

The portrayal of the Vietnam War  
in Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of the Vietnam War in Randall Wallace's 2002 film *We Were Soldiers*, comparing it to earlier trends of American Vietnam War cinema. The aim of the thesis was to identify some of the film's politico-ideological undertones and to determine the direction of the Hollywood Vietnam film at the turn of the millennium. The film was analysed mainly for its content rather than its form or style, with most of the analysis focusing on the portrayal of American soldiers. Literature dealing with Vietnam War cinema of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was consulted during the background research phase, and it provided the framework for interpreting the findings of the analysis. This thesis suggests that *We Were Soldiers* portrays the American troops and war effort in Vietnam in an exceptionally positive light, leaning more towards the "revisionist" tradition which emerged in the 1980s than the anti-war one which has largely predominated the genre since the late 1960s. Moreover, the film also strives to portray America's North Vietnamese enemies favourably, the result being a generalised glorification of war with little to say about the specific nature of — or politics behind — this particular one.

## Abstrakti

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan, kuinka Vietnamin sota esitetään Randall Wallacen vuoden 2002 elokuvassa *Olimme sotilaita*. Tutkielmassa selvitetään elokuvan poliittisideologisia pohjavireitä ja tehdään päätelmiä siitä, mikä on ollut Hollywoodin Vietnam-elokuvien suunta vuosituhannen vaihteessa. Analyysi keskittyy enimmäkseen elokuvan sisältöön muodon ja tyylin sijaan; tärkeimmäksi kysymykseksi on nostettu amerikkalaisten sotilaiden kuvaus. Taustatutkimuksessa on perehdytty 1900-luvun Vietnam-elokuvia käsittelevään kirjallisuuteen, ja analyysin tuloksia on tulkittu taustatutkimuksen tarjoamassa viitekehyksessä. Tutkielmassa esitetään, että *Olimme sotilaita* kuvaa amerikkalaisia sotilaita ja sotatoimia Vietnamissa poikkeuksellisen positiivisesti. Täten elokuva ilmentää 1980-luvulla esiin noussutta "revisionismia" Vietnam-elokuville tyypillisemmän sodanvastaisen linjan sijaan. Myös Yhdysvaltojen pohjoisvietnamilaiset viholliset esitetään suotuisassa valossa, ja lopputuloksena on sotaa yleisesti glorifioiva teos, joka ei juurikaan huomioi Vietnamin sodan erityisluonnetta tai poliittisia taustasyitä.

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## 1. Introduction

Given the highly controversial nature of the Vietnam War, it is unsurprising that films dealing with the conflict have often been controversial too, or that they have been more varied in their attitudes towards the war than has been the case with any other war involving the United States. Indeed, from the unquestioning anti-communism of post-World War II films that encouraged U.S. escalation in Vietnam; to a decade-long absence of direct portrayals of the war due to the volatility of the topic; to depictions of the returning veteran as a psychopathic criminal or violent vigilante in the 1970s; to his transformation into a macho action hero in the 1980s; and finally, to the more realistic portrayals of the ordinary American soldier's experience in Vietnam which appeared after that; the history of Vietnam War cinema is incredibly multifaceted.

Perhaps the most apparent distinction when it comes to American-made Vietnam films as opposed to, say, World War II films, is how negatively they often portray the war. The war film as a Hollywood genre has traditionally served the ideological function of justifying American involvement in foreign wars and glorifying the people who have served in them, thus lifting the national spirit and unifying the nation. However, films about Vietnam which have been made after the war have seldom done any of that, with even the more belligerent action films of the 1980s explicitly blaming the U.S. government for the disastrous war and the American people for shunning returning veterans. For the most part, films dealing with Vietnam have focused on the futility of the U.S. war effort, portraying the war as a hell on earth that merely traumatises the men who manage to survive it. In these stories, American troops usually have no clear sense of what they are fighting for, and indeed often end up either fighting — even 'fragging' — each other on purpose or getting killed by accidental friendly fire.

The first aim of this thesis is to provide an overview of how the conflict has traditionally been portrayed in American cinema. This will be addressed in the next section, where I recount the history of American Vietnam War films made by the mid-1990s. Aside from offering a condensed chronology of canonical Vietnam films, I grant specific attention to how the films portray the war and how they reflect the filmmakers'/the nation's attitudes towards it. In doing so, I delineate commonalities between the films to get a clearer understanding of how the war has typically been portrayed, but I also examine how the depictions have changed throughout the years.

