Hollywood Invades Vietnam:
The Second American Reconstruction
（ハリウッドによる歴史への挑戦：
ベトナム戦争の再編）

Todd Joseph Miles Holden*

SUMMARY IN JAPANESE：本論文はベトナム戦争がアメリカの歴史の中で，アメリカ社会全体の思想・構造・相互に影響しあうグループの再編を要したという点からも南北戦争に次いで，最も不和を生じさせた出来事であるという見解から書かれている。この二十年にわたった歴史の再編のプロセスが，今まさに完結したといえる。この過程は絶え間ない文化的テキスト——書物や映画——の著しい流出を通しておこなわれた。ところが，これらのテキストがベトナム戦争の忠実な再編でなかったのである。そして多くの場合は，そのメッセージやベトナム戦争の意味自体も変えられてしまっていた。

　再編は，とりわけ次の5つの形をとっているようである。
(1) ベトナム戦争に関わった人々の描写
(2) 変わりゆく戦争のイメージ
(3) 政治的趣旨の剝奪
(4) 被害者に重きをおくこと
(5) 映画の背景

　これらをまとめると，このような再編は警戒に値する。大規模に生産された大衆文化の生産物をとおして，一国の歴史の中の大事な出来事の起源が取り除かれ，その根底にあった政策や推定の根拠は無視され，そのイデオロギーの真意も覆い隠されてしまった。つまりその政治的・歴史的な側面が取り除かれてしまったのである。このような再編行為により国家の中心的惨事は，単なるエンターテインメントのための背景になりさがってしまった。このようなテキストは巧妙に歴

* Associate Professor, Tohoku University, Miyagi

史の模倣をしているに違いはないが，多くの意味から Orwell
の MiniTruth と何ら変わりがないように思われる。将来の次
世代がこのまだ未発達な政治文化的エピソードについて，ど
のように記憶し，解釈し，理解し，また反応するかというこ
とを作りかえてしまったのだ。

　過去二十年間にハリウッドで製作されたベトナムに関する
主な映画の内容分析をすることにより，上記の点が明確にさ
れる。

Introduction

There can be little dispute that the Civil War was the most divisive
event in American history: an episode which convulsed an entire nation
in every way—politically, economically, socially, morally; a conflagra-
tion which cleaved regions, races and classes for as much as a century
afterward; a cataclysm requiring reconstruction in the ideas, structure,
and interactive sets of an entire society.

It has been argued that the second most divisive event in American
history was the Vietnam War (e.g. Commager and Morris 1984). No
other episode exerted and has continued to exert such a strong influence
over all elements of American society—its politics, economics, social
groupings, ideas. The practices of the administrations which oversaw
the war contributed to the heightened disillusionment with and distrust
of government (Reich 1987). The government's handling of the war
gave birth to the term "credibility gap" between public officials and
those they served. In turn, such effects led to what could be called
"generational utopias" (Mannheim 1936): reactive movements toward
particular kinds to political candidates (first moralistic, then charis-
matic) and policies (first dovish and domestic, then hawkish and
international) resulting from the war's stratified ecology. The rampant
spending associated with the escalation of the war can be felt today in
the astronomical deficits incurred by the government's profligate spend-
ing. The division between social groups—generational, ideological,
economic class, race—were all wrapped up in the war (see Matusow
1984). Some have gone so far as to dub the Vietnam conflict as nothing

less than "America's most blatant class war since the Civil War" (Fallows 1989: 4).

There were other casualties of the conflict, most importantly, perhaps, hallowed illusions by which society had long lived and which it had widely trumpeted. After Vietnam, Americans could no longer say with a straight face that their country was the champion of democracy, undefeated in war, the nation that wages the noble fight. If not discredited outright, these notions were certainly called into question by prolonged military participation (O'Neil 1971: 352). The nagging doubts associated with these issues contributed to, in the words of a subsequent administration, a general malaise, a "pervasive pessimism." There came a "crisis of confidence in the political process and the future of the nation," (Caddell, as quoted in Broder 1980: 411). Americans, as well as other nations of the world, came to question America's efficacy and, more damaging, its integrity (Turley 1986: 200-201).

In short, the Vietnam conflict left lasting marks on the American body politic. Because this was so, the war demanded a reconstruction of all aspects of society on an order second only to that which transpired during the Civil War. We have only just witnessed such a reconstruction—a process that took about two decades to complete. This reconstruction transpired in a remarkable way: via the steady stream of cultural texts—books and film—which documented various aspects of the war and often reinterpreted the people, events and outcomes of the war. Importantly, however, this was not necessarily a faithful reconstruction. In a large number of ways, the messages and the meaning of the conflict in Vietnam have been changed.

It is the project of this paper to consider such transformations. It is my thesis that underlying these texts is a particular intent : repair of the multiple rifts (generational, racial, economic, ideological) engineered by the war. Whether intent is present, close scrutiny clearly reveals that a large number of images have been reconstructed, rewritten, and socially constructed. The result is that the status, the meaning, the history, and the events, associated with the war have been altered. These reconstructions include:

(1) **A consistent portrait of the war.** Despite the fact that Vietnam movies have been made about disc jockeys, cops, photographers, grave-

diggers, mercenaries, hired assassins, and reporters, virtually all the movies embrace American, white, male soldiers as their central focus. There is very little evidence of minorities—Indians, Blacks, Hispanics— though they constituted a large percentage of the American fighting force. Moreover, when minorities do make it onto the screen, they tend to be treated in a similar way: very few speaking lines, clannish and off by themselves, removed from the movie's central action, and (in numbers perhaps more reflective of reality but disproportionate to their presence on-screen) objects for carnage and elimination. There is very little attention to Vietnamese—from North or South. And when such attention is accorded, either their story is transformed to make a central place for a white male, or their depiction is in terms neither whole nor positive. There is very little place for women—save in diminished status, with attention exclusively given over to their capacity as sexual object, homemaker, or attachment in a soldier's life.

