VIETNAM: THE REMAKE

While movie-going has long since ceased to be a national habit for just about everyone but teenagers, the movies themselves remain a privileged instrument in the symphony orchestra of American—indeed, international—mass culture. Entertainment aside, they function as social metaphor, showcase utopian possibilities, present new personality types, provide socially cohesive cocktail party conversation. While television is a continuum, a transmission, a guilty pleasure, a consumer appliance; and pop music a way of life that generally exhausts itself by the age of thirty-five, each new movie is an aspiring Event—a conflagration, a potlatch, a public burning of celluloid and money, whose success is dependent on inspiring the public's fascination, instigating a kind of mass need-to-know, the secret fantasy that this might change your life.

The Vietnam War—to take the central event of many people's lives—was something else. It was, to paraphrase historian Gabriel Kolko, an epic event. It was both the longest single war and the most sustained revolutionary effort of the twentieth century, as well as the most challenging military experience in U.S. history—"a synthesis of politics, technology, the residues of past wars, convoluted logic, and symbolism," delivered with the greatest volume of firepower the world has ever seen. The cost in human suffering was monumental and difficult to calculate. In South Vietnam, the war produced seven million displaced persons—one-third of the population, over half the peasantry; it precipitated a forced urbanization, the most "brutal and disorienting that a large Third World nation has ever experienced." Here in the United States, we experienced another sort of disorientation.

In a brilliant essay occasioned by the American Bicentennial, Hannah Arendt wrote that the Vietnam War “was exclusively guided by the needs of a superpower to create for itself an image which would convince the world that it was, indeed, the mightiest power on earth.” Such “image-making as global policy,” Arendt observed, was “something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history... [Image-making] was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian—the phony body-counts of the search and destroy missions, the doctored after-damage reports of the air force, the constant progress reports to Washington.”

So the Vietnam War was spectacular—in the literal sense. Waged in the name of “credibility,” it was intended to project a superpower’s image as the mightiest on earth. But image-making has its own logic and imperatives. The war was also something less rational and more delirious, harder to control and easier to get high on, than just a ten-year public relations campaign. Vietnam was also a movie. Our movie. Our greatest hit. Our biggest bomb.

As orchestrated by two administrations, this movie became the greatest episode in American show business—the longest, costliest, most ambitious, best-attended catastrophe ever staged. Or rather filmed, videotaped, and televised. Cleopatra and Heaven’s Gate have nothing on this debacle—a cost of billions, a cast of millions, some sixty thousand American casualties (plus the death of forty times as many foreign “extras,” eighty or ninety times as many if you include the Cambodian sideshow). I don’t have to tell you what the ratings were like—or the word of mouth. Indeed, we’ve never stopped talking about it.

It’s not simply that Vietnam was perceived as a living-room war by those of us who used to watch the instant replay on television. The experience of those who participated was intimately bound up with our national fantasy life. Out in the field, dangerous areas were called “Indian country,” Vietnamese scouts

were known as “Kit Carsons,” the infamous one-liner “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” was updated as the slogan “The only good gook is a dead one.” It’s not a coincidence that the base to which John Wayne was assigned in The Green Berets is named Dodge City.

When an American captain invites war correspondent Michael Herr on a search-and-destroy mission, he says, “Come on, I’ll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians.” (This is in Dispatches.) Later, Herr muses over the combat performance given by nineteen-year-old kids when they realized a television crew was in the vicinity: “They were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. They were insane, but the war hadn’t done that to them.” Like the election of Ronald Reagan, the war was the fulfillment of something.

In his analysis of the role American cultural attitudes played in our Vietnamese involvement, Loren Baritz observes that “It is astonishing how often American GIs in Vietnam approvingly referred to John Wayne, not as a movie star, but as a model and a standard... Nineteen-year-old Americans, brought up on World War II movies and westerns, walking through the jungle, armed to the teeth, searching for an invisible enemy who knew the wilderness better than they did, could hardly miss these connections. One after another said, at some point, something like ‘Hey, this is just like a movie.’” You probably remember the famous scene in Dispatches where a wounded marine turns to Herr and says, “I hate this movie!”