Each source consulted in crafting the literature review comes with its own perspective. With authors ranging from a motion picture industry executive to academics with different viewpoints, some of whom are Vietnam veterans themselves, the books and articles written on the topic provide a well-rounded view of American Vietnam War cinema. For my own part, the biggest challenge has been to choose which films to include and which viewpoints to highlight in my synthesis. Given the scope of the thesis at hand, it would not be possible to include every film ever made about Vietnam, nor even most of them. For that reason, as well as due to my own interests, I have chosen to focus on fiction films, and mostly the best-known ones at that.

Furthermore, since the film that is later analysed in this thesis belongs to the category of combat films, the literature review will mainly focus on earlier Vietnam combat films and how they depict the war. However, it is also necessary to address the more indirect portrayals of the war, such as films about returning veterans, for they provide crucial insight into the prevalent attitudes of their time as pertains to Vietnam and the American troops who served there.

The second aim of this thesis, then, is to investigate through film analysis how the conflict has been portrayed in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of the few Vietnam films that were released in the 2000s, this thesis concerns itself with the most prominent one, namely Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers* from 2002. A more detailed introduction to the film will be provided in section three, where I discuss the study's data and method.

In accordance with the major themes discussed in the existing literature on Vietnam War cinema, the analysis of *We Were Soldiers* presented in section four zeroes in on questions such as, "in what light does the film portray its American and Vietnamese characters?" and, "does it address the political reasons behind the conflict?" The goal of the analysis is to identify some of the political and ideological undertones of the film and to see how its handling of the topic compares to its predecessors. Thus, the ultimate function of the film-historical account presented in section two is to serve as a starting point for studying this 21<sup>st</sup> century portrayal of the war in relation to older conventions and trends of the Hollywood Vietnam film. While section four mainly examines *We Were Soldiers* in isolation, the purpose of section five is to compare the film to earlier depictions of Vietnam and to make inferences regarding the direction of the genre in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. Background: The Vietnam War in American cinema, 1950s–1990s

Although it was not until 1965 that the situation in Vietnam transitioned “from a limited U.S. role to a full-blown military conflict” (Jeremy M. Devine 19), films dealing with the unrest in Indochina — or at least featuring it as a backdrop — had been appearing since Leslie Fenton’s 1948 film noir, *Saigon*. With the First Indochina War (i.e. the conflict between the French and the Viet Minh, 1946–1954) serving as the context for many of these stories, they saw Americans fight “as the French ... with the French ... and finally alone” against their new enemy (Rick Berg 51; original emphases). Gradually, “War films set in Vietnam became Vietnam War films and along the way became more meaningful as [the Americans’] experience became more tragic” (Devine 1). But to ignore the “war films set in Vietnam” and to start a film-historical account straight from “Vietnam War films” would be to distort history, for the former are necessary if we wish to see how America’s attitude towards the war changed from the 1940s to the 1960s. As Devine explains, these early films are not yet informed by hindsight but instead display an uncomplicated post-World War II belief in America’s obligation to fight communism in Southeast Asia (1–2). As will later become clear, this belief would soon lose much of its foothold among the American public, and so “the very ignorance and naïveté of the early films set in Vietnam are the key to their meaningfulness” (Devine 1).

Most of the early Vietnam films were B actioners concerned mainly with entertaining the audience, with only a handful of bigger-budget productions dealing with the complex political situation in more depth (Devine 2). In the following paragraphs, I will examine more closely three films deemed particularly important in the literature on the topic: *China Gate* (1957), *The Quiet American* (1958), and *The Ugly American* (1963). To describe briefly the entire body of early Vietnam films released by the mid-60s, a few generalisations can be made. Firstly, they were intensely anti-communist while portraying Americans as innocently attempting to bring freedom and peace to the region. In other words, films made prior to the eruption of full-blown war between American and North Vietnamese troops displayed an approval of U.S. escalation of the conflict. Secondly, the films readily conflated America’s new Vietnamese enemies with their former Japanese ones, relying on similar portrayals of Orientals as sadistic, sexually irrepressible, and altogether repulsive as had been the norm in WWII films. The fact that the Japanese had represented a fascist ideology while the Vietnamese were communists did not make much of a difference (Devine 12). Thirdly, it should be noted that Vietnam was not exactly a hot topic to begin with when the (relatively few) earliest films

were made, since “Americans felt they had little stake in Vietnam, a place, if public opinion polls of the period are to be trusted, most couldn’t [sic] even locate on their maps” (Auster and Quart 18). Ironically, of course, once U.S. escalation in Vietnam began, the topic soon became *too* hot for filmmakers to deal with directly.