(2) **A changing image of the war.** As a subject, the purview of the war narrowed over time. The focus in the movies quickly strayed from origins and recitations of actual history. There was also a noticeable hesitancy to determine which nation, ideology, or social class was right or wrong. By the end of the cinematic cycle, an identifiable social type who participated in the conflict (e.g. soldier, veteran, civilian, protester) had become the subject. Also, Hollywood's emphasis came to be on engaging plots—storyline—rather than history or the ascription of meaning to the events of the war. In the hands of Hollywood—attuned to the tastes and politics of a paying audience—plots often oversimplified or rewrote history entirely. In short, there was a signal shift in the status of the war, a shift that can be documented longitudinally— from "The Green Berets" to "Born on the Fourth of July."

(3) **Divestiture of political content.** Facilitative of such a change was a turn from heavily political movies to those virtually devoid of political content. Politics was not what audiences wanted to pay to see. Crucially, this does not mean that Hollywood's Vietnam movies were stripped of ideology. The depoliticised message, in fact, is rife with a particular kind of ideology. Movies that deflected consideration of origins, impacts and lessons emanating from the conflict served a particular ideological objective. Above all, what became possible was

48

the reintegration of a particular social group into society and the minimization of conflict between various social groups.

(4) **An emphasis on victims.** A steady shift over the two decades has transpired and by the end, the central cinematic focus was on victims— more often domestic than foreign. Relatedly, the war came to be retold in tragic terms, a retelling which was personalized, through the eyes of the soldier/survivor. The overall effect—whether intended or not—was to rehabilitate the soldier in the eyes of society; to reintegrate a particular class of societal members—veterans—back into the societal mainstream. By focusing on this group, rather than any number of other themes (i.e. Vietnamese victims, the war proper, American government, corruption, student protest) the themes which tended toward national deconstruction were skirted. The ground for national reconstruction— emotionally and practically—could be achieved.

(5) **The war's diminished centrality.** Toward the tail end of Hollywood's Vietnam cycle, the war became a mere backdrop. Most often it was incidental to the story being told. Vietnam provided a fashionable atmosphere in the telling of an unrelated story. Sometimes the war was simply a codeword used to enhance a movie's emotional impact—the movie might not even be about Vietnam at all. The war as "setting" came into vogue. The cumulative effect was to trivialize the war or else to send a statement to Americans that the war was finally behind them. Vietnam—once a central military and socio-cultural event —had attained the status of ambience.

Taken together, these trends constitute cause for alarm: a topic which, in mass-distributed products of popular culture, has seen its origins purged, its underlying policies and presumptions ignored, its ideological content suppressed, its political and historical dimension exorcised. Via such reproductive acts, a central national tragedy has been relegated to the status of backdrop for trivial entertainments. These texts may well mimic history, but in ways not much different from Orwell's MiniTruth they have reshaped how future generations will remember, interpret, understand, and respond to this seminal political-cultural episode.

To demonstrate these points, I consider commercial films made about Vietnam over the past twenty years. The population of movies is not

exhaustive, but does cover every major Hollywood release concerning the war, as well as a number of smaller budget pictures.[1] The movies were treated inductively, as delineated in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Denzin (1970). In particular, the following methodological strategies were utilized: constant comparison, the development and testing of working hypotheses (in particular, concerning the unity of cinematic vision and the rewriting of history) and incorporation of emergent ("grounded") hypotheses (the depoliticization of movies, the concomitant rise of entertainment, the trivialization of the war, and shifts in Hollywood's treatment of the soldier).

Let's consider the five points, cited above, in turn.

ANALYSIS

CONTINUITIES: A Consistent Portrait of the War

Generally. Taken as a unity, Hollywood's Vietnam films manifested a similar set of characteristics. Above all, the emphasis was on Americans. There were some exceptions, however—movies in which Vietnamese held some part of the stage. Most notable, perhaps, were: *The Green Berets, The Killing Fields,* and *Good Morning Vietnam.* However, it must be observed that, in the case of the first, the major South Vietnamese characters were played by Hawaiian and second generation Japanese-American actors, known to Americans for their parts in mainstream television entertainments (*Hawaii 5-0, Star Trek*) ; in the second, the central character was animated by the desire to secure freedom—embodied in the figure of America—and was assisted in this quest by a white, male American; in the third, while the South Vietnamese characters were more fully drawn than many of their predecessors, these characters remained peripheral to the plot—a plot, incidentally, about a white male American soldier's rebellion against the double-thinking, newspeaking military bureaucracy.

Views of the Allies. As for the presentation of America's allies, only in the last of the cited movies (at the tail of Hollywood's cycle) did anything but a superficial portrait emerge. Throughout the twenty year cycle the South Vietnamese were portrayed as unreflective recipients of

American benevolence, happy and grateful for assistance. In the movies where possible tensions were intimated, the finger was pointed from an American military perspective. In such cases the South Vietnamese were accused of incompetence or, worse, cowardice. The impression left was of American boys exploited to further the political objectives of a nation unwilling to sacrifice its own boys in order to achieve its own goals. Few movies worked at all to explore any negative feelings the South Vietnamese may have harbored concerning the presence of Americans in their country, the fact that outsiders were defending their interests, making decisions, and interacting with their population.

Views of the Enemy. Hollywood's view of the enemy was, without exception, negative. In a word the Viet Cong were amoral savages: killers, gamblers, rapists, fornicators, and robbers (*GB*); indifferent to the suffering of their own contrymen (*KF*); given to acts of unfathomable inhumanity(*MIA ; RII ; DH*). Even in the case of the one sympathetic portrayal (*GMV*) the undercurrent was decidedly negative: the enemy as ruthless assassin. There was no movie in the cycle which sought to fathom the enemy. Instead the Viet Cong were a less-than-human or non-human "they"; characterized in one movie (*GS*) as a "bellicose people," "irrational," "driven to endure, with a capability beyond all capacity." There was not a movie in this sample that failed to refer to the enemy by the racist appellation, "gooks."

