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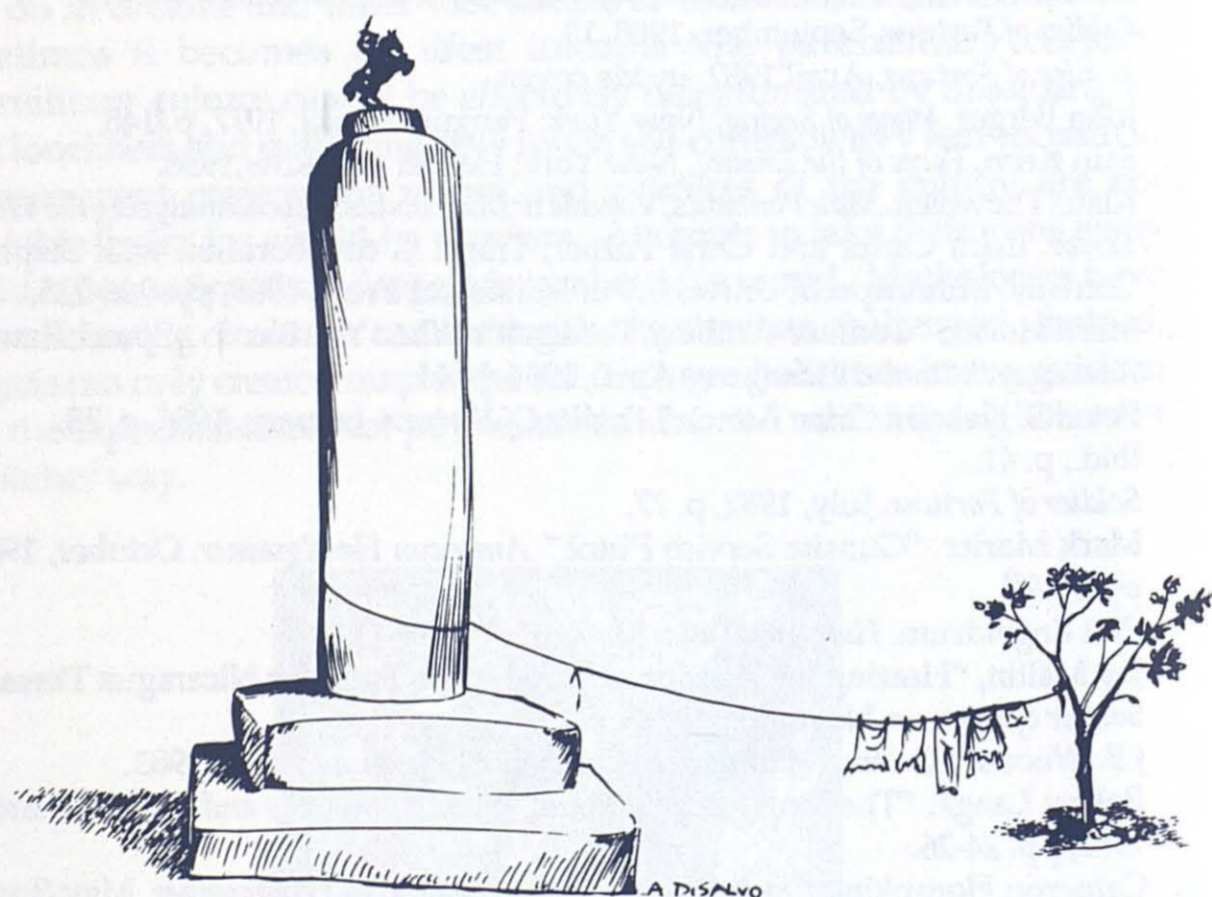
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The (Un)Reality of War: Reconsidering Stone's *Platoon*

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Thirty years from now people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*.
— David Halberstam¹

What is one to make of such a comment concerning Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Platoon*? Halberstam, a Vietnam War correspondent for the *New York Times*, respected journalist and author, "a man who's been there," according to *Time*, has been called in to pass judgment not only on reality but, as film critic, authorized to attest to its representation. Widely hailed as the most realistic portrayal of war ever committed to film, for this very reason *Platoon* raises slippery questions over representation of 'the real.' Yet in its almost fable-like story of a young man's ascension into wisdom, as well as its construction of an archetypal heroic warrior, *Platoon* also reaches mightily for a mythic grandeur unbounded by time or place. Indeed, considering that the Vietnamese have been rendered Other, even effaced, by the film, *Platoon* as historical document, as the Vietnam War itself, appears to have very little to do with history, let alone Vietnam. By replacing the Vietnamese-as-enemy with the morally obsessive enemy-within configuration, *Platoon* aspires to move beyond mere politics or history, offering instead a transcendent vision of some universal Human Condition.

That such contradiction resides in a mainstream Hollywood production isn't unusual; what is unprecedented is the thunderous applause heralding its hard-hitting reality, its brutal honesty in daring to tell-it-like-it-is; in short, its unflinching critical stance towards war. Although *Platoon* has taken its place in the cinematic canon as an 'anti-war' film, its miscegenation of recent history, existential circumstances, personal experiences, and mythic signifiers paradoxically implicates it in a much more radical glamorization of war: one sophisticated enough to denounce its own antecedents while simultaneously extending the ideological functions of cinematic war itself, i.e. the maintenance of the values and relations which sustain the 'good fight' and the will to fight it. My interest here is not only in the film's critical reception lodging it within a conception of 'the real', but also particular images generating readings arrayed along a continuum from historical 'truth' to mythic faith.²

The operating principle of praise for *Platoon*, the one word so closely associated with it that they're practically synonymous, has been 'realism.'