One of the first films to explore America’s growing role in Southeast Asia, Samuel Fuller’s *China Gate* is about an American soldier named Johnny Brock (Gene Barry) who joins the French Foreign Legion to fight communism in Indochina in 1954. Ideologically, the film’s main thrust lies in its depiction of “the French as heroes trying to preserve not only their empire but also the liberty jeopardized by communist hordes” (Devine 4). The communists, in turn, are portrayed as “ruthless destroyers who, in contrast to the supposedly civilized French, are ready to bomb civilians, both women and children” (Auster and Quart 15). The director’s intent was clearly to endorse greater U.S. involvement in the conflict after the French had lost their war (Auster and Quart 13; Devine 7). But since the communists posed no imminent military threat to America, Fuller was also able to address other social issues in his film, such as racism. In the words of Auster and Quart: “Fuller again sees racism not merely as a minor symbolic impediment to our democratic ideals but also as the major barrier to our claim to free-world leadership,” a criticism which most likely would not have been allowed had the external threat to the United States been more severe (15–16).

*The Quiet American*, written for the screen and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, is based on the 1955 Graham Greene novel of the same name. The story mostly takes place in Saigon and is told from the perspective of Thomas Fowler (Michael Redgrave), an English foreign correspondent whose comfortable life is disturbed by the arrival of a young American (Audie Murphy) into the city. Indeed, the American falls in love with Fowler’s Vietnamese girlfriend, Phuong (Giorgia Moll), and also meddles in Vietnam’s internal politics, endorsing a “third force” government that is neither colonialist nor communist.

If Greene’s novel was critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Mankiewicz turns the tables with his film adaptation. Auster and Quart have identified at least three important ways in which the film and its message differ from the novel: first, the title character is transformed from a CIA agent “into a selfless agent of an altruistic American organization called the Friends of Free Asia” and thus has no connections to the U.S. government; second, the role of the communists has been changed from “shadowy figures beneath the surface of Greene’s Vietnam” to “the active instigators of a devious plot” to turn Fowler against the innocent American; and third, although they talk politics several

times in the film, Fowler's political motivations for betraying the American are ultimately made secondary to personal ones (16–17).

Auster and Quart also point out that the idea of a “third force” government is eventually personified in Ngo Dinh Diem, to whom, along with “the people of the Republic of Vietnam,” the film is in fact dedicated (17). Indeed, the film implies that President Diem was a popular leader chosen by his people without U.S. involvement in the matter (Auster and Quart 18). Finally, to quote Auster and Quart once more: “The film’s essential message is that the United States was involved in Vietnam to help its people gain and maintain their independence and to protect the rest of Southeast Asia from falling to the Communists” (18).

*The Ugly American* is another adaptation from a political novel of the same name, this one written by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick. The film was written for the screen by Stewart Stern and directed by George Englund. The story is set in a fictional Southeast Asian country by the name of Sarkhan which, of course, is but a pseudonym for Vietnam. It follows a newly chosen U.S. ambassador, Harrison Carter MacWhite (Marlon Brando), and his attempts to make sense of the country’s complex internal conflict while organizing the construction of a “Freedom Road” to the border of North Sarkhan. While MacWhite supports the country’s current regime, his old WWII acquaintance Deong (Eiji Okada), who is now the leader of a neutralist faction, attempts to overthrow the government which he considers “a puppet of the United States” (Devine 16). Deong ends up recruiting communist help for his attempted coup, but the communists double-cross him and kill him, attempting a coup of their own instead. Finally, with North Sarkhanese troops invading South Sarkhan, MacWhite must summon the nearby U.S. Navy fleet to salvage the situation.