American-centered Racism. Another form of racism engaged in by these movies was the treatment of American "minorities": African-American, Hispanic, Indian, Asian-American. In stark contrast to the actual racial complexion of the military, there were very few minority faces in these movies. One could watch a number of these movies (*HH, CW*) and conclude, quite incorrectly, that this was a war waged almost exclusively by white Americans against their Asian enemy. Many of the major movies ignored racial minorities entirely (e.g. *DH, CH*). When minorities were present, very rarely were they central characters. Most often, they were situated along the sidelines, offering—pardon the pun —visual color (e.g. *GMV*).

There were, however, some notable exceptions. In a number of movies (e.g. *St, Sa, GS*), African Americans occupied center stage. The former two, however, had very little to do with the war—a point we will

return to below. These dramas could just as easily have been set outside the context of any war, and even if within the military, independent of the Vietnam conflict. As for race, while there is an effort in these movies to reflect a socio-organizational reality, the definition and comportment of the characters is generally free of racial distinction. This suggests that these parts could have been played by actors of any race. In short, race was ignored by Hollywood as a central element in the Vietnam episode.[2]

Treatment of Minorities. Overall, two tendencies can be seen concerning minorities in Vietnam films. First, as just mentioned, they were homogenized in such a way that, when present, they acted and thought like any other member of the institution within which they were constrained (i.e. the military). In this way, they bore more similarities to brethren soldiers of different racial categories than they did differences.[3] This, it must be observed, was a Hollywood invention. A second tendency of these films was to place minorities in peripheral roles. Banished to the background, minorities were the faceless grunts who, just as in the actual conflict, constituted the bulk of the unseen fighting force. In this case art might have mirrored reality, but it did little to elucidate or record the truth.

Even in movies in which blacks were present, their presence was rarely positive. Take *Apocalypse Now,* for example. Three African Americans appear during the course of the central (white) character's upstream quest. All are cloaked in negative symbolism. Two suddenly (and savagely) eliminated along the river; the other, stricken by incoherence and impotence—a symbol for a war beyond anyone's control; a war in which no one is in charge.

This raises a related point. Perhaps more alarming than the fact that African Americans were generally denied a central role in these movies, they were invariably eliminated (e.g. *GB, AN, HH, FMJ*). It is true that in the final movies in the cycle, African American characters survived the on-screen carnage (e.g. *Pl, HH*). Interestingly, in these movies, the survivors were depicted as educated, humane, nurturing, sensitive, incisive, and philosophical. In a word, more like the white heroes of these tales. The bottom line, though, is that the majority of minorities —coincidentally or not, those least like the central characters—don't

make it. To carry this point further, in the survey of movies, only one offered a prominent role to an Hispanic American (*THH*). What happens to this so-called "Spanish nigger"? Following a brief on-screen appearance, he becomes the only fatality among the prison population.

Race and the Military. An emergent theme as the movies reached the end of the cycle concerned the hostilities between American racial groups (e.g. St, HH). However, the farthest such movies go in depicting discord is the presentation of cliquishness—as opposed to overt segregation or open confrontation—between the races. Significantly, an even greater number of movies denied the image just as vigorously (e.g. *GS, FMJ, AN*). In these movies, comradery or solidarity between the races was depicted. It is true that a number of movies (e.g. *Pl, HH*, St) liberally employed epithets such as "nigger," "boy," and "redneck," but it was a rare case where such words attended challenge or recrimination between the races. In Hollywood's later movies, where summary and reassessment appeared to be on the agenda, structural inequality and endemic racism were discussed. However, such conversations were no more than barracks patter between engagements.

One factor appeared to outweigh the racial calculus in these films. All participants—regardless of race— —were depicted as wrapped up within an institutional environment which demanded a particular character, with particular (generic) socio-cultural and personality traits. Race and class don't really matter once in the army, these movies repeatedly told us. All men were equally transformed into killing machines—or they themselves were eliminated.

Men and Women. A final continuity in these movies concerned gender and socially-constructed roles. Hollywood's Vietnam movies were heavily male. Women most often made their way onto the screen by intimation. Figments and fragments, rather than actual embodiments. Brought to life via pornographic pin-ups taped inside men's lockers (*St*); conjured up via soldiers' references to "whores," "pussy," and "white nurses who'll give you head if you pay 'em enough" (*Pl, HH*). When women do appear in the flesh it is generally as flesh. For example: playboy bunnies whose physical presence so overwhelms an audience of sex-starved soldiers as to incite a riot (*AN*); ubiquitous

prostitutes (*FMJ, Sa, HH*); and indigenous women whom Americans terrorized, fondled and raped (*Pl, CW*).

When women were accorded large roles, they were of the white American ilk. Moreover, their presence was for fulfillment of some symbolic objective: Jane Fonda as metaphor for country, her story of growth more a portrait of a nation's progress than of a woman's, or Meryl Streep playing the supportive nation in waiting.

Generally missing from these depictions was the real story. Women were also casualties of the war: the native Vietnamese; the women at home. The former were a target within the world of the soldier; the latter, alienated entirely from that world. The story of the two groups was never fully or accurately explored.[4] Women had a story to tell about Vietnam, but Hollywood never recognized it.

Women were often used in another metaphoric capacity. At the center of *Good Morning Vietnam* was an evasive beauty, who symbolized the notion that cultures can never truly mix. In numerous movies (viz, *AN* and *FMJ*) the women were used to symbolize the paralysis of a population tragically caught between twin invading foes. Just as often, however, they were presented unsympathetically: as agents of cunning subterfuge. Foreign beauties who carried the furtive bomb in the bonnet or sniped at GIs from bomb-gutted buildings were on screen for a purpose. They symbolized the great dangers with which American boys had to grapple. Importantly, Hollywood never told us their stories. These women were only transient devices making the tales of America's fighting men more poignant. As was true of their female counterparts across the Pacific, Hollywood never explored their struggle.