One would be hard pressed to locate the actual motion picture within the swirl of adoration, the ecstasy of appreciation, the carnival of words denoting its 'reality.'

One of the most realistic, viscerally powerful portrayals of jungle warfare ever realized on the screen. (Gary Crowdus, *Cineaste*)³

Platoon gives Vietnam back some of its reality. (*The Nation*)⁴

It is more than a movie; it's like being in Viet Nam. *Platoon* makes you feel you've been there and never want to go back. (Steven Spielberg, *Time*)⁵

Platoon is the first real Viet Nam film, and one of the great war movies of all time. The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But *Platoon* is historically and politically accurate... I think the film will become an American classic. Thirty years from now people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*. (David Halberstam, *Time*)⁶

Platoon makes us real. (John Wheeler, Vietnam veteran activist, quoted in *Time*)⁷

Such discourses outline a number of problems in considering fictive representations of war. In this particular sequence the film is first described as a realistic portrayal of warfare. It then returns to the country "some of its reality"; it is capable of transporting us to Vietnam, it becomes identical with the war itself. Finally, veterans are made to feel authenticated by the film: it brings a kind of legitimacy, a certain reality to people's lives.

And yet, one could be forgiven for asking: whose reality? More to the point: how is (the concept of) war transmitted to the culture at large? First admission: war really does exist—it is not merely or even primarily a 'text.' What is problematic is that most people (in this country anyway) only know about war through its representations, through the forms of articulation employed to describe it. That is to say (an understanding of) war cannot be separated from representation. In postmodern parlance this sort of talk is usually referred to as intertextuality, the notion that, for example, an experience of the real is conveyed as a text, and other texts act as sources for suggesting what the primary text represents. In the sense that language is never transparent or identical to 'reality,' representations of the real cannot but help referring to other representations. This isn't so much the real set against the imaginary as it is a circular notion of both, model and image, reality and representation interpenetrating each other.

An all too appropriate example of this is circulation of texts is furnished by Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, I counted no less than a dozen references to the cinematic nature of people's experiences leading Herr to write:

I keep thinking about all the kids who get wiped out by 17 years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; 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.⁸

This rather *outré* play-acting wasn't limited necessarily to the combatants: journalists too, analysts and interpreters of the war, were not exactly immune to the cultural detritus of cinematic invasions:

A lot of correspondents weren't much better. We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. The first few times that I got fired at or saw combat deaths, nothing really happened, all the responses got locked in my head. It was the same familiar violence, only moved over to another medium; some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end so they could get up again and walk it off. But that was some scene (you found out), there was no cutting it. A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all, and even after you knew better you couldn't avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies, just like *The Quiet American* or *Catch-22*... just like all that combat footage from television...⁹

Earlier in the book Herr deliberately toys with these boundaries, suggesting that the story he's recording is his own movie. At some point a wounded soldier says to him, "I hate this movie,"¹⁰ a worrisome moment made doubly unsettling in that the text disrupts a reader's already precarious certainty: Is this a line in Herr's movie or the soldier's?

Soldiers in the field invoke invoking movie allusions seem disturbing enough, a likely source of such phantasma being WWII's war-as-glory genre. As Herr illustrates, even one's memory is often at play with other images, images which at least have the capacity to re-shape and scramble, relativize and compete with the 'real.' As Georges Duhamel remarked around 1930, "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images."¹¹

To consider then that succeeding generations might be shaped by such representations of war, specifically Vietnam (already the Televised War), one edges ever closer to vertigo. For the participants of war themselves have been marked by cinematic representations, and those experiences consequently become the basis of cinematic material, which in turn is received by audiences as (at least) an 'approximation' of what war must be like. But in fact what we see is a movie referencing movie - damaged participants, a kind of double-movie that itself reverts back to an earlier cinema constituted largely out of archaic myths of war.

This hall of mirror, this Möebius strip of representation and reality approaches the hyperreality of Baudrillard's suddenly unfashionable simulacra, wherein any notion of an original must be but a copy, already a series of codes and signs continuously reduplicating itself, where life is constructed by representations which are subsequently *lived out as real*.¹²

In *War and Cinema*, Paul Virilio refers to an interview in which crew members from the aircraft carrier Nimitz tell a journalist. "Our work is totally unreal. Every now and then, fiction and reality should get together and prove once and for all that we are real here."¹³ WWII vet and film director Samuel Fuller, maker of several combat movies, doubted the cinema's ability to "show war as it really is in the screen," insisting that it might preferable to "fire real shots over this audience's head" and "have actual casualties in the theater."¹⁴ And yet, this apparent conundrum doesn't seem to dissuade people from attempting (or audiences from attending) ever more 'truthful' renditions of war.

"Well, that brings us to the essential point," says Stone to *American Film* interviewer Alex Cockburn, "of what movies are and how they function. More and more, I feel that movies are not reality, but an approximation of reality, and, in some cases, a wish fulfillment."¹⁵ It comes as something of a relief to hear Stone's admission that, finally, "movies are not reality," although this would seem to antagonize his unending quest for 'realism' in his work. Regardless of the confessional nature of such a statement, this "approximation of reality" was taken so seriously that the cast of *Platoon* was put through a kind of simulation bootcamp.