In the words of Devine, “[t]he Lederer and Burdick novel had focused attention on the perplexing nature of the Third World’s mistrust and hatred of the United States despite what Americans felt were their own good intentions and efforts” (13). This is also true of the film, which “[f]or the most part ... indulges in a great many simplistic cold-war clichés about American virtue and Communist duplicity” (Auster and Quart 20). Then again, it also displays a scepticism regarding America’s understanding of “Sarkhan’s” complex situation, and ends with a warning that the United States could not win the cold war without applying its own founding principles to other nations as well (Auster and Quart 21; Devine 18). In this regard, the film contradicts itself, for “[a]lthough [it] raises the possibility that a country like Sarkhan might authentically desire to stay aloof from the big powers, it nonetheless portrays Deong’s neutralism as naïvely playing into Communist hands. The



basis for this purported belief is that the United States sincerely sees neutralism as a viable alternative for the Third World, while Communists use it as a ploy to cover their desire for domination” (Auster and Quart 21). Thus, *The Ugly American*, too, ends up justifying America’s global war on communism as much as it ostensibly questions it.

Due to its controversial nature, the Vietnam War was a subject that filmmakers dared not portray directly while the conflict was at its height. The sole exception was John Wayne, who directed (in part) and starred in *The Green Berets* (1968) (Dittmar and Michaud 2). While Hollywood had previously co-operated with the United States government by producing ideologically imbued films about the Second World War, even producing government-commissioned propaganda films during the war, Vietnam was handled differently. According to Dittmar and Michaud, “During the Vietnam War years, it has been suggested that this complicity effectively meant silence” (2). Interestingly, though, while the current war was absent from cinema screens, films concerning World War II, “the war most often characterized as the finest example of America’s political, moral, and military strength,” were still being made at a steady rate (Dittmar and Michaud 2). Arguably, the purpose was to conflate the two conflicts and America’s role in them — a theme frequently addressed in scholarly discussions on Hollywood’s relation to Vietnam.

Devine describes *The Green Berets* as “one of the most controversial films ever made about the Vietnam War” (38). By the time of the film’s release, opposition to the war had grown so strong that releasing an ultrapatriotic movie championing U.S. involvement was a risky move. However, being an avid supporter of the war, John Wayne felt it his duty to respond to the growing anti-war attitude at home, and even wrote to President Lyndon B. Johnson himself to secure Defense Department support for his film (Devine 38–39).

The story of *The Green Berets* has American elite soldiers, led by Wayne’s Colonel Kirby, defend South Vietnam from the Vietcong and the spread of communism. Along for the ride is a naïve journalist named George Beckworth (David Janssen) who, at Kirby’s suggestion, comes to see for himself what the war is like. Of course, in the film, the war and its participants are portrayed in a most clichéd and prejudiced manner. To summarise the film’s take on the war, as construed by Auster and Quart: U.S. involvement in Vietnam is rationalised as an effort to prevent communist world domination (31–33); the VC “are depicted in the main as a herd of faceless, endlessly dying barbarians who torture, rape, hatch conspiracies, rob the mountain districts of their rice, or insidiously infiltrate the Green Beret lines” (33); and finally:

Plot devices like the murder of a little Vietnamese girl, which turns the liberal newspaperman into a supporter of the war, and the comic relief and instant sympathy and tears provided by a cute, ubiquitous Vietnamese orphan named Hamchunk give the film the opportunity for indulging in every stock, patriotic film cliché ... And through it all, impervious to bullets, age, despair, and criticism strides the war-hungry patriarch Wayne, here giving generous absolution to the columnist (who returns a cold warrior wearing army fatigues to write the true story), there granting fatherly comfort and care to the tearful Vietnamese orphan, and throughout the film casually justifying the necessity for a war built on scorched earth and mass killing. (33–34)

It is no surprise, then, given the public atmosphere of the time, that *The Green Berets* was met with outrage and disgust by critics and audiences alike.

The film's box office results were actually positive, but that was probably more due to John Wayne's status as a movie star and cultural icon than people agreeing with the film's political message (Auster and Quart 34). Another likely reason was the mere fact that "[t]he hullabaloo surrounding the film generated interest in seeing it" (Devine 45). In any case, the film served as a warning example to filmmakers, of how the American public would respond to such outdated depictions of the current war — a war which simply did not fit the same ideological mold as America's previous wars had. Thus, *The Green Berets* was followed by a whopping ten years during which the conflict was not dealt with directly. "Whether because of a paucity of inventiveness and financial cowardice or not," write Auster and Quart, "film makers evaded any and all direct opportunities to confront the escalating nightmare of Vietnam. The same, however, didn't extend to attempts to capitalize on the public's growing disenchantment with the war" (35).