In the main, then, Hollywood's Vietnam movies were about the men whose lives were touched by the war. Toward the completion of the cycle, however, as such stories appeared to achieve saturation, a trend emerged. Movies began depicting the stories of other figures in the war: photographers, medical personnel, and police. In a couple of cases, this enlargement embraced Southeast Asians—in particular, women (e.g. *GMV* and *CW*). Nonetheless, at best, such inclusion served only as subplot, employed as a device for better elucidating the passage of the central character ... always a white, male soldier.

Todd Joseph Miles Holden

CHANGING IMAGES OF THE WAR

As we have just seen, twenty years of movies produced a number of continuities. Such constructions were a function of American perceptions of the war as much as Hollywood's chauvinism or audience preferences. Not all of the ideas about and images of the war, however, have remained static over the twenty—year cycle. In particular, four reconstructions can be discerned. Reconstructions which, though reflective of considerable change in thinking about the war, demonstrate a remarkable internal consistency. In the section to follow, we consider these four reconstructions.

A Narrowed Focus

Over the twenty-year cycle, the movies quickly stepped away from discussions of origins and the determination of which nation, ideology, or class of people was right or wrong. This change is perhaps easiest to see by comparing one of the first Vietnam movies with one of the last. In *The Green Berets* the opening scene was devoted to trumpeting stock Cold-War ideology about falling dominoes and articulating the need for American participation in Vietnam in order to thwart the Soviet/Chinese threat. By *Platoon,* by contrast, an entire two reels passed without any comment regarding the reasons for the war and which side was in the right.

Virtually every movie skirted the issue of origins (cf. *HM*). The closest any came was the introductory briefing in *The Green Berets* which informed: "Since you have served as commander here before, general, I can skip the explanations. In summary, gentlemen, the problem lies in the north." All other films only offered information regarding troop movements (*Pl*), troop strength (*GMV*), prevailing events (*Sa, FMJ*), and locations (*AN*). In every case, this was less for historical elucidation, than to add hue and advance plot.

As for treating the American involvement, the movies demonstrated great consistency: the U.S., in the words of *Good Morning Vietnam,* was "here to help this country." The only difference regarding such assistance was whether the people America was seeking to assist were worthy or not. While one movie labeled the Vietnamese as "the most

bellicose race of people I've ever seen. They have been fighting some-
thing for 1000 years—and they like it" (*GS*), another film saw them as
a people bent on "establish(ing) a country with values similar to
(America's): freedom; the right to think for yourself; to follow your
own faith. You know ... individual freedom" (*THH*). Despite dis-
sonance concerning America's allies, an important continuity concern-
ing American involvement was the following: not one film in the entire
cycle suggested that America was the issue in the war. Most often,
America was actually championed as the solution.

In general, the Vietnam movies tended to refrain from overt debate
about right and wrong. As just mentioned, virtually no air time was
given over to opposing views of American intervention. At the most
extreme (and standing as an exception to the general rule) was *The
Hanoi Hilton*, which, in an opening, patriotic coda, stated that South
Vietnam was only seeking to become another United States. It was only
asking for the right of self-determination, a basic human right which
was being denied.

Do not misunderstand: a number of films **depicted** division over the
question of national right and wrong. However, when they did they
carefully avoided drawing conclusions. The net result was that viewers
were treated to an on-going, though intentionally open debate between
various segments of the American population: military hard-liners
versus embittered veterans (*CH*); the military bureaucracy versus its
soldiers (*FMJ*, *GMV*); and the military establishment versus intellec-
tuals, politicians, and the middle class(*1969*).

Thus, one could not say that Hollywood was ignorant of or deaf to
the issues debated during the war. Indeed, its movies included discus-
sions of moral versus immoral forms of involvement (*WSR*, *Pl*) and
national autonomy versus international intervention (*GMV*). However,
there was a pronounced tendency, as we shall discuss at greater length
later, to engage in "Monday morning quarterbacking" in these movies.
By reliving the past through the eyes of the wiser present, the overall
impression Hollywood's Vietnam movies left was that America was a
hotbed of sentiment tipping against the war during the 1960s and 1970s.
This is a grand reconstruction, a fiction that, as those events were
actually being lived, was simply not the case.

A Depoliticized Turn

Facilitating the avoidance of history, origins and disquisitions on right and wrong was a turn from heavily political movies to those devoid of overt political content. Hollywood's presentation of the institutions and forces associated with the war underwent substantial modification from the time of *Coming Home,* (in which a crippled, former G.I. emotionally implores a high school assembly to think twice before signing up and going off to fight for Old Glory). By the end of the cycle, the climate had become sufficiently uncritical of U.S. involvement that one director commented: "(This is) a different movie than it would have been had (it been) made... two decades ago. It's not really political. It's very emotional and full of sorrow."

This is **not** to suggest that such movies were apolitical. For instance, while Hollywood's Vietnam movies did not place policy and history at their center, they **did** pack a considerable amount of retrospective political analysis. Most often, such analysis was critical of American political processes and institutions. As an example, *Platoon* tells us: "Elias is a waterwalker, like them politicians from Washington trying to fight this war with one hand tied around their balls." Such a view reflects the so-called "anti-institutional bias," (Robinson 1976) which dominated the 1970s and 1980s. Now even more cynical than at inception, the negative view resonated even more strikingly in the final films of the Vietnam cycle (viz, *FMJ, RFB*). Such a bias, I believe, worked to fuel the revisionism common in the Vietnam movies.

