is directed only secondarily against the enemy. The men are also, we have seen, *renamed* by the sergeant, who here and elsewhere obviously exercises the prerogative of bringing the men under the sway of the group superego that stands in for the Lacanian Symbolic function. At every juncture, however, the line between male bonding and the baldly homoerotic is a fine one. As the drill sergeant puts it in his Christmas speech, "God has a hard-on for Marines."

The film's Private Pyle is finally put under the charge of Private Joker, who is to instruct him in all the practices of soldiering, which Joker does both reluctantly and tenderly. At first this task is carried out with some success. In a series of standard boot-camp scenes (some of which, like the shoe-tying episode, are also to be found in Coppola's *Gardens of Stone* (1987)—the failure of the latter film can be gauged in part by its leaden use of this and other stock scenes), Pyle is shown making slow but steady progress. Then, in one of the many stylistically astounding barracks inspection scenes, Pyle commits an error that he will never live down—he is caught with a jelly doughnut concealed in his footlocker. Hartman declares that from now on the entire group will suffer for Pyle's mistakes and has the men do push-ups while Pyle eats the doughnut. Later, Pyle is made to suck his thumb (for the second time in the film) while the other men do "squat-thrusts and side-straddle hops"[10] as penance for their association with this now marginalized baby. The interdependency of group and individual—which, according to the World War II film formula outlined by Robert Ray, must always be shown to be a *resolvable* opposition—is brought into stark relief, then finally dissolved at the end of the film as Joker melts into the now irrevocably infantilized group. In this film Kubrick has it both ways: he fulfills combat-film formulas as he rewrites them.

Both major segments of *Full Metal Jacket* are marked by what we might term, following Girard, the "violent unanimity" of the group against the individual.[11] In the marine boot camp the event occurs as follows: on an eerily blue moonlit night, Pyle is held down and gagged while each man takes a blow at his body with a bar of soap wrapped in a towel. Joker at first holds back, does not want to hit this boy he has nurtured, but, in the first moment of his moral collapse, he finally joins in and delivers six particularly vicious blows. Pyle is himself transformed into a monster by this victimization. It is only when he is clearly insane that Pyle begins to "fit in" to the Corps (this is one of the film's more obvious messages): soon after this scene he develops into a crack rifleman. Having been inculcated with the ethos of the assassin by Hartman, who "jokingly" offers as models to the men the former marine riflemen Lee Harvey Oswald and Charles Whitman, Pyle later turns his rifle on himself and the sergeant in the barracks head. "I *am* in a world of shit," Pyle declares to Joker, who tries to talk him down with a warning. Although he has at this point graduated from boot camp, Pyle cannot leave behind the confusing miasma of his own infantilism, the blood and violence and desire for male love (the toilet on which he kills himself, like his name, might be seen as a sign of his fixation on the anal) that form the infrastructure of the Marine Corps but must be externalized onto women and the enemy. So Joker spends the rest of the film seeking to externalize this action—to take it out of the men's head, so to speak.[12] For example, the "properly" adapting apprentice marine uses the head in this way: In the very same restroom where Pyle dies on a toilet with his brains blown out, Joker and his buddy Cowboy had exchanged the first in a series of ritual insults of the women in their families—Joker to Cowboy: "I wanna slip my tubesteak in your sister. What'll you take in trade?" Cowboy: "What d'ya got?" The "head" is a place where male control of "tubesteaks" and the consequent devaluation of the women available for barter is paramount. In this woman-rejecting and expelling process, there are no more taboos: even though the sergeant at one point attempts to force Joker to acknowledge the sacredness of the Virgin Mary, this ritualistic invocation of the name

of the Mother of God only anticipates the discovery that there is no "elsewhere," no place where the good mother still prevails unassailable in her purity. One could scarcely imagine, in the diegetic world of *Full Metal Jacket*, the existence of a character like the grandmother (unproblematically) addressed by the protagonist of *Platoon* (1986) in his letters home. ②

Although Joker is a witness to Pyle's act of suicidal homoeroticism—Pyle has, in effect, offered his body to the drill sergeant—he goes off apparently unscathed to Da Nang as a reporter for *Stars and Stripes*, the newspaper of the armed forces. Ordered up-country for smarting off during an editorial meeting after the Tet offensive, Joker and his overly eager buddy Rafterman (Kevyn Major Howard) join up with Cowboy's combat unit in the days following the Tet offensive. The film's second scene of what I am calling "violent unanimity" against the "other" is foreshadowed by an earlier event, where a prostitute (Leanne Hong) poses and talks dirty for Joker and his buddy. Her swaying progress across the screen is the first action of the second half of the film and is accompanied by the theme song of country-western feminism, "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'", a sassy woman's song about taking control of her life (by stomping on a man). Suddenly, in one of Joker's only direct encounters with a living male Vietnamese, a young man (Nguyen Hue Phong) grabs Rafterman's camera, going through some karate moves obviously derived (anachronistically) from Bruce Lee films in a kind of mimeticism of Asian masculinity—moves that are amiably imitated by Joker. [13] This admiration for the Vietnamese warrior is borne out in another scene in the film, when Joker encounters a dead North Vietnamese (Duc Hu Ta) who is the "mascot" of the unit he joins. The dead man's American buddy praises the North Vietnamese Army, the gooks who are a worthy enemy, like "slant-eyed drill instructors"—not like the ungrateful South Vietnamese who bring them whores and hide bombs in babies' diapers. If this were a world of men, of drill instructors, slant-eyed or otherwise, the warrior ideal could prevail. [14] It is the South Vietnamese, not the NVA, who are associated with a degraded femininity.