The men that served in Vietnam used to call America “the World”—short for the Real World. Vietnam by inference, was somewhere else—somewhere imaginary. But this isn’t exactly what I’m going to talk about—I was never in Vietnam, I only know it second-hand, so for me it’s doubly imaginary. The rubric under which these talks are being given is “Remaking History,” and—as literal-minded as I am—this is “Vietnam: The Remake.”
Now, for Hollywood as elsewhere, the 1960s was a period of much fertile confusion. Among other things, the previous decade had been characterized by a cycle of Biblical or Roman spectaculars that not only demonstrated Hollywood’s wealth and power but were also suggestive of an imperial Pax Americana. With the twin disasters of Cleopatra (1963) and Vietnam (1964-75), this cycle came to an end—or rather, it reached its apotheosis.

The movie industry was in the midst of an identity crisis—it groped in the dark for the huge youth market, attempting to develop new formulae. By 1969, around the time that the war was wisely conceived to be unwinnable, five major studios were in the red. At its best, this disorganized state encouraged considerable genre criticism and directorial nonconformity. The old verités had crumbled, anything was possible. The quintessential sixties mode is the apocalyptic genre film—The Wild Bunch, Bonnie and Clyde, Easy Rider, Wild in the Streets, 2001, Myra Breckinridge, Night of the Living Dead. (The latter is a film of particular significance, having been made outside Hollywood, using the techniques of underground movies to offer the most literal possible image of America devouring itself.) The war film alone remained quite traditional.

Of course, the whole idea of a war film is bizarre—particularly if you suspect, as I do, that entertainment is by its nature somewhat utopian and compensatory, concerned with pleasure and wish fulfillment. Samuel Fuller, who was wounded twice in World War II and made a number of powerful combat movies, maintained that it was impossible to “show war as it really is on the screen,” adding that it might be preferable to “fire real shots over the audience’s head” and “have actual casualties in the theater.” The analogy between dreams and movies has been endlessly rehearsed and so it’s suggestive that, after studying the dreams of traumatized World War I veterans, Freud considered their nocturnal flashbacks a distinct category of dream that arose less from wish fulfillment or anxiety than a compulsion to repeat the traumatic experience.

The megabuck World War II epic was still a viable form of entertainment during the period of U.S. escalation. Each year, from 1965 through 1970, brought at least one large-scale replay of Big Two: Battle of the Bulge (1965), Is Paris Burning? (1966), Beach Red (1967), Anzio (1968), The Battle of Britain (1969), Tora! Tora! Tora! (1970). Yet, with the exception of The Green Berets (which, although produced in 1968, took its cues from World War II combat films), the current war was entirely absent from American movie screens. This was virtually true of popular music as well. There were a few songs dealing with unhappy soldiers, but the Vietnam War produced no “Over There” or “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree.”

Now, John Wayne and The Green Berets notwithstanding, the Vietnam War has always had an odd history in American films. Indeed, once the Vietnam War became widely perceived as unwinnable—that is, once Nixon and Kissinger began to withdraw American ground forces—all war vanished from the movie screen. Although Hollywood released nine war films in 1970 (the most since the big-budget World War II epic was launched in 1958), the genre was abruptly terminated once Richard Nixon set about withdrawing American combat troops. Only two war films were released in 1971, and none at all for the next four years (which, significantly, coincides with the heyday of disaster films). Not until the war was over did Midway (1976), A Bridge Too Far (1977), and MacArthur (1977) appear—along with the first wave of Vietnam combat films.

So, right from the start, Hollywood seemed to want the war in Vietnam over and done with—thus operating within the regime of wish fulfillment. The initial cycle of Vietnam movies were set mainly on the home front, where the battle was being fought for the hearts and minds of the American viewing public. These movies were considerably less interested in combat heroics than in the often nightmarish situation of the returning
vets—alternately shown as a guilty society’s violent redeemers or its victimized scapegoats and often an ambiguous combination of the two.