In a sidebar to *Time's* cover story, entitled "How the War Was Won," writer Dan Goodgame describes the harsh turmoil actors were subjected to under the orders of Captain Dale Dye, a retired Marine Corps lifer who served as the film's technical advisor. Through his consulting firm, Warriors Inc., Dye ensured the authenticity of *Platoon* by putting the cast through "a crash course in jungle fighting," replicating the experience of Vietnam infantry. Tom Berenger, who played Sergeant Barnes, conceded, "We didn't even have to act. We were there."¹⁶ Perhaps too aptly named, Dye, a

decorated Vietnam vet, returns to Vietnam, this time on the big screen: the military man plays an actor who plays a military man. Dye appears in *Platoon* as the officer who invokes the final apocalyptic air strike on his own defeated position, stoically declaring, "For the record, it's my call: dump everything you got left on my pods — expend all remaining." Lest anyone remain unconvinced that this man means business, the article cites further credentials to Dye's presiding as an authority on reality, including former editor of *Soldier of Fortune* and unofficial trainer of Nicaraguan contras.

In "Platoon and the Mythology of Realism," Thomas Prasch mounts an incisive critique of Stone's construction of the 'real.' Through a "conscious imitation of documentary styles"—hand-held camera, jungle foliage-obstructed views—the filmmaker produces what Prasch calls a "realism of surface texture." An endless stream of details which conform to our concept of "Vietnam"—biting insects, background radio signals, jungle serpents, perpetual sweat, G.I. language (every variation of "fuck" imaginable) — endows the movie with a "level of truth" that is nothing if not familiar. Such details "are precisely geared to audience expectations because they tell us absolutely nothing that we do not already know—about the jungle, about life in the army, about the war." Thus, the film doesn't so much 'reveal' reality as reinforce previously indexed notions of how we've come to know 'war.'¹⁷

Despite the abundance of so much realism, although again a realism heavily reliant on prior cinematic representations, *Platoon* has been exalted as a classical coming-of-age film, a mythic tale borrowing on the *Bildungsroman* tradition, according to *The Humanist's* Harry Geduld;¹⁸ similarly, two separate reviewers associated it with Stephen Crane in that the story traces the maturation of a young man from raw recruit to rough-hewn hero.¹⁹ *Platoon* is caught up in this double movement of reality and myth in a number of ways, but primarily in the central plot device in which the historical war merely provides a backdrop for a metaphysical one between good and evil. That the film moves from the particular to the universal is accomplished most spectacularly in its apotheosis of the common soldier as superhero, wherein male virtuosity is fetishized in a cult of the warrior. *Platoon's* mythic apportionment is one of scale: the heroic grandeur of epic war on film, from Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) through to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), has been telescoped down to the individual level, transferring fantastical qualities to a gladiator locked in proverbial mortal combat. In *Platoon*, two sequences are key to this construction.

During maneuvers through the jungle, the platoon is ambushed by the always seemingly hidden enemy. Elias, expert killer and cunning tactician, proposes sneaking behind NVA lines; Taylor expresses desire to accompany Elias who, stripping away his gear, gently smiles "No—I move faster alone."

Mythic invincibility is best represented in isolation, so Elias, the fierce warrior, must brave the enemy separated even from his admirers. Stone employs a smooth tracking shot, taken from alongside Elias (never in front of or behind him — the viewer can only hope to keep up with his movements) as he glides through the jungle. He moves silently, this guerrilla fighter, becoming one with the alien terrain, stalking the stalkers — operating on a plane available only to warrior intuition. Stone cuts back and forth to heighten the confrontation: the NVA, charging right to left are filmed in a wide shot as a group; outfitted with foliage, they look and sound much like a menacing herd. In contrast, Elias, moving left to right, is shown in isolation; for him the jungle is still, save for the sound of distant fire. Stone offers close-ups only of Elias: on his face as he calculates his face strategy, signaling intensity by wiping sweat from his brow; then on his hands clutching the ever-present weapon as he picks up the pace of his mission. Finally, darting at top speed through a scattering of NVA, and with a sense of economy too, he picks off at least a dozen "dinks" (as he called them), most at only few feet distance — all the while *running through the jungle*. In case we fail to recognize the gallantry of such efforts, Elias gives out a first-rate war-cry before his fatal meeting with Barnes.

The torch of the warrior is eventually passed to Taylor. By the film's final battle scene he has become Elias — at least semiotically. Trading in helmet for headband, stripped of the non-essentials, Taylor is all sleeveless t-shirt, automatic weapon, and glistening muscles. Like Elias, Taylor can predict the NVA's intentions, dragging his comrade Francis from their foxhole seconds before it explodes. And like Elias, Taylor's motion, speed and shooting are impeccable, taking out several more hapless others — again at nearly point blank range. Stone's hand-held camera-work mimics Taylor's jarring dash (also left to right) through the gauntlet; forging yet further identification with Elias, Taylor gives out a victorious, somewhat more histrionic, war whoop on his way to immortality.