Later in the film, another prostitute is brought before the men of the unit by a South Vietnamese Army pimp. The woman agrees to have sex with all the men for $5 each after some complicated negotiations, including an argument about the size of black men's penises, in which it is concluded, reassuringly, that black men's penises are *not* larger than white men's. Here the sexual threat posed by the racial "otherness" of Eightball (Dorian Harewood), the "nigger behind the trigger," as he puts it, is recuperated; so, too, is he recuperated in his "otherness" by belonging to the Corps, although the potential threat he offers is never far from the surface of the narrative. The scene of a group of men and a single woman ends "humorously," with "Animal Mother," the quintessence of man-as-fighting-machine, taking first honors with the whore, displacing the black soldier.

Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin) is an arresting character. With a helmet that reads "I AM BECOME DEATH," he seems to be the reincarnation of Pyle in the form of a fighting man, as though that repository of infantile or animal instincts could not be entirely repressed, but may in fact be necessary for the group's survival, even as walking dead. [15] A crack shot, as was Pyle, Animal Mother looks like a "hard" version of the dead recruit. And his name is an index of that never quite completely expelled "maternal" force that seems to haunt the film: Animal Mother is the fighting man (a particularly ruthless one) who must wear the banner of the fertile female principle if he is not to be subsumed by it. Pyle, who wanted to be mothered, is now a mother himself. We could, once again, invoke the notion of a return of repressed ideas, or, in a slightly more deconstructive mode, note how the dominant term in the binary pairs set up by the film (in this case "adult-infant" and "mother-son") depends upon the logic of the repressed term.

The climax of the film takes place when the men of the unit suffer horrifying casualties from the assault of an unseen sniper, located, like the former marine crack shots Oswald and Whitman, in a building somewhere above the victims. These not-quite-dead victims squirm in the dust, their screams tormenting their fellow marines. Here at last is the true test of war: enraged by the violent loss of Cowboy, Joker tries to become a real warrior. He makes his

way into the sniper's building—only to find that "he" is a young, austerely dressed Vietcong woman.[16] Joker is paralyzed when he sees her: when he recovers, his rifle jams, then he fumbles the pistol he had drawn for his defense. Leaping into the breach, Rafterman blazes away with his M16, felling but not killing her. There ensues a strange dialogue between the men, who stand over the woman's body as though this were a gang rape, as they had stood over Pyle when they hit him, as they had stood over their dead comrades, and as they had figuratively surrounded the $5 whore. They are clearly confused by this woman who embodies both the repulsive and castrating "otherness" of womanhood and the ephemeral virginal/warrior ideal (she is praying—or at least the men think she is—and they are curiously restrained in their treatment of her). Animal wants to leave her to rot, but in an act of "mercy" Joker puts her out of her misery. "Hard core, man," comment his fellow marines.

In point of fact, the symmetry with the earlier scenes indicates to us that Joker has inexorably succumbed to what Girard might term the machine-logic of victimization, if indeed Joker's status as outsider in conflict with the group, as he who raised the question of "man's duality," was ever genuine. He lifts his hand against the woman as he had against Pyle, as had the human ape against his fellow ape in *2001*. Caught in a double bind, Joker can perform an act of mercy only as a gesture of scapegoating, one for which he must now take personal responsibility. Social unanimity involves violence against the "other": in a capitalist-imperialist society that "other" is a third-world Communist; under patriarchy it is a woman. While the woman is obviously not the only "victim" Kubrick portrays (indeed the women in these films are often complicitous with the powers of oppression), his films almost always show that Western social structures are based on ejection of and contempt for female sexuality. This contempt is curiously coupled with a pervasive desire for regression to the womb, as the last scene of the film (where the men sing "Mickey Mouse"—Hollywood as matrix) seems to indicate. In *Full Metal Jacket* we see the production of man—the storm troopers of America at the apogee, perhaps the final moment, of its imperial power—as a killing machine, whose violence finds

its model in that inflicted on women. This is not a film that specifically represents the struggle of the Vietnamese people: it is a film about the construction of the racist woman-haters who walk, as Animal Mother puts it, "like Jolly Green Giants with guns" across the face of the earth. Woman is troped, in this and other films by Kubrick, as the "Virgin Mary," whose name is invoked in all seriousness by the drill sergeant, and simultaneously as the cloacal shit from which the fighting men are trying to emerge so that they can become "real" men. Clearly, the woman-sewer or woman-fosterer-of-regression must be destroyed, but we have seen that, to their confusion, the men find that in doing so they have also destroyed both the virgin-mother and the warrior ideal that silently pervade the film's ideological structure.

In *Male Fantasies*, his book on the formation of the protofascist "soldier male" in Germany after World War I, Klaus Theweleit describes the Freikorps soldier's fear of the terrifying Communist riflewoman. These riflewomen were perceived as being endowed with a fearful instrument of castration: "The men experience communism as a *direct* assault on their *genitals*," according to Theweleit.[17] Thor Goote, a fascist author whose works Theweleit closely examines, describes a battle in the Baltic, where rumors were rife of armed Red Army women on the warpath after men.

> [T]he worst thing is not to die from a head wound, as this boy has just done; it is far worse to be captured by this bestial enemy, to suffer the most drawn-out, bitter and tortured death imaginable at the hands of sadistically grinning rifle women.

> [T]he dead continued to scream, though they were already cold. They will scream into eternity, those twelve savaged men of the Iron Legion, each drenched in black blood between hips and thighs, each with that terrible wound with which the bestial foe has desecrated defenseless, wounded men.[18]

So, too, in *Full Metal Jacket,* does the sniper woman lure the men one by one to their bloody doom, set in opposition to the clean "head

wound." Of course, Kubrick is both alluding to and undermining this image of the sadistic riflewoman by surrounding us with conflicting images about her. Theweleit continues: "The sexuality of the proletarian woman/gun slinging whore/communist is out to castrate and shred men to pieces. It seems to be her imaginary penis [whose visible representation is the rifle] that grants her the hideous power to do so."[19] The female phallus is, in *Full Metal Jacket*, fully feminine: Hartman orders his men to name their rifles after women (Pyle's is "Charlene") and to sleep with them each night.