The 1967 Born Losers not only introduced the messianic half-Indian, ex-Green Beret, Billy Jack (a now-forgotten left-wing precursor to Rambo in his agonized vigilantism), but spawned an entire subgenre in which alienated Viet vets either joined up with or battled marauding motorcycle gangs (the most malevolent manifestation of the youth culture). With the rise of blaxploitation, the turf shifted so that ex-Green Berets played by Jim Brown or Paul Winfield came back to war against ghetto dope dealers and exploitive gangsters. While only a few horror flicks—the 1971 Fiend with the Electronic Brain, Bob Clark’s 1972 Deathdream—were crude enough to use returning Viet vets as literal monsters, movies like Welcome Home Soldier Boys (1972), Tracks (1976), Taxi Driver (1976), and Rolling Thunder (1977), not to mention scores of TV shows, made the psychotic, violence-prone Viet vet a mass culture cliché.

But the purpose of war, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, is to injure—“to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep integrity of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves.” And so, more disturbing perhaps than those vets who returned to the World to run amok were those who came back visibly or invisibly scarred—the wounded vets of Coming Home (1978), Who’ll Stop the Rain? (1978), Cutter’s Way (1981), and Some Kind of Hero (1982)—who appeared to suffer some particular sexual malaise, if not an out-and-out mutilation. Something of theirs is missing. Vietnam, it would seem, hit America below the belt.

The first recuperation of the sixties can be found in the cycle of disaster films inaugurated in 1970 by Airport—and peaking four years later with Earthquake, The Towering Inferno, The Hindenburg, Juggernaut, The Taking of Pelham One Two Three, the resignation of Richard Nixon, and Airport 1975. These featured all-star casts in the guise of ordinary, middle-class people who have to cope with the total breakdown of institutions thought to be safe. Such institutions are clearly microcosms of America but, although the disaster is worsened by mendacious, greedy, corrupt, and incompetent leaders, it does not reflect a fundamental flaw in the system. Actually, the system works. Disaster films demonstrate the fundamental decency of ordinary people, their allegiance to traditional moral virtues. All the middle-class values reign victorious at the end.

By asserting that America’s enemies remained nature and/or technology, disaster films denied that Americans had become decadent or that consensus had shattered. Indeed, they suggested that the sixties never happened—traditional virtues are intact and, unlike in Night of the Living Dead, enable people to help each other survive the crisis. So disaster films were fundamentally reassuring and they also reassured the alienated audience with the old-time entertainment religion of conspicuous consumption, happy endings, and all-star casts. They were typically filled with familiar faces from the forties and fifties—had he not decided on another career, Ronald Reagan would have fit right in as a secondary character in The Towering Inferno.

In recuperating the apocalyptic breakdowns of the sixties, disaster films were the first wave of reillusionment. There would be others. With the fall of Saigon in June 1975, the American public was left to contemplate the futility of its great disaster film—the wasted lives and squandered wealth. This was depressing. Small wonder that, from 1976 on, Americans indulged in an orgy of born-again genres and exercises in feel-good regression, a prolonged fascination with the fabulous fifties that functioned like Freud’s notion of the fetish—that is, a defense against castration anxiety fixating on a substitute phallus, often the last thing experienced before a traumatic discovery or loss. For the
past fifteen years, the era we call the fifties (really the 1955-62 period between the Korean and Vietnam wars) has been a kind of lost paradise within American popular culture. George Lucas's 1973 *American Graffiti* was the harbinger of this trend—not just because it was the first film to periodicize the 1955-62 period, but because it deliberately used the disaster of Vietnam as a structuring absence.

Since then and up until very recently, American movies, TV, and politics have continued to privilege the fifties, even to the point of superimposing that happy era over the eighties. Only in *Blue Velvet* (1986) does this contradiction begin to manifest itself; in the more seamless *Back to the Future* (1985), “1955” is a place for the hero to play—a theme park or Disneyland (which, perhaps not coincidentally, opened that very year). *Back to the Future* is a kind of historical Moebius strip that negates the idea of history, by suggesting that the troublesome past can be rescripted to improve the present.