According to Virilio, by the First World War "rapid-firing guns [had] largely replaced the plethora of individual weapons. Hand-to-hand fighting and physical confrontation were superseded by long range butchery, in which the enemy was more or less invisible save for the flash and glow of his own guns."²⁰ And yet, *Platoon's* apparent disavowal of glamorization — of war, of the warrior, of death — is inverted by its own imagery. "*Platoon* is important because it reminds us what war really is like," Stone tells one interviewer. "You see a film like *Top Gun* if you're a kid, you join the Navy. It looks great. think *Platoon* shows kids... what combat is really like and what war really means."²¹

The disintegration of the warrior's personality is at a very advanced stage," claims Virilio,²² more so now that war has become increasingly reliant

on sophisticated technological apparatuses — satellite weapons, laser-guided missiles, 'smart' bombs. But *Star Wars* doesn't carry as much charismatic weight, so *Platoon's* main combatants stand in for this atavistic figure, the lone warrior delivering the ultimate heroic gesture — hand-to-hand combat, face-to-face duel, killing and being killed. Now obsolete to the war-rooms and battlefields of (post)modern warfare, this glorification of a supermasculine icon, displaced onto the magic of the big screen, perpetuates less "what combat is really like" than how narrative conventions function — here, depending on a nostalgia for an idealized heroic warrior that makes fantasy possible and future cannon fodder probable.

Still, the cinema's reality principle holds sway. "We've had the war as metaphor for moral chaos, and the war as rock'n'roll hallucination," claims Rafferty, but those films have "barely bothered to represent it."²³ *Platoon's* representation of the real becomes ever more slippery, however, when one considers its extreme dependence on ancient ideals — transformation of the self, male virtuosity, heroic truths — which burden it with a dual existence: a film about Vietnam (historical treatise) is also somehow one about all wars (philosophical text).

Taylor's closing soliloquy, in which the wounded soldier, carried out of the jungle by helicopter, inspecting the carnage below, finds him musing

"The war is over for me now, but it will always be there the rest of my days..."

Traumatized, face clenched, fighting back the tears, he raises his arms as a survivor's gesture of triumph, then wraps them around himself, sobbing

"... those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again..."

Stone alternates shots of a dense countryside, an untamed nature of forest and mountain expanding beneath Taylor's vision, with close-ups on his weathered face (something of a standard technique that dignifies grunt suffering), now toughing it out holding back the pain —

"... to teach to others what we know, and to try with what is left of our lives, to find a goodness and meaning to this life."

Sun envelops headshot of Chris, whiting it out. Credits roll.

What we're offered, finally, isn't so much a particular morality but less: the capacity to judge morality. What war ultimately teaches, according to Stone himself, is that "You find out if someone is moral or not. That's what the film's about."²⁴ By rising out of a messy quagmire somewhere in a

Southeast Asian jungle, waxing metaphysically on the human condition, *Platoon* aspires to a much larger commentary, assumes a burden of responsibility to speak of a significantly wider context. "Essentially, what I wanted to say," imparted Stone, "was, remember. Just remember what war was. Remember what war is. This is it."²⁵

Such remarks encourage one to wonder if *Platoon* is really about Vietnam at all, if it doesn't give itself over entirely to the order of myth. Certainly, *Platoon* desires to stand for war in a kind of humanist idealism as *all War*, leaving us with a rather timeless human drama that forsakes history and politics. Stone addresses this in the *Cineaste* interview:

... I wanted to tell the story of a small microcosm of an infantry unit and the struggles of a young boy. That's what interested me, and I could only do it from his perspective. Too many war films try to give you too much exposition, they all fall into a pattern, and I always found those films to be unlike war, because war is chaotic.²⁶

However, in another interview, Stone offers a different reason for writing *Platoon*: "I wanted to make a document of this forgotten pocket of time. I felt Viet Nam was omitted from history books."²⁷ He had long doubted his script would ever make it to the screen, "figuring that the truth of that war would never come out because America was blind, a trasher of history." Again we're left with a contradictory set of imperatives: a film that is widely believed to be about Vietnam — the best one according to a large body of opinion (Stone himself insinuates "the truth of that war") — is also *not* about Vietnam (but "the struggles of a young boy").

There are, to be sure, allusions to time and place. An opening shot includes a super which reads: "September 1967, Bravo Co., 25th Infantry, somewhere near the Cambodian border" (somehow Stone can't even bring himself to mention the name). But nothing of substance before or after, i.e. no historical context of either country. Of course, the film's very disengagement from history has been championed as ever more realistic because it more closely resembles the basic grunt's-eye view of the war: few apparently knew why they were there other than to fulfill some abstract sense of duty, obligation, and so on.

This motion picture, which at the very least trades on the assumption of the Vietnam War as its backdrop, further distances itself from it by nearly erasing the Vietnamese out of its field of vision. Their appearance in *Platoon* as mere traces suggests a description no better than Other. The Other as enemy: a series of shadows and outlines, stalking, lurking, barely representable. In one interview Stone blames reality for their absence from his film, explaining

As for seeing the North Vietnamese troops as shadows moving in the jungle, that was the way we saw them. Sixty to seventy percent of our actions came at night, and they were very hard to see, very hard to catch. In fact, when I was there, we didn't really see the North Vietnamese very much.²⁸

To those of us who have never experienced combat, this sounds very much like the nature of guerrilla warfare, and Virilio recognizes this lack of direct sight as symptomatic of 20th century conflict in general:

Numerous veterans from the 1914-18 war have said to me that although they killed enemy soldiers, at least they did not see who they were killing, since others had now taken responsibility for seeing in their stead.²⁹

Indeed, the enemy as Other seems less a condition of their unrecognizability than their inscrutability, a product of Western tradition which has assigned most things Asian as shrouded in mystique. Even leading policy-makers of the Free World like Henry Kissinger can only shake their heads, bewildered:

Psychologists or sociologists may explain some day what it is about that distant monochromatic land, of green mountains and fields merging with an azure sea, that for millennia has acted as a magnet for foreigners who sought glory there and found frustration, who believed that in its rice fields and jungles some principle was to be established and entered them only to recede in disillusion. What has inspired its people to such flights of heroism and monomania that a succession of outsiders have looked there for a key to some riddle and then to be expelled by a ferocious persistence that not only thwarted the foreigner's exertions but hazarded his own internal balance?³⁰

Several commentators have noted how the "historically and politically accurate" (Halberstam's words) *Platoon* is actually quite consistent with pretty much every Hollywood production 'about' Vietnam in its treatment of the Vietnamese. In other words, another typical picture that fails to tell anything but an American story.³¹ Yet leave it to an otherwise gushing Corliss in *Time* to admit that *Platoon's* Vietnamese "are either pathetic victims or the invisible, inhuman enemy. The nearly 1 million Vietnamese casualties are deemed trivial compared with America's loss of innocence, of allies, of geopolitical face."³² If *Platoon's* version of history has been accepted, even taught, as history³³ (Halberstam: "Thirty years from now people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*"³⁴), how will the Vietnamese appear in such a history, for Stone doesn't even feign an attempt at the Vietnamese as subjects; they are presented as merely objects of representation.

The very first Vietnamese one sees is the rapidly decomposing body propped up against the stump of a tree that Taylor stumbles upon during his first march through the jungle. "That's a good gook," Barnes intones, "good and dead." The second Vietnamese the viewer might notice, included in a rapid succession of shots depicting 'camp' life — soldiers unloading ammunition from a running helicopter, men eating, shaving, washing, digging holes — is of a young boy being attended to by an American soldier who appears to be dressing a foot wound or, like Jesus, applying ointment to his feet — pulling the proverbial thorn from the other's foot. They next appear as shadows lurking in the jungle, sneaking upon the platoon during Taylor's first night watch on ambush. After the jungle skirmish another is found badly wounded, helplessly nestled again in the stump of a tree; we see his eyes moving before he is matter-of-factly 'finished off' by Barnes. Yet another is shown dead, hanging in a hammock, lifeless eyes left open. In the same sequence, Elias, playing tunnel rat, pops out suddenly to shoot one on the run—a blur past the camera. It's all a blur, really: abstract, impersonal images; ciphers, but for their value to Stone as objects to be killed.

Meanwhile, the American deaths are personalized into significance. The pitiful Gardner, 'green' to a fault, is shot up enough in his first ambush to require emergency medical procedures; to heighten the shock, Stone zooms in on the dying soldier, his last few gasps mocking the medics' futile attempts to resuscitate him. The camera lingers on his prone, doomed body, bloodied chest enveloping nearly the entire frame; in the distance the sound of helicopter propellers, replicating a heartbeat, come to a stop.

One of the ensemble figures, Manny, is offered up to the viewer on two memorable occasions. In the underworld of drugs and camaraderie, he is shown square to the camera lifting weights, a mile-wide smile accompanies his eroticized body, rippling chest muscles glistening with sweat. In an uncomfortably similar shot, the platoon, following Manny's disappearance posting watch, discovers his body now brutally strung up to a tree. Stone pans slowly across every face; horrified, wearisome, implacable — they stare into the camera, beseeching the viewer to fathom the utter savagery of Manny's death.

Unlike our boys, martyred in a way that seems exclusive to their American-ness, the Vietnamese remain nameless, faceless figures, often indistinguishable from the jungle; the enemy is one and the same — like nature, cruel and unforgiving. In one of Stone's ultimate gestures at representing an intractable, even otherworldly, determination beyond our comprehension, one Vietnamese soldier is depicted kamikaze-like cradling a hand grenade rushing into makeshift American headquarters, obligatory war-cry and all, sacrificing himself along with Oliver Stone's cameo appearance

as a field commander. What Vietnamese bodies are left following the platoon's final battle are bulldozed into a giant mass grave, while nearby corpses of Americans, neatly laid out, await a helicopter ride to their final resting grounds.

In the harrowingly My Lai sequence, the picture becomes somewhat more entangled. Here, the villagers play the role of Other as victim, generally pathetic, worthy of our pity. Women, children and elders are pulled from their hiding places, screeching, while suspected men are duly dispatched. Lachrymose images abound: an old farmer leans wearily on his hoe, a frightened little girl huddles under a thatch hut. A particularly pathetic young man, obviously physically disabled (Taylor's breaking point: he forces the Cripple to dance on his one leg by shooting wildly around him) and perhaps even mentally retarded (he continues smiling throughout Taylor's terrorizing binge), finally is put out of our misery by the ruthless Bunny, who splatters the Victim's head with his shotgun butt. Meanwhile, Barnes extends the brutality by shooting an 'hysterical' woman point blank in the head. Her distraught daughter, wailing her way into the audience's heart, becomes Barnes's perfect weapon: he places a gun to her head and demands a confession from her grief-stricken father. After the camera switches close-ups of their faces, Stone's carefully composed shot, taken from medium distance, portrays the woman's body prone across the frame with Barnes and the villager squaring off to either end, little girl held hostage in Barnes's grasp (to the left), the father pleading for their lives (to the right) — before Elias intervenes to save the day.