This revision argued that it wasn't so much the case that the war was wrong or that the men who fought it were incapable. The limitations and failures which emerged lay with the people overseeing the effort. The higher-ranking officers, the bureaucracy or, most often, the elected politicians came up short on Vietnam. This theme can first be discerned in movies made in the mid-seventies (e.g. *CH, DH*). It began in the relatively benign form of the search for an explanation for failure (e.g. *DH, WSR*). However, this uncertain questioning soon gave way to a more conscious attempt to affix responsibility on the visible system (e. g. *AN, GS*). The institutions that gave us "the credibility gap," Watergate, Abscam, and assorted personal abuses of discretionary power became Hollywood's villains.

One more point: to say that the Vietnam films were depoliticized does not mean that they were stripped of ideology. The effect of a message void of origins, impacts and lessons was to flee from considering the assumptions—rooted in the Cold War—that first prompted then fueled U.S. involvement. This was not only a failure confined to Hollywood movies. As we shall discuss below, this was also an error committed by television and newspaper journalism. And, as we shall discuss below, the larger impact that such a depoliticized message had was to create a state of affairs in which history was rewritten or oversimplified, entirely. Critical questions of U.S. involvement became lost in the face of plot (see *RII, THH, MIA, Sa, Pr*).

However, most dangerous in this reconstruction is the following. When a message is stripped of its politico-historical dimensions it loses one more support against the installation of stereotypical views. Thus, absent the ballast of origins, events and ideology, Hollywood's Vietnam library provides a consistent set of images for future generations. Images which may not all have been entirely correct. The most common of these images include: the enemy savage (*DH, MIA*); and the American soldier as: superhero (*RII*); inherently virtuous (*THH*); America's finest (*GS*), but most ill-treated (*RFB*); a simple pawn of an immense bureaucratic system (*HH*); a suitable figure for martyrdom (*WSR*); a victim of conditions beyond his control (*MA, CW*); a disposable unit rendered out of place (*CH*) and misunderstood (*DH*) by society. These are powerful stereotypes, reconstructions which possess the power to rehabilitate the war or aspects of the war in the eyes of the consuming public for generations to come.

The Rise of Victimization as Central Theme

As we just saw, the drainage of overt politicism from these movies led to films whose central focus was on victims—more often domestic (e.g. *DH, CW*) than foreign (*KF, GMV*). This trend also appeared in the literature of the time, as well (e.g. "Paco's Story", "Buffalo Afternoons"). In such works the reader encounters a tragic retelling of the war, personalized in the form of soldier as survivor. This appeared to be the final statement Hollywood had to make about Vietnam (see, in particular, *FMJ, THH, CW, and BFJ*).

This final construction was a movement, of sorts, away from the movies of the seventies (e.g. *CH, DH*), where (relatively healthy) survivor was balanced off against sufferer. It was certainly far removed from the brief period in which veteran as somnambulant sufferer assumed center stage. In those movies (viz, *WSR*) the status of the Vietnam veteran was that of freak, curiosity or misfit who had no place in society. Importantly, this presentation was merely an emotional device aimed at furthering plot. And, while it was quickly supplanted by other presentations of the veteran, in some ways this thematic tack was later resurrected. By the end of the cycle, victims were not only more fathomable—their portraits fuller—but they were more sympathetic (e.g. *CW*). Rather than freak, the American soldier became a sensitive sufferer seeking to maintain his sanity in the face of inhumane captors (*THH*) or a hostile(*R*), uncomprehending(*BFJ*) home front. The soldier Hollywood had conjured by the end of the twenty year cycle was of a man striving to become whole.

For what reason? The purpose appeared to be to reintegrate a particular class of societal members—veterans—back into society. By what means? First, by sheer volume of attention. Second, by continually harping on the multifarious dimensions of their victimization. Third, by concluding (as *Platoon* did) that society had much to learn from veterans. Fourth, by validating the perspective (as the otherwise unrelated *Betrayed* did) that Vietnam veterans were back in societal favor now.[5] The cumulative effect of such presentations was to remember the class on society's margins; to reintegrate and restore its members to wholeness. The deeper themes related to the war that might have tended toward national deconstruction were avoided. National reconstruction emotionally and practically—could be (and apparently was) better achieved.

The Rising Marginality of the war

Strange as it may seem, by the end of the cycle, Vietnam movies were not always about Vietnam. It was common for movies to center on people whose stories did not depend entirely on the presence of the war. In the final years Hollywood released movies about: a disc jockey struggling against a rigid bureaucratic system; two detectives searching

for a crazed killer; military police trying to crack a smuggling ring; grave diggers stationed at Arlington National Cemetery; mercenaries sent to break compatriots out of a prison camp.

By its sunset, the Vietnam movie evolved to the point where even in movies ostensibly about the war, there was very little war in the film (viz, *THH, GS*). The movies became more about personalities and the dramas they encountered on the fringes of the fight (e.g. *GMV*). The stories Hollywood became interested in were about people who were touched by the war, but whose lives moved beyond or away from it (e. g. *KF, BFJ*).

More dramatic (and significant), however, was a development that lay behind that just discussed: the trivialization of the war. In focusing on the interesting personalities and stories associated with the war, the war itself became transformed into a subject for entertainment. No longer the gripping story based on a true event (*HH*), nor some writer/director's statement which sought to place war in some intellectual context (*AN, DH, CH*), Vietnam became the fodder for escapism and enjoyment. Comedy, tragedy, but most of all, suspense became the genres of choice associated with Vietnam.

Perhaps even more troublesome, a number of movies appeared to invoke Vietnam for no other reason than to provide atmospheric effect (e.g. *St, GMV, Pr*). None of the stories in this final segment of the cycle actually required Vietnam in order to tell their tale. There is danger in such a turn, I believe. For the effect was to encourage the audience to forget history; to ignore the larger, unresolved issues of the war. More, in bypassing the war these movies ensured that the audience—many of whom were not born before the conflict came to an end would know little about the particulars of the war they were watching a movie about. By the end of the cycle all viewers of a Vietnam movie knew was what Hollywood fed them: namely, bona fide American heroes going into some Asian jungle and doing good—most often as defined by the prevailing standards for box office success: *Star Wars* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

In the face of this final trend, the dominant effect of Hollywood's Vietnam cycle appears to be this: whether or not America lost the Vietnam war, it lost *sight* of the war. The lessons and historical

particulars of the war were discarded in favor of Hollywood's constant campaign to locate new, more remote and entertaining themes associated with the actual military conflict.