In the absence of direct portrayals of Vietnam after *The Green Berets*, the war was addressed and criticised in more oblique ways. One way to do this was to make films about earlier wars which actually served as commentaries on the current one. For instance, Robert Altman's *MASH* (1970) was set in the Korean War but was obviously about Vietnam (Auster and Quart 35–36). Ripe with "counterculture antiwar, 1960s references," the story featured a group of field hospital surgeons who use humour as a coping mechanism to maintain their sanity in the war, and "carry out their own guerrilla war against army bureaucracy, football, organized religion, and a variety of other establishment devils—behavior more connected to the Vietnam era than the Korea of the 1950s" (Auster and Quart 36). Franklin Schaffner's *Patton*, also released in 1970, followed the career of the legendary General George S. Patton through World War II. Appealing simultaneously to both pro-

and anti-war sentiments, the film “practically became a litmus test of one’s feelings toward the [Vietnam] war: hawks effortlessly saw it as the glorification of the martial spirit, and doves just as easily perceived it as a portrait of a monstrous war lover” (Auster and Quart 37).

Another means was to address the Vietnam War symbolically through different genres, especially the western. Michael Klein has remarked: “Both Ralph Nelson’s *Soldier Blue* (1970) and Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970) suggest in their condemnation of cavalry massacres and genocidal policy towards American Indians allegories of the war in Vietnam, perhaps with particular references to the massacre of Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai and the U.S. Air Force’s indiscriminate use of napalm in free-fire zones” (20–21). According to Klein, both films view the United States as colonialist and hypocritical while portraying the life of indigenous peoples as “more holistic” than American society, hence affirming the Civil Rights movement’s social values (21). Another well-known western that expressed concerns over America’s involvement in Vietnam was the 1969 Sam Peckinpah film, *The Wild Bunch* (Dittmar and Michaud 2). Aside from westerns, allusions to Vietnam have also been present in (or at least have been read into) films of other genres, George A. Romero’s 1968 horror classic *Night of the Living Dead* being one example (Sumiko Higashi).

Some films were also made about the draft, “an institution that by the late 1960s had come to personify all the home-front emotional trauma of the war as well as some of the class and racial biases inherent in U.S. society” (Auster and Quart 40). However, despite dealing with serious issues, such as young men having to choose between going to war or risking jail time, or the fact that working class and minority men “[bore] a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying,” the films were rather humorous in spirit (Auster and Quart 40). Brian De Palma’s indie film *Greetings* (1969) had Robert De Niro try to avoid the draft by using “homosexual mannerisms and fascist rhetoric in order to fail his army physical,” while Arthur Penn’s *Alice’s Restaurant* (1969), starring Arlo Guthrie as himself, examined sympathetically the alienation of the young from their society and how the draft played into that (Auster and Quart 40–41).

However, the most common way that filmmakers dealt with the war indirectly was to portray returning veterans, usually in a rather negative light. Starting with *The Born Losers* (1967), “the image of the veteran became the site where America’s ambivalent feelings towards the conflict were made manifest” (Dittmar and Michaud 4). The film’s main character, Billy Jack, who appeared in three more films in the 1970s, is a disillusioned and traumatised Vietnam veteran with a “revulsion with American society” and an “affinity for the counterculture,” which are mixed with

“his self-confessed feelings of rage and the obvious relish he takes in demolishing or humiliating his enemies ...” (Auster and Quart 43). According to Auster and Quart, “the 1971 version of *Billy Jack* suggests in embryonic form all of the characteristics that were to become standard for the 1970s image of the returned Vietnam vet” (42–43). Not all veteran characters were entirely similar, however. Over the decade, two distinct types emerged: “the dangerous social misfits of *Angels from Hell* (1968), *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1972), and *Taxi Driver* (1976)” were followed by “the veteran-turned vigilante of *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Good Guys Wear Black* (1979), and *The Exterminator* (1980)” (Dittmar and Michaud 4).

Berg refers to these two types as “killers and moral killers” (59). According to him, the fact that the Vietnam veteran is often portrayed as a killer reflects the views of concurrent spectators, for whom “the vet *has* become what he has done” — he has become “infected spiritually and mentally ... by the senseless genocide in Vietnam, the continuing murder of women and children,” and thus presents a threat even at home in America (58; original emphasis). Simultaneously, “The Vietnam vet came to stand for the prejudices and contradictions that the home folks had about the war, for, after all, the essential quality of the veteran is that he has internalized the war and with a stiff upper lip carries it around with him. Thus Hollywood could take the notion of the returning vet and fill it with the country’s sense of Vietnam” (Berg 56).