The denouement, following the Barnes-Elias bout, is punctuated with another shot of mercy: Elias turns to leave, shadowed by a shaken Taylor, kicking up a cloud of dust; the camera drops on the man, who is shown clutching his dead wife looking up through the glare of sun and dust, clenching his teeth in anguish. Seemingly dictated by this logic of victimization, Stone zeros in on her prone body, offering us one last look.

Taylor's complicity in this segment is offset by his intervention in the rather obligatory rape scene. Indeed, inspired by Elias' heroism, Taylor rescues two young women, but what is key here is that we never even see their faces. They both clutch their defender, faces buried in his chest; their display of gratitude for being saved comes off as an opportunity for Taylor to exhibit heroism. Failing to accord them even the dignity of recognition, Stone dehumanizes them cinematically, as the soldiers had physically within the narrative. The segment closes with American soldiers carrying Vietnamese children on their shoulders out of the village to which they have just set fire. Stone's crane shot rises above the procession of bodies, Exodus-like, emancipated from the burning hell.

All of which is to say that the Other provides a backdrop for Americans to demonstrate both their capacity for cruelty as well as compassion, serving a dual purpose: repository for our aggression, evidence of our grace. We destroy the Other in order to save them. In Stone's universe the Vietnamese are a kind of blank canvas on which Americans work through their ethical dilemmas; the manner in which Americans come to terms with themselves in films like *Platoon* is by turning human beings into Rorschach tests.

Hence, the 'casualties of war' in *Platoon*, as Hoberman has pointed out,³⁵ are almost entirely American. The 'reality' of Vietnam, according to Stone, is more like one long period of navel gazing. For the enemy isn't even Vietnamese — it's us.

After an entire movie of this enemy-within theme, the film's central "war within a war" polemic (hyostatized as the strife-ridden platoon) — Chris Taylor's last soliloquy, his final act of talking to himself, delivers his revelation verbatim to benefit those of us whose attentions may have wavered:

"I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us . . ."

And so, Oliver Stone's major motion picture on Vietnam, the one lauded by so many as definitive — America's long-delayed coming to terms with the war, "the first Viet Nam Memorial movie" (*Time*) — winds up as a meditation on War generalized into a seemingly immutable universal themes that haunts all war: the loss of unity, the failure of resolve to carry through on one's convictions, the attrition of moral integrity by moral cowardice.

"Thirty years from now people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*." Perhaps Halberstam will be right, or more: maybe the war has always been *Platoon*, engaged in by young Americans who had already rehearsed it, "making war movies in their heads,"³⁶ producing and reproducing a set of beliefs and ideals, stories and images which make up and make possible the culture of war. And still, and yet, this (un)reality of war, war's cinematic doppelganger is bound up with a more specific set of questions. Surely the film provides a reassertion of patriarchal values, ironically by conflating neo-colonialist sentiment with orthodox masculine identity. In an era in which feminism has mounted a challenge to representations of a traditional male ethos, or when machismo is Ramboized to parodic infinity, the phallic signifier appears in retreat. Yet the only women in *Platoon* are non-individuated Vietnamese, already noted as either enemy or victim — a militaristic version of the male protection racket. Accordingly, the interpellation of male self-apprehension is inferred by the glorification of a supermasculine icon, variously assigned to Elias, Barnes,

and finally Taylor, in the text's reinscription of the cult of the warrior. And the film's paradigm of heroic monumentalism has been preserved formally through the doctrine of slow motion (replete with an over-wrought arrangement of Barber's already elegiac *Adagio for Strings*): first, in Elias's memorialized death as both Christ and Rodin's *The Prodigal Son*, and last by Taylor's closing helicopter transference out of innocence and ascension into wisdom. So it is that the film beckons a range of tensions between race, gender, masculinity, even knowledge in its testament to sacrifice and suffering as a path to some higher truth.

Perhaps Stone's statement on, if not Vietnam then, war in general, betrays his own ambivalence to the subject. His trust in heroic representation might be seen as a critique of such conventions, a conformity that demands partial complicity with such imagery in order to unmask the fascination they hold over us. Of course, such self-criticism also serves to regenerate the very myths it seeks to comment upon by submitting to their allure in the first place. Either way, heroic soldiers die hard. Nevertheless, by employing a traditional narrative structure (viz. using a white middle-class young man as its protagonist), the film's authority to convey a story relies on our willingness to identify with its conventions, valorizing our consent in positioning us as subjects flattered by heroic displacement. It shouldn't come as too great a leap, however, to suggest that this reality-myth paradox allows the film's audience critics included) to recognize itself in both realms: the self in (a representation of) history ('You are there') and in mythic archetypes ('the stuff dreams are made of'). Apparently there are enough of us with a propensity for spectacular violence, for devoted male camaraderie (life during wartime), for the exalted traits of courage, honor, uncommon valor, a deep desire for the Chris Taylor in us all, that vainglorious blend of Barnes and Elias, brilliant killer and tortured martyr, soldier extraordinaire and moral sage.