In terms of war movies, this usually occurs several years after the war is over. Hollywood began to ponder World War I in the mid-twenties and World War II after 1949, while Korean War movies were a staple of the late fifties. Not until several years after the fall of Saigon did Hollywood attempt to reenact the war as a period spectacle. A cluster of films released in 1978 and 1979 established and/or epitomized the basic thematics that, in various combinations, have gone in and out of favor through to the present day: the returning vet melodrama (Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, 1978), the grunt ensemble film (Sidney Furie's *The Boys in Company C*, 1978), and the macho back-to-Nam fantasy (Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, 1978).

These were preceded by the publication of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a vivid work of gonzo journalism that established certain basic loans about Vietnam and the American relationship to its triply elusive antagonist, the Vietcong—“Under the ground was his, above it was ours... We had the days and [Charlie] had the nights.”* Dispatches* further paved the way for the psychedelic spectacle of Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that, in its brazen megalomania and dazzling concern for the power of special effects, may be truer to the sense of the original Vietnam War than any remake yet produced—up to its confused, anticlimactic ending, not to mention the destructive effect it had on Coppola's subsequent career (which most recently included a hack, maudlin tribute to Viet era heroism).

For all this, however, the war remained as dark and primal as a murder witness by a two-year-old. For Herr, “Night was the war's truest medium; night was when it got really interesting in the villages, the TV crews couldn't film at night.”* Our popular culture hadn't evolved language to describe it, beyond the grandiose failure of *Apocalypse Now*'s final movement. As mad Dennis Hopper said of crazy Marlon Brando when he met a dogged Martin Sheen at the heart of darkness: “I wish I had words.” Despite the success of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, their unresolved ambiguities proved far less attractive than the clearcut fantasies generated by something like *Good Guys Wear Black* (1979), an early Chuck Norris vehicle in which the ex-karate champ searches for the Washington politicos who betrayed him and his commando unit, or *First Blood* and *Uncommon Valor*, two early eighties sleepers both directed by Ted Kotcheff.

Released almost simultaneously with the dedication of the Vietnam Veteran's Monument in Washington, *First Blood* proved the surprise hit of late 1982—as well as Sylvester Stallone's first commercial hit outside the Rocky cycle. A property that spent a decade on Warner's shelf, *First Blood* turned the assumptions of the returning vet films inside out. This incendiary plea for tolerance, designed to appeal to both hawks and doves, introduced 'John Rambo—a taciturn, hippified ex-Green Beret driven to acts of insane violence by the relentless persecution of a redneck sheriff.

In effect, Rambo brought the war home and cast himself as
a victimized, victorious guerrilla fighter. In the novel from which the film is adapted, Rambo is clearly a Frankenstein monster. He kills the entire posse that chases him up into the hills, returns to burn down Main Street, and is finally terminated by the very Green Beret officer who trained him. The movie Rambo, who anticipates Bruce Springsteen in his ambiguous mixture of left- and right-wing symbols, is more like a reverse neutron bomb—destroying property rather than lives. Although Rambo never succeeds in wrestling the Phallus from the possession of the sheriff, when he's hauled off to prison, it's clearly for our sins.

Rambo's equally haunted if less neurotic and more securely masculine equivalent was Tom Magnum, the hero of CBS's long-running *Magnum, P.I.* The show is set in Hawaii but Vietnam is continually manifest in its characters and situations, not to mention the hero's frequent flashbacks to his commando experiences—often accompanied by soulful sixties pop songs or moody riffs for electric guitar. (Clearly, Magnum was a man who had once smoked pot and brooded over Eric Clapton.) An eruption of orange and green, the war is represented as a mad succession of meaningless missions or chaotic combat. But for all its incomprehensibility, it is clearly a male testing ground. Son and grandson of American war heroes (his father was killed at Inchon), the Magnum Man exudes a tough melancholy that substituted Vietnam for some prehistoric unhappy love affair in his private-eye mystique. (*Simon and Simon* is another hit detective show, born during the 1982-83 season, that proposed to bind America's wounds by splitting Rambo in two. The protagonists are a brother team, one a Viet vet, the other a college-educated peacenik.)