The castrating riflewoman is menacing not only because of her phallic attribute but in some cases because of "something else, too," as Theweleit puts it—that something being racial or ethnic "otherness."

> SALOMÉ, RUTH, ESTHER: she stands there, a half-flight above him. Tight, tucked in shirt; left hand planted on her hip; right hand brandishing a pistol. The woman who enticed them to come up, with her shouting and crying.[20]

The beautiful, castrating Jewess is like her silent Vietnamese counterpart; both stand above the men, armed and dangerous.

Kubrick's representation of the enemy woman is, as I have indicated, a complex one. The Vietcong sniper, allied with the North Vietnamese, presents a sharp contrast to the whores of capitalism, as though Kubrick wanted us to make no mistake about the conditions of women under the two social systems in operation in Vietnam. The liberal Kubrick (one could also argue for a "radical" and for a "libertarian" Kubrick) makes sure that we get the opposite message to that given by the Freikorps officers who confront the Communist whores. And yet Kubrick's sniper is a Communist riflewoman who mutilates the men squirming on the ground beneath her. Joker has reached both a moral impasse and the point where it is no longer possible to conquer the woman, even through gang rape or execution. And having this woman of iron beg for death is no relief, either. The idealized virginal woman and the destructive Communist whore cannot finally be separated.

Full Metal Jacket is not Kubrick's first antiwar film. In 1953

Kubrick directed *Fear and Desire*, an abstract meditation on certain existential issues of war.[21] *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is, of course, a black comedy about nuclear annihilation. The (seemingly) more traditionally humanistic 1957 antiwar film, *Paths of Glory*, is structured, like *Full Metal Jacket*, on the scapegoating of individuals within a military context. And in the former film, as in each of Kubrick's films dealing with war, women play a significant, if liminal, role.

In *Paths of Glory*, Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) defends his men against charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy, brought by the lunatic "bad" father figure General Mireau.[22] Mireau's paranoia and lack of conviction in his leadership lead him to irrational behavior, for which he himself is finally cynically weeded out of the French Army at the end of the film. As in *Full Metal Jacket*, the men are propelled in forward motion toward a deadly objective—in this case they must conquer "the Anthill," a name indicating the dehumanizing effect of the forced assault. They fail in their attempt and then are psychologically tortured by their commandant, who arbitrarily executes three of their comrades. At the end of the film we find the remaining soldiers seated in a tavern watching an enemy woman (in this case a German) perform on stage. Their lewd catcalls quickly turn to tears as the woman sings a touching ballad instead of the torch song they had expected. This victimized "enemy" woman is in fact doubly the object of a spectacle, since Dax is outside watching his men watch her, paternally or paternalistically concerned with the nature of their response to her. But unlike *Full Metal Jacket*'s men, *these* men are able to make the moment of scapegoating itself into one of community, sharing this sad song with the woman as they would a lullaby, accepting her mastery of a language they may not understand. The men in *Paths of Glory* remain "human" because they can accept their own infantilism without violently punishing the woman who makes them aware of their helplessness. (One of the lyrics in the German song is "Please, Mother, bring a light.")

Earlier in *Paths of Glory*, Mireau had struck a man, a victim of shell shock who was acting like a "baby." Mireau cannot bear to see

his own fear reflected in the outside world. Obviously we are not to take him for the hero he believes himself to be. Still, in this film Kubrick seems to posit, though ironically, that "real men"—neither babies nor afraid of babies—might exist, and he offers Dax as a stand-in for that possibility. Mireau had earlier declared the Anthill "pregnable." Dax replies—"It sounds odd, like something to do with giving birth." Real men can look without fear into the abyss of female sexuality and reproduction—and still respect the purity of women. Such is the doublethink of old-time gallantry. However, even in this early film, what it means to be a man, to be human, to be a spectator are never simple givens, but are, as I have indicated, continually problematized. While Dax's men seem to accept their own infantilism without violently punishing the woman who brings it to their attention, they can only express their "humanity" in response to a markedly maudlin spectacle. We in turn must question our spectatorial relationship to Kubrick's close-ups of the tears on Dax's men's faces: the meaning of the sympathetic response as evoked by cinema is cast into doubt in the earlier as in the later film, though the political situations represented by the films are radically unlike.

In the title of this chapter I allude to a phenomenon that I have termed "Hollywood Orientalism." By this qualification of the notion of Orientalism, I mean to indicate that I do not wish to invoke the entire history of Western dealings with that heterogeneous "other" that it has called "the Orient," but simply to contextualize the representation of women in *Full Metal Jacket* by pointing to a tendency in *film noir* and in films about Vietnam (to name only two genres) to conflate various Eastern cultures with corrupt sexuality, a degraded or treacherous femininity, and male homoeroticism.[23] I will now take advantage of a textual cue in *Full Metal Jacket* to turn briefly to a late-colonial Orientalist text where a masochistic and homoerotic "turning in on oneself" is presented in the guise of a glorious form of male bonding among Arab men.[24] Lawrence of Arabia, who, as we have seen, is specifically named in Kubrick's film, is one well-known colonialist man who acted out the fantasy of "going native" (in this case, in the Middle East) in explicitly mas-

ochistic and homosexual terms.[25] T. E. Lawrence's works bring to the surface the deepest fears (and desires) of white colonialist and postcolonialist men everywhere.[26] As Rana Kabani has written, "Lawrence's 'heroic' epic begins with a passage that seems at odds with the lofty title [*Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*]. It describes the homosexual relations that Lawrence claimed took place all around him in the desert."[27]

> Friends quivering together in the yielding sand with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort. Several, thirsting to punish appetites they could not wholly prevent, took a savage pride in degrading the body, and offered themselves fiercely in any habit which promised physical pain.[28]

Kabbani suggests that this "unlikely description of quivering bedouins" may represent "Lawrence's subconscious portrayal of his own desires." In projecting such a lurid fantasy about Oriental male relationships, Lawrence seems to be attempting to do his Eastern brothers one better, exaggerating the homosociality/homoeroticism of Arab men to suit his fancy. One is reminded of Colonel Kurtz, in *Apocalypse Now,* whose reinterpretation of Asian customs is inscribed in violent rather than in explicitly erotic terms.