DISCUSSION : THE VIETNAM WAR MOVIE AS SOCIAL MIRROR

By the end of the 1980s it became fashionable to say that America did not so much lose the war as it did its will to win. Rambo's plaintive line (thick with cynicism and bristling with an undiminished self-confidence) "This time, do we get to win?", suggests as much. On this version, the incessant images of war spewing out into America's living rooms worked on the national consciousness, wearing away their conviction, fatiguing Americans to the point of submission. In time, the public lost their taste for the conflict. They desired its termination. In such an interpretation, the media played a heavy role in the war's cessation. Its images, so this version goes, carried the power to influence the viewer/voter. This is the "videomalaise" thesis (Robinson 1976) wherein the media has the power to turn a public against its government. Under such an interpretation, movies (as a major media form) no less than television would have had a critical role to play in bringing about the cessation of the unpopular conflict.

There's only one flaw with this thesis. It probably isn't true. Early on, Arlen (1969) argued that the cumulative effect of television was to present a *positive* image of American efforts in Vietnam. Hallin's later, systematic research (1986) offered strong concurrence. In the early years of the conflict, Hallin showed, "most news coverage was highly supportive of American intervention in Vietnam" (1986: 9). It was only with a breakdown in consensus about the war that the media shifted to a position less in step with the State. Even so, the media never really became critical of the "system" or its core beliefs (Hallin 1986: 208). It was highly supportive of the soldier throughout (180). America was always the good guy (174). The war was never fully questioned—not its roots, nor the motives behind American engagement.

How about the Hollywood movie? Did it, like its small-screen cousin, contain positive views of the war? I would argue that, at least

in certain ways, it did. Never was a film made that went system-searching: centered on exploring origins and questioning core values. Throughout, even in allegedly "anti-war" movies such as *Coming Home* and *Apocalypse Now*, there was a refusal to affix blame on America. There was little effort to peer below the layer of acts and actors and explore the level of ideology. An award winning documentary (*HM*) may have done so, but its presentation was jumbled; its circulation not as widespread. Mass cinematic entertainments allowed intimations of flawed thinking (*FMJ, HH, GS*) and breakdowns in command (*AN*), but never an indictment of the system. Importantly, one has to search hard for a movie that places the soldier in an unfavorable light. Settle a finger on a movie like *Casualties of War* and find that for every crazed, inhumane Sean Penn, there's an even more sympathetic Michael J. Fox: a soldier who is sensitive, compassionate, and remorseful.

At the same time, one cannot say that there have been many pro-Vietnam war movies (cf. *GB* and *THH*). How is this to be explained? Hollywood discovered Vietnam as a fertile (and profitable) subject at about the time that U.S. involvement was waning. Thus, careful scrutiny of movies in the beginning of the cycle reveal some undercurrent of opposition to the conflict. As for the movies at the tail end of the conflict, one sees a tendency to view the war as: immoral, wrought of a flawed system (*AN*); precipitating a demise in morality (*WSR*); a destroyer of lives (*DH*). By the end of the 1980s—when no conflict was raging (save for the final interpretation of the war)—film makers stated their desire to produce "anti-war, pro-military movies."[6] There was a noticeable tendency to portray American warriors as virtuous (*THH*) and restored (*CW, RII*). In each case, Hollywood's products reflected the attitudes present in society at the moment.

The shifts in the treatment of the war and its participants is discernible. Because it is a view which emerged in a large number of movies, produced by a large number of unassociated directors, working for a number of unaffiliated studios, I would argue that these shifts bore correspondence to changing ideas present in the larger society. These were not simply coincidental changes in perception among a number of independent filmmakers insensitive to the ideas of the paying public.

Support for this thesis can be found in two areas of social scientific theory: power and communications. The former is captured in Block's (1987) proposition that the visibility of a phenomenon becomes apparent only in the face of a loosening hold by the institutions of power. Applied to the Vietnam war movie, this would account for why one did not find the themes of the 1980s in the 1970 films. Similarly, the themes of the 1970s could not be found in the 1960s (when virtually no Vietnam movies were made by Hollywood's studios and certainly none that were critical of the war effort) because the dominant ideologies of the time obstructed such expression. Only as alternative intellectual forces ascended to positions of power—the accession of what Mannheim (1936) called rival "utopias"—did the invisibility of these viewpoints wane. Only then did the respectability (and increased public articulation) of these counter-voices ascend.

The second body of research which might help explain the relationship between Vietnam film content and societal ideas is communication theory. The notion of media as mirror, rather than instigator, is a consistent theme in contemporary media research. On this account, the media tends to reflect present values, rather than initiate new ones. At the same time, the media is powerful. In particular, the general consensus goes :

1) the media may not tell viewers what to think, but they are particularly effective at telling them what to think about (Cohen 1963);

2) rather than persuading, media inform (Patterson and McClure 1976);

3) the information transmitted tends to fit within particular frames; other (rival or dissonant) values often get excluded from such frames (Schudson 1984);

4) as such, the media are a powerful tool in the advancement of the interests of those who are powerful—by virtue of their access to the instruments of message transmission (Schiller 1973).

Together, such findings have built a strong case for the view that media are selective transmitters of cultural content. As such, they are powerful vehicles for the expression and acceptance of elite or dominant

or emergent opinion (Bennett 1983: 133).