By the early eighties, the idea that Rambo—if not all those who fought in Vietnam—had been betrayed at home, then “spat upon” when they returned, became an article of faith. This ingratitude lent piquance to the fantasy of an American victory in Vietnam and an aspect of implied revenge to the imaginative appropriation of the Vietcong's guerrilla tactics. In 1983, this scenario was canonized with the unexpected success of *Uncommon Valor*, co-produced by John Milius, in which a retired officer trains guerrillas to spring his son and other MIAs held captive in a Laotian prison camp.

*Uncommon Valor* basically appropriated the premise of *The Losers* (1970), in which a group of bikers returned to Nam on their motorcycles to rescue a captured presidential adviser from a Chinese prison camp. (Anticipating the self-pity endemic to early eighties Nam films, the surviving gang members have to hear themselves denounced as “trash” for their troubles.) But, with its emphasis on patriarchal authority, mutilated genealogy,
and male rites of passage, *Uncommon Valor* took the lead in visualizing Indochina as the site of America’s symbolic castration. Unlike *Apocalypse Now* or even *The Deer Hunter* (in which De Niro’s possession of the Phallus seems tentative and depressed), it offered itself as a clear-cut exorcism of the shame and dishonor of American defeat.

Milius’s 1984 *Red Dawn* provided a guilt-free version of *First Blood* that managed to refight the war in Colorado—identifying his youthful protagonists with the VC while projecting America’s wartime activities onto the Soviet and Cuban invaders. In the wake of *Uncommon Valor* (and the euphoria produced by Grenada, surely the most successful American war movie since *Bridge on the River Kwai*), subsequent Vietnam exorcisms grew increasingly fantastic and compensatory. Films like *Missing in Action* (1984), *Rambo* (1985), and the futuristic *Top Gun* (1986) changed the emphasis from teamwork to the glorification of a supermasculine principle.

In recuperating the war, these movies finally (after twenty years) recapitulated something of its initial appeal. The American policy makers of the early sixties were obsessed with the issue of American military potency. The nuclear stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union only intensified their frustration—you can see this again in *Top Gun*, which is like a celebration of *ejaculatio retardata*. Once upon a time, back in the bold, Kennedy-inflected sixties, war was an invitation to manliness . . .

Now, given the shame inherent in missing a war and thus foregoing the opportunity to demonstrate one’s manhood, it seems appropriate that the movies most expressive of America’s humiliation would have been produced by John Milius and Sylvester Stallone, both of whom avoided service during the Vietnam War. (*Top Gun’s* co-producer, Don Simpson, actually bragged to one interviewer that he deliberately wrecked his motorcycle to be beat the draft.) No less than the war itself, the fantasies of *Red Dawn* and *Rambo* reflected a nostalgia for what Philip Caputo, in *A Rumor of War*, yearns for as “that savage, heroic time . . . before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers.”

As Elaine Scarry has noted in her essay, “Injury and the Structure of War,” it’s scarcely uncommon for an army to be envisioned as a single gigantic individual, often named for the commanding officer, with an Achilles heel or an underbelly or a rear that may be penetrated. For the American ground forces in Vietnam, that individual only appeared some years after the war was over. This colossus is Rambo—a thing built to absorb punishment, whose illusion of mastery complements Ronald Reagan’s mastery of illusion.

Rambo is a superb icon: a hippie he-man (he manages to keep his talismanic long hair even in prison), a patriotic loner. Once in the Nam, he strips down to his trademark tank top and sweatband—he’s a high-tech primitive incinerating battalions of gooks with his special TNT-tipped arrows. You might reasonably assume that Rambo is the American descendant of a nineteenth-century French poet, back for another Season in Hell. As it turns out, he’s of “Indian-German” descent, a sort of Apache *Übermensch* or a Prussian noble savage, the ultimate Karl May fantasy. But mainly, Rambo is a torso: absurdly muscular, perpetually taut, a sort of Nautilus-biult hard-on. One critic wrote that “Stallone is so pumped up his veins have erections.” Rambo is so phallic, he really should be called Dildo.