For the most part, *Platoon* triumphs as a peculiar hybrid, released at a particular place and time, un beholden to a particular place and time — yet emerging at a moment when a need for the distinctions between reality and myth have been suspended. It succeeded no doubt because it had it both ways. The critics and commentators especially have been virtually unanimous in their acclaim for the film's credibility and historical accuracy, its attention to details, its unremitting realism — simulation bootcamp notwithstanding. *New York's* Blauner for one insists that "*Platoon* is about the real place and the real time."³⁷ Stone's genius, if you will, has been in coupling this singular moment in history, one fraught with an almost ferocious anxiety about our collective 'self,' with epic mythological dimensions that suggest a vague sort of timelessness which aspires to universal Truth. One senses that Stone's

myths are some essential reality that conceal their own construction—a truth that is 'found' (and consequently 'natural'), never created.

Finally, *Platoon* offers a brand of patriotism that liberals can call their own. Right-wing versions of Vietnam, from Rambo to Chuck Norris vehicles, still seek to win the war this time around.³⁸ But Oliver Stone, at least, operates on a different psychology: to heal wounds, reconcile differences, make us whole again. Because the film itself so desperately believes in the heroic myths of war, Stone is able to take critical stance against an implied particular war while pardoning the soldiers as victims too. That is to say, by questioning the moral turpitude during one historical moment, the film leaves inviolate the nobility of serving one's country *in general*, preserving the very mechanism by which every nation mobilizes its people to arms.

The film closes on a reverent note: "Dedicated to the men who fought and died in the Vietnam War." A certain anxiety accompanies such homilies: the soldiers who died in Vietnam don't necessarily legitimize the war itself, which is still widely acknowledged as a mistake; but so that their deaths are not in vain, and they are accorded the dignity they deserve, war in general is justified not only as a legitimate way to resolve conflict but moreover, is mystified, like Barthes' "Voice of Nature",³⁹ as some base instinct beyond human intervention.⁴⁰

"Perhaps a society's willingness to go to war always depends on heroic fictions about what war is like," speculate the editors of *The New Republic*. "Let's hope there still are things Americans are willing to shed blood for—even their own blood."⁴¹ Cinematic representations of war, such as *Platoon*, which in effect heroicize, if not glamorize, war play a crucial role in rationalizing the call to arms. In many ways, the battle has already been won.



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Notes

1. Richard Corliss, "Platoon: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film," *Time*, January 26, 1987, p. 57.
2. Besides the *Time* article and an accompanying sidebar, Dan Goodgame, "How the War Was Won," *Time*, January 26, 1987, pp. 54-61, 12 other articles and reviews were used for this study: John Simon, "Found in the Mud," *National Review*, March 13, 1987, pp. 54-57; Harry M. Geduld, "The Enemy Within," *The Humanist*, May/June 1987, 41; Pauline Kael, *New Yorker*, January 12, 1987, pp. 94-96; David Denby, "Bringing the War Back Home," *New York*, December 15, 1986, pp. 86-88; Peter Blauner, "Coming Home," *New York*, December 8, 1986, pp. 60-76; Terrence Rafferty, "Platoon," *The Nation*, January 17, 1987, pp. 54-56; Pat Aufderheide, "Exiles on pain street: the wild, the innocent, and the Vietnam shuffle," *In These Times*, January pp. 14-20, 1987, 20; Stanley Kauffmann, "An American Tragedy," *The New Republic*, January 19, 1987, pp. 24-25; TRB From Washington, "Platoon and Iranamok," *The New Republic*, March 8, 1987, pp. 4, 42; William Harris, "Lights, camera, lawyers!" *Forbes*, August 10, 1987, pp. 33; Gary Crowdus, "Personal Struggles and Political Issues," *Cineaste*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, 1988, pp. 20-21; Mike Felker, "Back to Vietnam," *Jump Cut*, no. 33, February 1988, pp. 20-30; Alexander Cockburn, "Oliver Stone Takes Stock," *American Film*, December 1987, pp. 20-26.
3. Crowdus, op. cit. p. 18.
4. Rafferty, op. cit. p. 55.
5. Corliss, op. cit. p. 56.
6. Corliss, op. cit. p. 57.
7. Corliss, op. cit. p. 57.
8. Michael Herr. *Dispatches*, New York: Avon Books. 1978, p. 268.
9. Ibid. p. 225-26.
10. Ibid. p. 203.
11. Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 238.
12. Jean Baudrillard. *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
13. Paul Virilio. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Verso, 1989, p. 66.
14. J. Hoberman. "Vietnam The Remake," in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds.). *Remaking History*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1989, p. 178.
15. Cockburn, op. cit. p. 23.
16. Goodgame, op. cit. p. 58.
17. At the time this paper was written, I was unaware of *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, edited by William J. Searle. Bowling Green: State University Popular Press, 1988, and specifically Thomas Prasch's "Platoon and the Mythology of Realism" included in the

collection. Briefly, Prasch quite convincingly seizes the reality-myth dichotomy (that is only sketched out here) that raises contradictions both within (his analysis of) the film and in the ways the film has been received. Among the many strengths of his essay, there is a particularly penetrating assessment of the film's epistemological conviction through its *Bildungsroman* framework, "the overt message of which is that the war served as an education: in explaining the war experience . . . *Platoon* also legitimizes it, creating in the war a source of meaning and value." (p. 211) And crucial to the film's faith in war's educational value, achieved through direct personal experiences, is its semi-autobiographical undertow. Shot through with a number of critical memories from Stone's tour in-country, *Platoon's* credence as true-to-life is enhanced by the ontological privileging of the filmmaker's own experiences, an allure by which, to quote Adorno, "Simply to be there becomes the merit of the thing" (Theodore Adorno. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will, Evanston Northwestern University, 1973, p. 21). Prasch argues that this "primacy of the personal" (p. 213) limits the film's perspective — "the only criticism *Platoon* can mount is of the conduct of the war" (p. 214) — but also inoculates it against criticism from those who missed out on the education.