In other words, Vietnam veterans were victimised, probably to an unfair degree, by a people in need of an outlet for its frustration with the war. In the earlier films of this phase, the veterans were often associated with outlaw bikers and were represented as marginalised individuals who operate outside of the dominant value system (Berg 57). However, by 1972, as the image of the veteran had become infected by the My Lai massacre, the portrayals consequently grew ever more dreadful, with films like *The Visitors* (1972) and *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* depicting their veteran characters as brutal rapists or mass murderers of civilians (Berg 57–58).

Auster and Quart see Henry Jaglom’s *Tracks* (1976) as a turning point after which “the heart of the work was often the returned veteran’s need to satisfy his rage” (46). Belonging to this trend were films like *Taxi Driver*, *Rolling Thunder*, and *Black Sunday* (1977) (Auster and Quart 46).

*Black Sunday* (dir. John Frankenheimer) featured an ex-Vietnam POW (Bruce Dern) so hellbent on taking revenge on his country that he is willing to help the Palestine Liberation Organization in bombing the Superbowl (Auster and Quart 45). In the view of Auster and Quart, the PLO connection

“is mere plot contrivance,” and the veteran’s anger is seen as “pathological, not political,” but nonetheless “a genuine menace to the country” (45).

John Flynn’s *Rolling Thunder* was written by Paul Schrader, who had also penned the script for *Taxi Driver*. In *Rolling Thunder*, a returning Vietnam veteran/POW named Charles Rane (William Devane) takes bloody revenge on the gangsters who break into his home, torture him, and murder his family. This time, “any fears the audience may have about the explosive menace of the returned vet are supposed to be submerged in admiration of his strength of will and sense of purposiveness” (Auster and Quart 47). As Berg (61–62) has observed, the Charles Rane-type character was the precursor to the “superguerrilla” veteran of the 1980s (to be discussed below).

Of course, the most famous of the bunch is *Taxi Driver*. Written by Paul Schrader and directed by Martin Scorsese, the film follows the endeavours of its lonely, insomniac lead character Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) as he works long night shifts driving a cab in New York City and indulges in dirty movies, alcohol, and pill-popping to ease his anxiety. In the day time, Travis writes about his thoughts in a diary, watches television in his ragged apartment, and for a while pursues a relationship with Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), a presidential campaign employee whom he develops a crush on. As the story progresses, Travis gradually becomes obsessed with cleansing the city of the “animals ... filth ... and scum” (Devine 112) that deprave its streets and, to cut a long story short, ultimately ends up saving a twelve-year-old girl (Jodie Foster) from a life of prostitution by launching a gory one-man assault on the pimping operation of Harvey Keitel’s loathsome “Sport.”

Devine argues that Travis’ Vietnam background “is an integral but subtle part of his disturbed persona,” serving as “an A movie shorthand for his loner status, psychological problems, proclivity to violence, and strangely moralistic vigilantism” — all traits that could just as well be attributed to a non-vet character but which are easily explained by a quick mention of Travis’ service in the Marines (115). Furthermore, Devine interprets “[t]he physical and psychosomatic manifestations of his anomie” as symptoms of a form of PTSD, a condition which was not yet officially recognised at the time of the film’s release (112). Aside from that, Devine also sees in *Taxi Driver* “a macro-cultural commentary,” arguing that the way in which Travis’ “moralistic desire to rid the land of evil and corruption [presumably influenced by his military service] gets out of hand” is analogous to “the genuine hopes of the nation in getting involved in Vietnam and the subsequent degeneration of the positive national character of Americans once they were there” (115).

Films that portrayed veterans in a more positive light also existed, though they were in the minority. “[A] more benign image of the emotionally disturbed vet” was projected by Henry Winkler in Jeremy Kagan’s comedy-drama *Heroes* (1977) where he played a flashback-suffering veteran who breaks out from a veterans’ hospital in search of his old unit members (Auster and Quart 45). Another film that differed from the trends discussed above was Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (1978), in which a love triangle forms between a Marine named Bob (Bruce Dern), his wife, Sally (Jane Fonda), and a paralysed Vietnam veteran named Luke (Jon Voight). Over the course of the story, Luke comes to terms with his disability and becomes an anti-war activist, while Sally becomes a more independent woman, liberated by her affair with Luke and her newfound freedom in the absence of her husband. Bob, for his part, is crushed by the compound effect of experiencing the horrors of the war and then finding out about his wife’s infidelity, and ends up drowning himself.