The view of the Middle and Far East discernible in *Full Metal Jacket* echoes the Hollywood Orientalist ideology at work in a number of films from the 1940s through the 1980s, where certain issues of gender, race, and war are covertly or overtly addressed. I will concentrate here on the films where the Far East, rather than the Middle East, is the geographical area indirectly or directly under scrutiny.[29] In many of the films in this rather inchoate category, there is a bizarre coincidence of *gesture* that caught my attention. The gesture is one of annihilation, and seems to be strongly overdetermined, an intertextual allusion that expresses the Western man's externalization and vicarious destruction of his own fears and desires.

Film noir has offered a rich field for the observation of sexual role playing to theorists of gender. And, as is well known, *film noir* has its own historical tie to World War II. Howard Hawks's *Big Sleep* was, for example, made at the end of World War II; indeed, it was previewed by men overseas on the front. Annette Kuhn has observed an intriguing pattern of movement in this hermeneutically dense film.[30] During its last few minutes, we return to a site that was obsessively investigated earlier in the film by the protagonist, Philip Marlowe. The place is Geiger's house, a den of corruption, where blackmail, pornography, drug dealing, and other unsavory activities were carried out by the now-deceased homosexual tenant, Arthur Gwynn Geiger. A young woman, Carmen Sternwood, had been blackmailed by Geiger with pictures taken by a camera concealed in an Asian statuette, one of the many generically Asian art objects decorating Geiger's sinister home. Indeed, Carmen is found at one point in the film in Geiger's house wearing Chinese clothes. (In Chandler's novel she is naked, obviously not a choice for Hawks— Chinese clothing is thus a permissible though still, we are apparently to gather, sleazy substitute for nudity.) Philip Marlowe loves Carmen's older sister, Vivian—but even at the end of the film Vivian is still too closely associated with Carmen's disturbing sexual and infantile behavior to be considered a reliable potential sexual partner.[31] In this last scene of the film Marlowe must solve, once and for all, the enigma that Kuhn terms *the* enigma of female sexuality, here, as is often the case, conflated with the mysteries of the Orient and the perversions of effeminate men.

Is Vivian a good woman? What is her secret allegiance to Eddie Mars? In the last scene of the film, Marlowe (with Vivian's help) sets up Geiger's house as a place where he will ambush and kill Mars. In this crucial scene, the Asian statuette, of indeterminate, possibly feminine appearance to the eyes of the Westerner, is first linked to Vivian by means of a dissolve over *her* head, then shot by Marlowe in an uncharacteristically hysterical burst of anger at Eddie Mars. Mars is then sprayed with machine-gun fire by his own men, an act that has foul incestuous or homoerotic overtones (penetration, orgasm, death). Vivian has earned her spurs through her passive

cooperation with Marlowe. This bit of quintessentially Hawksian teamwork, where the woman seems to be an equal partner but is in fact subordinated to the man, makes the symbolic point of resolving through violence the enigma of what we might call the Orientalized woman. Interestingly, as the scene was first scripted, Carmen (the naughty sister) herself was to have been shot. Instead, she will simply be put away somewhere. In 1945, when *The Big Sleep* was first shown, the United States was on the verge of winning World War II. The Japanese menace will surely be beaten back—the "disturbance in the sphere of sexuality,"[32] curiously conflated with the Asiatic, also appears more resolvable in 1945 than it does in 1968, as seen, in *Full Metal Jacket*, through the lenses of 1987. At the end of World War II, the Japanese were defeated and, on the home front, women left the factories to return en masse to the domestic sphere. The specters of the spread of Asian Communism and of the increasing autonomy of women in the American work force were not so readily vanquished or contained after the war in Vietnam.

The destruction of the "Orientalized" woman has, as I have implied, a *gestural* as well as thematic relationship to later cinematic purges of dubious characters. The gesture is simply a shot to the head, a common enough suicidal or homicidal modus operandi, but strangely insisted upon in this body of films I am examining. In a discussion of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Robin Wood lays particular emphasis on the film's quasi-mystical treatment of what the protagonists call the "one shot," that pure, masculine single shot that kills the deer stateside, but in Vietnam is transformed into the suicidal, Asianized, and homoerotic Russian roulette subculture used by the Christopher Walken character (Nick) as a way of "going native."[33] The "one shot" is thus transformed during the course of the film from an "emblem of control"[34] to "a monstrously perverted enactment of the union he [Nick] has always desired [with Mike]."[35] It is, I think, important to emphasize that this (probably mythical) game is presented as an *Asian* one, forced upon the men when they are held prisoner by the Vietcong.[36] Nick takes possession of the game as a masochistic expression of his desire for the sexually reticent Mike: the turning inward of sexual aggression is thus once again troped as

a process of "Asianization." According to Wood, Mike's attempt to save Nick from the addiction to this perverse game (which he likens to Chance's rescue of Dude from alcoholism in *Rio Bravo* [1959]) can only spell to Nick a return to repression, a return to the externalized, aggressive, and "masculine" meaning of the "one shot."[37] Obviously, Wood sees *The Deer Hunter* very much as a "male love story,"[38] though he seems to see the subversive treatment of male sexuality in this film as less a deliberate act on the part of Cimino than as a product of larger cultural determinants.