Relative to Vietnam this tells us the following. First, the media may have played a role in channeling or focusing or reinforcing attitudinal shifts regarding the war. However, as Hallin concluded, the media were **not** the primary agents of reconstruction. Such a conclusion corresponds to Gitlin's (1980) study of the media's treatment of—and complicity in—the rise and demise of the Students for a Democratic Society. On both accounts the media were involved in reconstructing images. However, the shifts in message content were reflective of larger patterns of perception and belief present in the society—either amongst the consuming public, the state, or those in charge of managing and shaping state affairs (see Ginsberg 1986).

Analysis of the Vietnam film appears to reveal a similar pattern. Like the television news of Arlen's conception, views in the Vietnam movies were supportive of the war up to the early 1970s; then, with the breakdown in consensus about the war, the movies became less supportive—even critical of the government's crusade in Southeast Asia. Finally, with the return to a Cold War mentality in the 1980s, the Vietnam movie adopted a more favorable, pro–U.S. revisionism. This revisionism did not have it that America won the war, of course. But it clearly said that America **could** have won the war, had the government only done this or that.

In the height of the swashbuckling Reagan years, this revisionism had Americans going back to "kick ass" in missions to recover MIAs still held in prison camps. And when it wasn't inventing fictions which enabled Americans to escape the prison of history, it created situations and dialogue which could tell viewers as much. Thus, for instance, in one movie when a communist warden admits being discredited for failing to break the captives' solidarity one prisoner trumpets to the camera, "We won."

CONCLUSION: THE VIETNAM FILM AND THE REWRITING OF HISTORY

The second to last major studio treatment of the Vietnam War was a film called *Casualties of War*. In this movie an American soldier and

Southeast Asian woman stood in solidarity—both victims of the war. But, taking Hollywood's body of work on Vietnam into consideration, the major casualty of the war appeared to be the war itself. Because of Hollywood's output, no true understanding of the conflict has been— nor may ever be—possible. Over time, Hollywood fed the viewer a consistently slanted, successively revised interpretation of the war. Each generation of revision may have reflected prevailing (elite) views about the war, but they have also worked to redefine the war for a mass audience, an audience not only in the movie's present but in the world's future.

Each new Vietnam movie contributed to an on–going reconstruction. Every new release contributed to an additive reinterpretation of the war. And with each re–envisioning, the Vietnam conflict was reinvented. Such reconstruction—what can be called the revisionist interpretation of the war—was comprised of at least five distinct parts.

The first and perhaps most important of these was burial of the past, not only the history—which we have discussed above—but the mem- ories of great division within the nation. These movies, especially at the end of the cycle, appeared aimed at resolving divisions and healing wounds. To do this, a number of films focussed on the theme of Vietnam as a second American civil war. In the words of one movie, the conflict "tore the country apart" (*GS*). Or, as *Platoon* dramatically framed it: "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us."

By emphasizing internal conflict, didn't this make Hollywood's movies divisive, rather than restorative? Absolutely not. The point of such movies, appearing as they did at the end of the cycle, was to attack the last great barrier to national reunification. It is also significant to note that no movie paid deep, exclusive, or prolonged attention to the internal conflict. Moreover, no movie left the matter of division un- resolved. Present opposition was thematic, rather than substantive; impressionistic rather than systematically explored (viz *CH, 1969*). Most often, division was left for the random scene or turn of phrase (*BFJ, HH*). Significantly, in no movie was attention given to the nature, dynamics and mechanics of such cleavage. Finally, in Hollywood's hands, protagonists were never divided, were always

vindicated, and always allowed to return to the national fold.

Second, Hollywood's revisionist visions (while transpiring often two decades later) were presented as if they were products of the depicted moment. In other words, the movies spouted positions the audience only came to hear (or at least came to accept as legitimate) following disengagement from the war. Hollywood's efforts were peopled with "Monday morning quarterbacks" purported to be living, acting and speaking on Sunday. In such a way, Hollywood led its audience to believe that such figures were ubiquitous and persuasive at the times depicted in those films (viz *1969*). On film, such voices consistently said: this is not a war we can win (*GS*) or we're going to lose this war (*Pl*). The cumulative effect was the construction of a fictitious perspective: that a great number of good, upstanding people—many of them within the military—had vision and wisdom. These were just, upright citizens, audiences were told, who were either reluctant participants in the conflict or stood in opposition. In almost every case, these movies told audiences, while these characters lived and cried out in protest, they were not heard.

One effect that this revision had was to validate the view of a moral military. This is not an insignificant development, as it may have primed audiences to support the increasing international involvements (Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, and the Gulf War) the military engaged in under the Reagan and Bush administrations.

One factor which may have contributed to public acceptance was the movies' virtually uniform insistence—generally articulated by its noble soldiers—that the war was not so much a bad or mistaken one, as it was unwinnable given the prevailing socio-political conditions (*RII, Pl, GS*). Such a reconstruction led easily to the shifting of blame and the manufacture of excuse: the Rambo line that the American soldier did not lose the war so much as the American public or its key institutions did. We see a similar view in *The Hanoi Hilton*, where a communist jailor informs the audience:

> The real war is not in the Delta. It is in the United
> Nations, Champs Elysees, Berkeley, California. On the
> Washington Monument. The cities of America. And
> what we will not win on the battlefield, your journalists

will win for us on your very own doorstep. And you
will help by cooperating with them and other friendly
Americans.

Related to the ennoblement of the military as institution was the
defense of the fighting man himself. The soldier was resurrected through
a succession of depictions as victim (*CH, DH, THH, CW*)—even
martyr (e.g. *WSR, PS, GS*). *Platoon* immortalized the American
fighter in the following words:

> They come from the end of the line, most of them.
> Two years of high school is about it. Most of them've
> got nothing. They're poor, unwanted. Yet, they're fight-
> ing for our society, our freedom. It's weird, isn't it? At
> the bottom of the barrel and they know it. Maybe that's
> why they call themselves grunts. Because grunts can
> take it. Can take anything. They're the best I've ever
> seen, grandma. They're the heart and soul.