If you’ve seen the movie, you know that the love object is killed in Rambo’s arms seconds after he clasps her to his pecs, thus the VC saves him from even a moment’s relaxation. Rambo, as Klaus Theweleit wrote of the Freikorps, is one of those “men [who] look for ecstasy not in embraces, but in explosions,” the great balls of fire that the guys in *Top Gun* are always singing about. Rambo can never be satisfied, he can never detumesce, he presents himself as the embodiment of unrequited patriotic love:
with him, that unwinnable war had at last (and at least) been successfully repackaged.

Magnum and Rambo (we might call him Cro Magnum) redeemed the American fighting man, thus making the world safe for their lesser buddies. With Platoon (1986), Gardens of Stone (1987), Full Metal Jacket (1987), Hamburger Hill (1987), Good Morning Vietnam (1987), the documentary Dear America (1987), and the television series Tour of Duty (shot, like Magnum, P.I., in Hawaii), the Vietnam exorcism has taken a turn for the “naturalistic,” focusing on the actual experience of ordinary combatants. Not surprisingly, a number of these movies are statements by Viet vets who have been trying, in some cases for years, to get their experience of the war on the screen.

The emphasis having shifted from the humiliation of the elite POWs, mainly air force bomber pilots, and the fantasy exploits of their supermasculine rescuers, to the less glamorous suffering of the teenage recruits who were most often sent into combat, the new Vietnam films are less virulently right-wing than their immediate predecessors and more attuned to the specific nature of the war. (As Herr observed, “Flying over the jungle was almost pure pleasure, doing it on foot was nearly all pain.”)\(^4\)

Now on the American side, Vietnam was a war fought mainly by working-class teenagers—half of them black or Hispanic. Their average age was nineteen (as opposed to twenty-six in World War II). These kids knew that most of their peers were beating the draft, that the better educated enlistees were enjoying American-style amenities. In short, they understood that they were suckers, and they were resentful. Consequently, they developed their own anti-authoritarian subculture: more than any previous American army, they were prone to go native, take scalps, wear earrings, shoot drugs, scrawl weird slogans on their helmets.

The grunt ensemble films acknowledge that the war’s human cost was born largely by the disadvantaged. Still, they do so only obliquely: poor blacks are prominent, but the protagonists of these movies are middle-class whites. There has been as yet no Vietnam film made from a black point of view although, overrepresented as they were in the worst assignments, black grunts were far more politically radical and disadvantaged than were whites. Hamburger Hill allows a taste of black rage, albeit focusing on micro-incidents of racial tension rather than addressing the essential racist component of the war.

Instead, war is shown as terrifyingly existential: a sense of abandonment amid meaningless conflict is as central to the grunt ensemble films as it is to the MIA rescue films, but here it is less tragic than pathetic or, in the case of Full Metal Jacket, ironic. Gardens of Stone is the lone current example to even bother with traditional forms of patriotic sentiment. Like, it wasn’t them who started “that crazy Asian war.” Bereft of even the most minimal ideological support, the teenage warriors nevertheless perform their “patriotic chore.” As befits a TV show, Tour of Duty is the most didactic when it comes to this: the last episode I saw had a peacenik learn to kill, a Puerto Rican win the respect of his black comrades, a middle-class lieutenant come to appreciate his tough sergeant. But the acme of excruciatingly pointless heroism is Hamburger Hill, where the central battle for control of a slope in the Ashau Valley has no intrinsic meaning, strategic or otherwise. With the collapse of the greater values, the minor ones are drafted into service. The film escapes the bleakest sort of absurdism only by making it seem a virtue to be cannon fodder—a tragic and noble fate.