A film that, by contrast, works in what is clearly a self-conscious and deliberately citational mode is Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), which to some extent deconstructs the *film noir* conflation of the enigma of feminine sexuality with the cultural "otherness" of the Chinese. *Chinatown*'s female protagonist, a victim of paternal incest, cannot be salvaged—she is doomed to remain a victim of her hopelessly contorted past. Like Carmen in the original screenplay for *The Big Sleep*, Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) is finally shot in the head (her eye is shot out, as is the camera eye at the end of *The Big Sleep*), only in this case the "one shot" is not fired in the shady home of a homosexual man, but, more directly, in Chinatown itself. The ending of Polanski's film shows that Gittis (Jack Nicholson) is precisely *unable* to purge himself of the evils associated with the "Asianized" woman by means of this act of violence. Rather, the scene reveals that Gittis is caught in a repetition compulsion that (by nature) is both out of his control and a deliberate choice he has made: he had lost a woman in Chinatown in the past, and now it is he who has asked Evelyn Mulwray to meet him in Chinatown, where she is killed by the police. A group of Chinese passersby watches the tragic spectacle, obviously not directly implicated in the events unfolding before them (though our discussion of spectatorship in *Paths of Glory* might indicate a need to examine further the meaning of "looking on" in this scene, as well). In this way Polanski wryly comments on *film noir*'s use of Chinatown as a figure of *Western* corruption.[39]

Although Cimino's recent film *Year of the Dragon* (1986) treats many of the same issues that come up in *Chinatown*, its presentation

of the sexual and ethnic material it unearths is, as one might suspect, muddled.[40] *Year of the Dragon* is a strangely anachronistic film about a cop's extended flashback of Chinatown-as-Vietnam, as a place that can only be purged of its corruption by all-out warfare. (The references to Vietnam are explicit, as when Stanley White [Mickey Rourke] declares that "this is a fucking war and I'm not going to lose it—not this one.")[41] Not surprisingly, the detective's mission includes saving a woman from the evil influence of the Chinese, of Chinatown. Oddly, the woman, Tracy Tzu (Ariane), a television reporter, is herself Chinese, as White vehemently reminds her throughout the film. At the end of the film the white man does manage to save the Asian woman from the threat of her native culture, after having vigorously dragged her back to Chinatown from the assimilated place in white society she had earlier achieved. While Chinatown-as-Vietnam remains allegorical in Polanski's film, *Year of the Dragon* depicts Chinatown as the literal locus for working through the post-traumatic stress experienced by the Vietnam vet, who rescues/exorcises the woman held captive by her own ethnicity. Like Vivian Rutledge, Tracy will be domesticated—but, true to the reigning ideology of the 1980s, domesticity has been portrayed as even more threatening than Chinatown. The film's plot is predicated on an initial conflict between the detective and his wife, Connie (Caroline Kava), an aggressive woman (she constantly tells her husband not to "break her balls") who wants badly to have a child. This desire sends her husband into paroxysms of doubt and evasive behavior. Before she manages to become pregnant, Connie is killed by Chinese gangsters. The final rescue of Tracy is thus both a displaced rescue of the wife and a more sinister replacement of the phallic mother (a woman with balls who wants to get pregnant) by the more salvageable (because finally less demanding) assimilated Asian yuppie. The "one shot" is also in evidence in this film: in a final, climactic scene White permits a Chinese gangster to commit suicide with his gun. Asian sexuality—both masculine and feminine—as well as Chinese upward mobility are thus punished and brought back under white control at the end of the film.

In his analysis of *Dr. Strangelove*, Peter Baxter describes the

"ineradicable tendency towards self-abasement, even self-destruction, that is almost universally repressed in the construction of masculinity."[42] The joyous self-annihilation of male-dominated Western culture is made hilariously explicit in that film (viz., its subtitle, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb"). Baxter's reading of *Dr. Strangelove* concentrates on "the one woman" in the film, Miss Scott (the bikinied secretary), who, like the "single women" in *Paths of Glory* and *Full Metal Jacket*, functions to reflect and transmit various masculine concerns. Baxter notes that "the comic conceit" of *Dr. Strangelove* derives from the fact that "between men and the reality of politics and war intervenes the realm of sexual phantasy,"[43] a phantasy focused on "the nostalgic desire for a past that cannot be reached except in death. Doomsday echoes with the voice of the one woman we once upon a time all knew."[44] As I have already indicated, Baxter, like Kaja Silverman and a number of other critics, emphasizes the primacy of masochism in this (male) phantasy,[45] in which a desire for pain, humiliation, and death is attributed to other beings, generally those of lower social (i.e., ethnic or sexual) status. *Full Metal Jacket* incorporates both the "turning inward" of male masochistic homoeroticism and its aggressive turning outward in the form of projection and denial that we have observed in the films discussed above. In *The Deer Hunter*, male love of other men is a disruptive force, capable of tearing apart the social fabric of the homophobic, working-class American community. It is also shown to be strongly linked to a self-destructive fantasy that is attributed to the Vietnamese. In *Full Metal Jacket*, male homosocial bonding forcibly expels its homoerotic content—and yet Pyle's self-annihilation under the eyes of his buddy/mother remains the erotic focus of the film. *Full Metal Jacket* progresses from that image of violence and eroticism turned *inward*, to its outward infliction on a woman, as part of a chain of violent group actions against marginal figures. From fantasies (and phantasies) about male homosexual love entrenched in violent projections of masochistic desire, from heterosexual interactions irremediably founded on denigration and fear, to homo- and heterosexualities less marked by patriarchal victimization patterns: these are social and political gains that will not have

been achieved by the time the next Kubrick film is released (even if it is as long in the making as was *Full Metal Jacket*). In the meantime, we can expect to continue to see works in which the Western male's desire to abase himself to the great white father is put off on Arabs, Asians, and women, the "natural" masochists of the world.