As for those movies in which the soldier was presented as bad, his
behavior was, nonetheless, justified. As one director put it: "(my
movie) asks the viewer to accept the fundamental amorality that our
soldiers embraced in order to survive."[7]

A final reconstruction was that these movies sanitized history in a
particular, seminal way: they refrained from questioning the basic
values that led America into war. Never did a movie discuss the Cold
War ideology that prompted involvement or the thinking prompting the
government's decisions to escalate the conflict. Virtually no movie
engaged in a critique of the war's underlying logic (cf. *AN*). The closest
Hollywood came to criticism was at the end of the cycle, where it
depicted bureaucratic doublethink (*FMJ*), military censorship
(*GMV*), and failures of leadership at the upper echelons (*HH*). Only
a few movies engaged in sustained critiques of the military. Again, the
target appeared to be the faceless leaders off-camera. In such movies
viewers encountered depictions of a mentality of continual engagement,
a policy leading to the virtual annihilation of America's brave, young
boys (*HH, Pl*).

In such a way these minor voices served to bolster the dominant
image: that of a noble fighting force and, through their nobility, a

noble war. Perhaps the war should not have been fought, the message became, but not because it was immoral; not because the country was pursuing the incorrect policy. And because the values that gave rise to the conflict were never rebutted in these movies—never really opened up for consideration—they tended to be upheld or restored. The American participants were rehabilitated, the issues of societal fragmentation put to rest, the discrepant elements of drugs, morality, splits in generations, economic classes, the races, ideology all pushed to the rear as each new movie made its way into theaters and onto video. One of the final movies in the cycle, *1969*, was the perfect example. Its retelling of history would have the viewer believe that all Middle America—a great silent majority—existed out there in defiance of the war; then rose up as one to bring U.S. involvement to an end.

Such a retelling—which became the dominant voice toward the conclusion of the twenty year skein—bore only partial correspondence to the way life really was during the period. It came closer to the history we learned from the newspaper and television accounts of the day. But those accounts themselves were only partial. Products of the "history devouring machine (that) scoop(s)... up great sections of reality and then reconstitut(es) them, made for TV" (Cross 1983 p. 234). But this analysis of Hollywood's Vietnam movies suggests that their proximity to television's products concerning Vietnam has done a fast fade.

As America has sought to reconstruct its society in the aftermath of Vietnam, it has socially constructed the war, abetted by the lenses of Hollywood. But, in so doing, a disservice has been done to truth. What has been serviced is the selective recollection of history. Such a recollection may be proximately restorative. However, it holds the potential to be ultimately disruptive. For the record that has been constructed will almost certainly have an impact on American's later thought and action.

NOTES

1   The list includes: Apocalypse Now (AN), Born on the 4th of July (BFJ), Casualties of War (CW), Coming Home (CH), The Deer Hunter (DH), Full Metal Jacket (FMJ), Gardens of Stone (GS), Good Morning Vietnam (GMV), The Green Berets

Todd Joseph Miles Holden

(GB), Hamburger Hill (HH), The Hanoi Hilton (THH), Hearts and Minds (HM), The Killing Fields (KF), Missing in Action (MIA), 1969, Platoon (Pl), Presidio (Pr), Rambo, First Blood (RFB), Rambo Part II (RII), Saigon (Sa), Streamers (St), Who'll Stop the Rain (WSR). Where clarity can be maintained, the bracketed abbreviations will appear in the text for brevity's sake.
2 Although *Streamers* turns on racial confrontation, the central interracial friendship possesses virtually no evidence of racial difference. Nor is the *denouement* exclusively —even primarily—about race.
3 This was true even of movies which paid attention to segregation and conflict (e.g. *HH, Pl*).
4 Cf. *Casualties of War* as a case of the former and *Gardens of Stone* as a case of the latter.
5 The situation in this film concerned an FBI agent charged with infiltrating a suspected white supremacy movement. During discussions with her superiors mention was made that the prime target in the investigation was a Vietnam veteran. One FBI agent remarked that one has to be careful about casting stones in the direction of Vietnam veterans. They are back in fashion now.
6 A quote from the promotional paragraph on the back of the *Gardens of Stone* videocassette.
7 Brian de Palma, as quoted in a 1989 *New York Times Magazine* article.

REFERENCES

1 Arlen, M.J. 1969. *Living Room War*. New York: The Viking Press.
2 Bennett, W.L. 1983. *News: The Politics of Illusion*. New York: Longman, Inc.
3 Block, F. 1987. *Revising State Theory: Essays in Politics and Postindustrialism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
4 Broder, D.S. 1980. *Changing of the Guard: Power and Leadership in America*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
5 Cohen, B. 1963. *The Press, the Public and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
6 Commager H.S. and R.B. Morris. 1984. "Editors Introduction," in A.J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.
7 Cross, D.W. 1983. *Mediaspeak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc.
8 Fallows, J. 1989. *More Like Us: Making America Great Again*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
9 Ginsberg, B. 1986. *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power*. New York: Basic Books.

10 Gitlin, T. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

11 Hallin, D.C. 1986. *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12 Mannheim, K. 1936. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

13 Matusow, A.J. 1984. *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.

14 O'Neil, W.L. 1971. *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s*. New York: Times Books.

15 Patterson, T.E. and R.D. McClure. 1976. *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

16 Reich, R.B. 1983. *The Next American Frontier*. New York: Times Books.

17 Robinson, M.J. 1976. "Public Affairs Broadcasting and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of the "Selling of the Pentagon," *American Political Science Review*, 70 (June): 409–432.

18 Schiller, H.I. 1973. *The Mind Managers*. Boston: Beacon Press.

19 Schudson, M. 1984. *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

20 Turley, W.S. 1986. *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975*. New York: New American Library.