Given the close identification between Rambo and Ronbo, one suspected that when Platoon swept the 1987 Oscars, six months after the Iran-contragate revelations, the Reagan revolution was receding from its high water mark. But even as Platoon provided a gutsy correlative to the fantasies of bellicose noncombatants
Milius and Stallone, it initiated another round of mythologizing. Drenched in sixties rock and a perverse Viet nostalgia (one’s youth is still one’s youth, whether spent in Kansas or Khe Sanh), grunt ensemble films shy away from any sense of the war’s moral basis or its political significance. In this, they may reflect the conflict of Vietnam veterans who want to forget the horrors of war but recognize that the experience was the high point of their lives.

Historical context is secondary to the re-creation of the period—and, by extension, American innocence. Hence the stunning popularity of Good Morning, Vietnam in which Robin Williams appears as an irreverent Saigon-based disc jockey. Aside from playing the man who brought rock ‘n’ roll to Vietnam—thus making possible Vietnam movies—Williams’s major accomplishment is his attitude. He reads classified news items or rags on LBJ’s family on the air, insults uptight officers and teaches Vietnamese students to talk street jive. Williams’s hipness distances him from the war. Like the protagonists of Platoon and Full Metal Jacket, his cynicism is a form of militant naiveté, if not denial. Moreover, despite his insolence, he’s protected by a friendly general who recognizes his value for morale. Thus, Good Morning, Vietnam doesn’t satirize the war so much as celebrate the illusion—and the impotence—of “telling it like it is.”

The first Vietnam films had two themes: the vet’s return home and the vet’s return to Vietnam, embodying a restless movement back and forth in some fruitless search for closure. The more naturalistic grunt ensembles plunge headlong into the war’s center, an attempt to ward off inevitable defeat. The machine is still engorged: it’s Good Morning, Vietnam rather than Good Night World.

This is why virtually all Vietnam combat films are set during the present tense of Johnson’s war—that is, at the peak of American involvement, before Nixon’s troop withdrawals de-
stroyed what was left of army morale, the exposure of the My Lai massacre eroded America's moral position, before the invasion of Cambodia made a mockery of Nixon's promise not to widen the war, before new recruits had experienced the antiwar movement and the counterculture, black power, and urban riots. The post-1969 recruits were less docile and, as the troop withdrawals signaled the retreat from military victory, the army was plagued by escalating disorders that raised questions as to the ability of the U.S. armed forces to continue to function at all.

The grunt ensemble films strongly suggest the dreams that Freud attributed to traumatic neuroses, "repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident." (In fact, there was an article in Newsday about the value of Platoon as therapy.) This repetition, according to Freud, is an attempt at mastery: overpowered by the initial experience, the subject actively repeats it, as children might as play. But, a neurotic in the grip of a repetition compulsion is "obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of ... remembering it as something belonging to the past."13

Defusing blame is a key aspect of the new Vietnam film. Although the war is named for a foreign country, it must always be shown as an American struggle. It can never be acknowledged that in waging this war, the U.S. orchestrated the most massive display of firepower in human history. As in the original movie, the stars of every Vietnam film are entirely American. Hamburger Hill and Good Morning, Vietnam might be considered mildly revisionist for the cameos they award the locals but, a bit of hand-to-hand combat and a few flashes of North Vietnamese artillery aside, the indigenous population is almost entirely female and thus designed for subjugation. The enemy is only perfunctorily the VC: Platoon refights the American Civil War with blacks and northern white dopers pitted against Southern juicedheads; in Full Metal Jacket, women are the enemy; in Hamburger Hill, it's the media.

Bill Coutrie's Dear America, produced for Home Box Office, is the documentary corollary to Platoon and Hamburger Hill. Sentimental and horrific, it juxtaposes actual GI letters to parents, wives, and girlfriends read by a small galaxy of Hollywood stars with candid footage, as well as the obligatory sixties rock track, to create a sort of transpersonal home movie. These letters are often expressions of pure terror and disorientation. But this powerful raw material makes the result doubly disturbing. The paradox is that Coutrie's documentary is the most heavily mythologizing grunt ensemble film yet. Not only are the musical juxtapositions stupefyingly literal-minded ("I'm 18" for boot camp, "Gimme Shelter" during an air assault, "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall" used to accompany a monsoon), but the filmmakers conveniently forget that war is war and one doesn't necessarily tell Mom all.