Notes

1. It is, I think, significant that the press kit has no pictures of any of the three women who appear in the film.

2. David Denby, "Waiting for Stanley," *Premiere*, July–August 1987. Included as an insert in the Warner Brothers promotional packet for *Full Metal Jacket*.

3. For a succinct and informative discussion of the functioning of this formula, see Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985) 112–25.

4. This connection with *The Green Berets* is made much more explicit in Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), from which the film was adapted. In "Full Metal Genre: Kubrick's Vietnam Combat Movie," *Film Quarterly* 42.2 (1988–89): 24–30, Thomas Doherty notes that the grunts in Hasford's novel laugh at the naïveté of Wayne's film. Kubrick's Joker comes off as more credulous, regarding the media, than is his novelistic equivalent. And like the journalist in *The Green Berets*, Joker is also a reporter who begins by being "cynical" about the war but becomes a believer by the end of the film.

5. Mickey Mouse makes his appearance at least two other times in the film—once when the sergeant asks the soon-to-be homicidal Pyle, "What is this Mickey Mouse shit?" and once as a figure in the background of the *Stars and Stripes* "office," next to the lieutenant.

6. The "technologized" man is neither machine nor human, but something called a "killer" (another of Joker's nicknames). Joker describes the sergeant as proud when the men grow beyond his control: "The Marine Corps does not want robots. The Marine Corps wants killers. The Marine Corps wants to build indestructible men. Men without fear."

7. The ending of Kubrick's film is only very loosely adapted (by Kubrick, Michael Herr, and Gustav Hasford) from Hasford's novel. Elements of dialogue in this sequence and the group march itself are garnered from other sections of the novel. The final product, in *Full Metal Jacket*, is an ending that very much resembles that of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of*

Courage, as Ed Dryden indicated to me and as I have hinted by using an epigraph taken from that novel. (The "derisive paint" to be splashed against the sky by Crane's protagonist anticipates the haunting lyrics of the Rolling Stones's "Paint It Black," which is played over the film's final credits.) Kubrick's is an ironic version of the already ironic Crane text— both film and novel achieve a peculiar impersonality of tone despite their close recounting of a young man's experience of a war whose political implications are (directly) dealt with almost not at all. See James A. Stevenson, "Beyond Stephen Crane: *Full Metal Jacket,*" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 238–43, for a more extensive discussion of Kubrick's reworking of Crane. The most striking differences between Hasford's novel and Kubrick's film are structural ones: by expanding the boot-camp episode Kubrick gives as much weight to the construction of the soldier mentality as to the "Vietnam experience," and by emphasizing certain pivotal scenes of violence he achieves a more economical effect than does Hasford, who, it seems to me, adds a note of ideological confusion when he has Joker "mercy kill" Cowboy, as well as the Vietcong sniper.

8. In *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), David Marc notes that although the show paralleled precisely the worst years of American combat deaths in Vietnam, the word was never mentioned in the series (129).

9. The motif of anality reappears when the men laugh at Private Snowball for calling the structure from which Oswald shot Kennedy a "book suppository building."

10. Hasford, *The Short-Timers* 16.

11. See, especially, René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), for Girard's most far-reaching discussion of the social origins of scapegoating.

12. Moments before he is shot, Sergeant Hartman asks Pyle, "Just what are you doing in my head?" The significance of the image of the "head" in *Full Metal Jacket* has been more fully explored by Elaine Marshall in a paper entitled "Looking into *Full Metal Jacket* and the Problem of Cinematic Representation" presented at the Florida State University thirteenth annual Conference on Literature and Film, January 1988. In "*Full Metal Jacket* and the Beast Within," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988), Claude J. Smith, Jr., notes that in *Strangelove* the "probably homosexual General Jack D. Ripper similarly committed suicide inside his latrine, apparently via a head wound" (228).

13. That Kubrick is willing to use such an anachronism in his film is

characteristic of the suspicion pervading *Full Metal Jacket* about the ability of media (including television and newspapers) to "mimetically transfer truth" (Gerri Reaves, "From Hasford's *The Short-Timers* to Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket,*" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 [1988]: 236). In the television interview scene and elsewhere, "we get Kubrick's comments on the creation of a gigantic media event and on the obvious discrepancies between the reality of the war and the soldiers' perceptions of the war" (234). The Bruce Lee citation serves to remind us that we are looking at a depiction of the Vietnam War filtered through twelve years of postwar media representations.

14. "The more socially 'efficient' scapegoating is, the more capable it is of generating a positive transfiguration of the scapegoat, as well as the negative transfiguration of fear and hostility. The positive transfiguration is still present in the feudal and even the national traditions of military warfare. The enemy is respected as well as intensely disliked" (René Girard, "Generative Scapegoating" in *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation,* ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987] 94).

15. I owe this insight about the "identity" of Pyle's and Animal Mother's character, as well as aspects of my analysis of the role of spectatorship in *Paths of Glory* (below), to a discussion with Mark Crispin Miller. I thank him here for his many useful comments both after screening the film and when this chapter was in manuscript form.

16. In Hasford's novel the sniper is described as Eurasian; see Hasford, *The Short-Timers* 116. In Chapter 6 of this book, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," Tony Williams comments that the woman's Eurasian ethnicity makes it possible to read her as Joker's feminine double. Although Williams's is a powerful reading of this scene in the novel, I see little evidence in *Full Metal Jacket* that the woman is meant to be partly European.

17. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies,* vol. 1: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History,* tr. Stephen Conway, in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 74. As this essay was first going to press, I discovered that Tania Modleski had also written on *Full Metal Jacket,* using Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* as one of her tutor texts. See Tania Modleski, "A Father Is Being Beaten: Male Feminism and the War Film," *Discourse* 10.2 (Spring–Summer 1988): 62–77. Modleski's placement of *Full Metal Jacket* within the context of other recent war films' depictions of the relation between sexual and military

conquest is extremely useful. She comments on Kubrick's refusal (in contrast to Stone in *Platoon*) to validate the "father": "the authoritarian nature of military training is [shown to be] positively disenabling" (72), as is indicated by Cowboy's strategically disastrous misreading of the map. "Thus," she continues, "Kubrick extensively undermines male authority; the father is not resurrected after he is killed off" (74). Still, the "paternal" power undermined by Kubrick is to a certain extent "recuperated in the signature of the filmmaker himself, the man who has the power to undertake the critique of authority in the first place" (74). Ironically, the overall effect of *Full Metal Jacket* may have been to glamorize the Marine Corps, through the intervention of this authorial signature.

18. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* 74 is citing Goote (Johannes M. Berg), *Kamerad Berthold der "unvergleichliche Franke": Bild eines deutschen Soldaten* (Hamburg, n.d. [copyright: Braunschweig, 1937]) 286, 297.

19. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* 76.

20. Ibid. 78.

21. Like *Full Metal Jacket*, this early film also focuses on the interaction between a group of men and a female hostage. See Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) for details.

22. Oliver Stone's *Platoon* might be seen as a (simplistic) rewriting of the good-father, bad-father dichotomy in *Paths of Glory*.

23. For an encyclopedic overview of the Orient as "an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture," see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Said's discussion of the Occident's sexual obsession with the Orient has strongly influenced my own treatment of the subject. See also Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

24. In my discussions of male bonding I am referring implicitly to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially to *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), where she explores the importance of male homosocial bonds in British culture and literature and the related repression of male homosexuality in Western culture.

25. The reference to Lawrence of Arabia by Sergeant Hartman seems to be a deliberate choice in Kubrick's film, although I do not know which of the collaborators on the script (Kubrick, Herr, Hasford) came up with the idea. In Hasford's novel Leonard's last name is "Pratt."

26. It would take me too far afield to examine the complex situation of

the female colonialist. Obviously, the position of the white middle- or upper-class woman differs entirely from that of the (dominated) colonial subject, male or female, although a conflation of these positions seems to take place in some of the texts I am describing. In a more complete discussion of the relationship between colonialism, Orientalism, and gender politics, it would also be important to consider the function of lesbianism and of colonial female sexual adventurism in the Orient (cf. *Emanuelle* [1974], which takes place in Thailand).

27. Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* 110–11. In *Between Men*, Sedgwick discusses T. E. Lawrence as "charting the alien but to him compelling geography of male homosociality in the Arab culture" and remarks that "he had moved from intensely charged but apparently unfulfilling bonds with Englishmen, to bonds with Arab men that had, for political reasons, far more space for fantasy and mystification and hence for the illusionistic charisma of will" (195). Those "political reasons" for the Englishman's sense of a greater freedom to act out his sexual fantasies in the Orient include the dominance of the British Empire over the Arab world. For Sedgwick, Lawrence's experiences among the Arabs represent a "kind of postgraduate or remedial Public School," where the homosexual component of homosociality is explored without risk to class or gender privilege. See also Kaja Silverman's detailed discussion of the nature of Lawrence's homosexual masochistic fantasies and their complex relation to British imperialism in "White Skin, Brown Masks: The Double Mimesis; or, With Lawrence in Arabia," *Differences* 1.3 (1989): 3–54.

28. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London, 1935; repr. 1965) 29.

29. I will not attempt rigorously to delineate the often composite profile of the ethnically "other" that is found in the films under discussion. A recent Hollywood film offers a good example of the difficulties involved in sorting out Hollywood's representations of ethnic and racial groups. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) is largely a remake of *Chinatown*, except that the oppressed social group in the film consists of "Toons," indestructible, marginally human cartoon figures housed in a ghetto called Toontown. As the film industry's most exploited entertainers, the Toons are modeled on black musicians and actors. At the same time, Toontown is the structural equivalent of *Chinatown*'s Chinese enclave, living according to its own alien laws (cf. the Chinese bordello in Wenders's *Hammett*). Finally, the film harks back (with twenty-twenty hindsight) to the question of World War II era anti-Semitism, invoking images of the Holocaust by depicting its

villain as plotting the genocide of the Toons. Although it is obviously useful and important to distinguish between the depiction of, say, Chinese sexuality in *Broken Blossoms* and Arabic sexuality in *The Sheik*, my purpose in this chapter is to point out the very slippage, concerning the various "orients," that occurs in Hollywood and Hollywood-style cinema. For a discussion of race and gender in *Broken Blossoms*, see Julia Lesage, "Artful Racism, Artful Rape: Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*" in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

30. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 74–95.