However, if I have any reservations at all it might be in the way Prasch seems to posit a 'reality' outside the filmic variety: "Fundamentally, *Platoon* is a fictional film," he asserts, "firmly rooted in allegory and genre conventions" (p. 198) True, if one could also assert that indeed *all* film is necessarily fiction; even documentary work is 'constructed' in the dimensions of time (editing) and space (framing, distance) — e.g. de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig*, still perhaps the most rigorously accountable representation of history ever committed to film, depends on dramatic contextualization of 'facts,' primarily other films and images. And Prasch's contention is further acceptable if we are to treat 'fiction' not in opposition to the factual but as a *way* we present things, the forms in which facts are presented. But at the risk of a vulgar reduction, I would like to suggest the inherent difficulty of such a proposition in the first place: participants of war, we learn, seem to at least act (and maybe even think) as if they are in a movie, while war movie audiences often respond as if they are experiencing war first-hand—a confusion not only of 'text' but of politics, in the seemingly inextricable suffusion of ideology and real bodies shredded by real war.

Finally, I would take issue with Prasch's description of the film's unambiguous and rather ham-fisted good vs. evil theme as allegory, if only because I take allegory to imply a more open-ended level of irony that *Platoon*, in its dead-serious faith in such categories at all, seems incapable of approaching.

18. Geduld, op. cit. p. 41.
19. Denby, op. cit. p. 86; Blauner, op. cit. p. 62.
20. Virilio, op. cit. p. 69.
21. Blauner, op. cit. p. 62.
22. Virilio, op. cit. p. 84.
23. Rafferty, op. cit. p. 54.
24. Blauner, op. cit. p. 76.
26. Crowdus, op. cit. p. 21.
27. Corliss, op. cit. p. 61.

28. Crowdus, op. cit. p. 20.
29. Virilio, op. cit. p. 14.
30. Loren Baritz. *Backfire: American Culture and the Vietnam War*. New York: Ballantine, 1985, p. viii.
31. *Platoon* has been described as a break with Hollywood's own history, "the screen's most un-compromising vision of the Vietnam conflict," according to Geduld, (op. cit. p. 41). *Platoon* "is the first Hollywood film about this country's Southeast Asian adventure that's just a war movie—and, weirdly, its straightforward genre-picture intensity makes all the other treatments of the subject look evasive and superficial" (op. cit. p. 54).

Such pronouncements to the contrary, *Platoon* fits quite comfortably within the trajectory of American cinema about Vietnam. For example, its narrative structure in the shape of a *Bildungsroman* (self-realization through the rite of passage ordeal) aligns the film with the theme of self-discovery: *In Coming Home* (1978) and, more obviously, the mythic quest of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *Platoon's* protagonist, the loner Taylor (certainly a function of such narrative logic to be separated out from the pack), is marked by a disaffection endemic to *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), films which signal something of a crisis of the hero. Not only are Taylor's origins all wrong (he doesn't come from the 'grunt' class), but once in Vietnam, he fails integration as well: after disrupting the gang rape attendant to the already calamitous village scene, he is told by angry comrades "You don't belong in the Nam, man!" Finally, *Platoon* belongs to a tradition of Hollywood's representations of the Other, most sensationally to the 'heart of darkness' in *Apocalypse Now* which, as Comber and O'Brien have noted, supports "the recognizable vision of Vietnam as primeval arena for man's basic instincts." For a perceptive analysis of *Platoon's* predecessors see Michael Comber and Margaret O'Brien, "Evading the War: the Politics of the Hollywood Vietnam Film," *History*, Vol. 73, no. 238, June 1988; citation p. 253.

32. Corliss, op. cit., p. 58. See also Felker, op. cit., and R.G. Davis, "On *Platoon*," *Telos* no. 73, p. 117.
33. At least one social studies teacher in a Buffalo high school uses *Platoon* in a course on Vietnam. See "Teaching Kids About Vietnam," Maxine Kopel Bookbinder, *The Buffalo News*, May 6, 1990, p. E-1.
34. Corliss, op. cit. p. 57.
35. Hoberman, op. cit. p. 192.
36. Herr, op. cit. p. 225.
37. Blauner op. cit. p. 62.
38. See especially Hoberman, op. cit.
39. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Wang and Hill, 1977, p. 47.
40. "The thematic of absolution answers to this need to resocialize the veteran," according to Prasch. "Acceptance of the 'realism' of the movie's incidental detail allows us to condemn the war without condemning the veteran, thus accomplishing the veteran's reincorporation without reopening political debates." Prasch, op. cit. p. 212. See also Hoberman, op. cit.
41. TRB From Washington, op. cit. p. 42.