Although insistent on its authenticity, Dear America is Vietnam without racism, drugs, fraggings, atrocities, sex weirdness, or any of the perks of an occupying army. Historical context dissolves in subjectivity, the war emerging as a no-fault collision whose victims are entirely American. The Deer Hunter has been replaced by Dear Hunter.

In their retreat from the realm of the sociohistorical, recent Vietnam films stress the subjective experience of the individual combatant—thus, the importance of voice-over letters in Platoon, Gardens of Stone, and Dear America, the frenzied flashbacks of Magnum, P.I., the immersion in sixties pop music. The war becomes a personal affair or a generational coming of age. Grunt ensemble films honor the Viet vet by extolling his situational loyalty to his buddies. Although in this, they are true to the experience of a war where the continual rotation of ground troops discouraged cohesion and a soldier's overriding concern was to survive his twelve-month tour of duty and get out, these movies can never address the ideological conditioning that suckerd
Americans into Vietnam to begin with.

Imperial America is now in syndication: it’s a perpetual rerun. As the TV ads for the video release of *Platoon* told us: “It’s not too late to do something about Vietnam. See *Platoon* and understand.” The World War II combat film had addressed the question *Why We Fight?* It explained who our adversaries were, located the war in our national history, and directed us towards our individual responsibilities. It provided instruction in what it meant to be an American while reassuring us that, whatever the provocations of the enemy and horrors of war, we were still nice guys and square-shooters who played by the rules. Vietnam films could do none of this. Nor can they. *The Green Berets* aside, there were no such movies produced during the course of the Vietnam War. Instead, *The Dirty Dozen* (from the right) and *How I Won the War* (from the left), both 1967, initiated a cycle of cynical war stories that had nothing to do with patriotism, democracy, or fair play. If anything, these issues were displaced onto the dying form of the western. *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *High Plains Drifter* (1973) had more to do with Vietnam than any war film.

This quintessential American genre was typically the way that, however honestly or meretriciously, America used to explain itself to itself. Who makes the law? What is the order? As American soldiers played “cowboys” in Vietnam, it is significant that the antiwar counterculture identified itself with the Indians, adopting beads and headbands, tribal lifestyles, peyote, eco-politics, a return to the land. This split in historical consensus made the western obsolete. The genre, which enjoyed its Golden Age during the quarter-century Pax Americana that followed World War II, grew increasingly apocalyptic throughout the Vietnam War, with the ultimate desecration of *Blazing Saddles* (1974) capping the assorted anti-, post, spaghetti, revisionist, psychedelic, and burlesque westerns of the early seventies.

The decline and eclipse of the western effectively redefined the screen image of the masculine hero. When Dustin Hoffman finally made a western, he played an Indian; the seventies saw a whole generation of stars who never donned stetsons (Robert De Niro, Sylvester Stallone, Al Pacino, Richard Dreyfuss). The mythology had been discredited. No wonder *Top Gun*’s press book was emblazoned with a quote to the effect that “there are only four occupations worthy of a man: actor, rock star, jet fighter pilot or President of the United States.” The difficulty inherent in constructing a winner out of a loser is at least a partial factor in the abject failure of Senator Albert Gore, the first Vietnam veteran to run for president. He really should have spent less time listening to Martin Peretz and more time watching *Magnum, P.I.*

Vietnam offered no great battles and no clearly defined enemy. Its casualties included our longstanding sense of national innocence and masculine identity, not to mention the broad national consensus that had defined American foreign policy since World War II. This has made the war particularly difficult to represent: inherently polarizing and depressing, with a built-in unhappy ending, it both broke the conventions of civilized warfare and the basic rules of Hollywood entertainment. It was the last picture show.

The impossible longing for a satisfactory conclusion tempts each Viet film to sell itself as definitive. It is precisely that bummer of a finale—more the film just running out of the projector, than the roof caving in—that has left us with a compulsion to remake, if not history, then at least the movie.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., p. 201.
5. Ibid., pp. 188-189.
8. Ibid., p. 41.