31. Like Pyle in *Full Metal Jacket,* Carmen sucks her thumb.

32. Kuhn, *The Power of the Image* 89.

33. I am drawing these arguments, rather loosely, from the chapter on Cimino in Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1986). On the question of "going native" and of Orientalization as making feminine, see Eve Sedgwick's chapter "Up the Postern Stair: *Edwin Drood* and the Homophobia of Empire" in *Between Men.* Discussing *Edwin Drood,* Sedgwick remarks that, contrary to the American black-and-white dichotomy of racism, "Colonials . . . can 'go' native: there is a taint of climate, morale, or ethos that, while most readily described in racial terms, is actually seen as contagious" (183). Sedgwick notes that, in *Edwin Drood,* John Jasper wakes up "in a London opium den on a bed with a Chinaman, a Lascar, and a haggard woman." The woman has even " 'opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of a Chinaman.' " Jasper will later become "orientalized by his contact with the Princess Puffer—and, by the same toke [*sic*], insidiously feminized" (184). I would submit that the black-white dichotomy of race in American film and literature is not as clear-cut as Sedgwick contends—see, for example, John Stahl's and Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* for similar enunciations of the problem of racial "contamination."

34. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 294.

35. Ibid. 296.

36. Judy Lee Kinney has observed that Michael "presides over the ritualizing of one of the most famous visual icons of the War, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan's execution of a Viet Cong suspect during the 1968 Tet offensive by a shot to the head" ("The Mythical Method: Fictionalizing the Vietnam War," *Wide Angle* 7.4 [1985]: 40).

37. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 296. He also mentions (278) the more widely remarked intertexts for *The Deer Hunter*: Ford's *The Searchers* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer.* Both of these narratives are of interest in that they involve what Richard Slotkin (see below) has termed the "feminization" of the white captive held by Indians. Many critics, including Tony Williams (in "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories") and Thomas Doherty (in "Full Metal Genre"), have noted the explicit "cowboy and Indian" themes in *Full Metal Jacket* and in other recent Vietnam War films. Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) explicitly addresses the role of the "hunter and captive myths" in the selling of the war in Vietnam to the American public. In 1965 President Johnson himself "invoked the characteristic imagery of the captivity myth, in which the family—symbolic embodiment of social order, centering on the figure of the mother and the child and associated with the cultivation of the soil—is assaulted by dark and savage forces from beyond the borders" (562–63). South Vietnam was the mother to be saved from outside invasion. In films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Full Metal Jacket* it is evident that the fear of engulfment by this mother is at least as strong as the fear of the "dark opponent." I will also note my disagreement with Susan Jeffords's assertion that women "disappear" from Vietnam in the recent films under discussion. I realize, on rereading her thought-provoking article "Friendly Civilians: Images of Women and the Feminization of the Audience in Vietnam Films" (*Wide Angle* 7.4 [1985]: 13–22), that my notion of the "repression of the feminine" is a direct citation from Jeffords (17), but in her description of how in these films the Vietnam soldier "denies the feminine" Jeffords does not seem to recognize that this repression is unsuccessful: a threatening (not simply a *passive*) femininity resurges to the forefront of the text. Since my essay first appeared Susan Jeffords has vastly expanded her reading of femininity in relation to Vietnam in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). In her section of *Full Metal Jacket,* she unfavorably contrasts Kubrick's film with Hasford's novel, claiming that the changes introduced move the screenplay "into a more definitive depiction of the feminine as enemy and rewrites the novel as a story of a gendered opposition between masculine and feminine" (174). I disagree with this reading insofar as I see this move as one analytical of American attitudes about race and gender, rather than one that "allows for the repression of the violence that underlies the gender

system" (176). Whether Jeffords's interpretation or mine is more convincing must be determined by our readers. See also Michael Pursell, *"Full Metal Jacket*: The Unraveling of Patriarchy," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 218–25, for a discussion of the "gynophobia" shown by the characters in the film.

38. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 294.

39. For further discussion of the depiction of Asians in Polanski's film, see William Galperin, "Bad for the Glass: Representation and Filmic Deconstruction in *Chinatown* and *Chan Is Missing,"* *MLN* 102 (1987): 1151–70.

40. In fact, *Year of the Dragon* was picketed by Chinese Americans in many cities when it was released. Complaints focused, for the most part, on the representation of the Chinese-American community as corrupt and controlled by gangs. Most prints now begin with a disclaimer regarding the representation of Chinese Americans in the film.

41. In discussing the use of Chinatown as a metaphor for Vietnam in *Year of the Dragon*, I should note that Oliver Stone (writer and director of *Platoon*) cowrote the film with Cimino, basing it on Robert Daley's novel of the same name.

42. Peter Baxter, "The One Woman," *Wide Angle* 6.1 (1984): 35–41.

43. As is the practice among some psychoanalytic critics, Baxter is using the term "phantasy" to indicate that this is a preconscious or unconscious mental process, rather than a conscious "fantasy."

44. Baxter, "The One Woman": 41.

45. For a discussion of the theoretical grounds for claiming a primary, projected masochism, see especially Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Subjectivity," *Framework* 12 (1975): 2–9; *"Histoire d'O*: The Story of a Disciplined and Punished Body," *enclitic* 7.2 (1983): 63–81; "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988): 31–67; and "White Skin, Brown Masks."

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Vietnam, Chaos, and the Dark Art of Improvisation

CHAPTER 12 The Vietnam War has proved to have remarkable staying power as an unsettling experience. By the time of the South Vietnamese government's collapse in 1975, a great many Americans had been compelled to relinquish their illusions about managing the war to an ordered, reasonable resolution. Consequently, a panoply of assumptions about power and control was virtually swept aside, and a kind of existentialism at last became more real than theoretical. Old truths no longer offered assurance, and the Vietnam War has shrouded every turn of events in U.S. foreign policy to the present day. The specter of Vietnam was evident throughout the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–91, even at the conclusion of the 100-hour ground war, even at the moment when the United States and its allies claimed victory over Iraq. Even in victory, President Bush was compelled to deliver a funeral oration for the doubts sown by the earlier war.

The legacy of the Vietnam War will extend, however, far beyond the end of Operation Desert Storm, challenging American life for decades with cautionary stories about the fragility of certainties