Although they affirm that “there are moments when [*Coming Home*] captures a great deal of the feel and texture of the war’s legacy,” Auster and Quart have criticised the characters’ transformations as “simplistic” and pointed out how the film still avoids critiquing the government or dealing with the particularities of Vietnam, focusing instead on more universal themes (50–51). In any case, the film’s portrayal of the Vietnam veteran stands out in marked contrast to the psychopaths and criminals of earlier films, with the violent threat posed by Bob being ultimately confined to himself, and Luke’s successful rehabilitation suggesting the possibility of national healing.

Some documentaries were also made in the 1970s which portrayed Vietnam veterans not as psychopathic but as politicised, namely *DC III* (1971), *Winter Soldier* (1972), and *The War at Home* (1979) (Berg 59). In the sphere of mainstream narrative films, however, portrayals of politicised Vietnam veterans have largely been absent — Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) being an exception. Based on the autobiography of Vietnam veteran-turned-activist Ron Kovic, the second part of Stone’s Vietnam trilogy (following *Platoon*) chronicles Kovic’s journey from an innocent boy who wants to “serve his country,” to a bitter, guilt-ridden, paralytic war veteran disowned by society, and finally, to a devoted member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Unlike most anti-war films about Vietnam, *Born on the Fourth of July* exhibits anger towards the U.S. government for (so the film claims) essentially deceiving an entire generation of young men into fighting and dying in a meaningless war against the supposedly world-threatening outbreak of communism. In one scene, the enlightened Kovic (played by Tom Cruise) explains to reporters how he and other

Americans were tricked “into going 13,000 miles to fight a war against a poor peasant people who have a proud history of resistance, who have been struggling for their own independence for one thousand years” — a viewpoint rarely expressed in films about Vietnam.

Towards the end of the 1970s, films depicting the actual war began appearing again. One of the first was Sidney J. Furie’s *The Boys in Company C* (1978), a story about a motley crew of youngsters, most of them draftees, who go through Marine Corps boot camp in 1967 and are then sent to fight in Vietnam. The first act depicts the boys’ time in boot camp in comical fashion; it shows the guys fooling around, being yelled at and humiliated by their drill instructors, and eventually growing into a coherent fighting unit. Unfortunately, in Vietnam the company is led by an incompetent captain who blindly follows orders from his superior officers without much regard for the safety of his men or the local populace.

*The Boys in Company C* is extremely critical of the United States military’s policies and procedures, at times making the entire war effort look like a joke. For example, the company is repeatedly ambushed by the Vietcong (of whom we often see just the muzzle flashes of their weapons) due to the captain’s foolish decisions, and men keep dying basically for no reason; a Vietnamese village is bombed based on the captain’s hunch that it is occupied by the VC (the use of body counts as a measure of progress acts as a motive for such incidents); one of the protagonists blows up a U.S. general’s trailer because the company lost two men delivering him a shipment of luxury goods; and so on.

Towards the end of the film, the American protagonists play a game of soccer against their South Vietnamese allies and are told mid-match that they must lose on purpose to keep the South Vietnamese happy and bolster their morale. If they do that, they get to escape the frontlines of Vietnam and embark on a soccer tour in the nearby countries. At first the boys agree that living is more important than winning, but in the end their pride and desire to win get the better of them. Mirroring the stubbornness of continued U.S. escalation of the war even in the face of rising casualties and fading public support, the young Marines choose rather to keep fighting a losing war at the risk of their lives than to take a blow to their pride and surrender the game. Thus, the soccer match certainly serves as an allegorical critique of U.S. military policy in Vietnam. However, as Auster and Quart have pointed out, it simultaneously seems to suggest “that whatever the particular realities of the war, GI Joe is still a hero and winner” — a prevalent theme after the conflict (56–57).

One of the best-known Vietnam films of all time, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) follows the tale of three Russian-American steel mill workers whose time in Vietnam changes their lives, and the lives of their friends and families, forever. Robert De Niro has the lead role as Michael, with Christopher Walken's Nick and John Savage's Steven accompanying him to Vietnam. As they go, they leave behind three of their buddies, Stan, Axel, and John (John Cazale, Chuck Aspegren, and George Dzundza), as well as the newlywed Steven's wife, Angela (Rutanya Alda) and Nick and Michael's mutual love interest, Linda (Meryl Streep). By the time the story is finished, the three warriors have been tortured by the VC, Steven has become a triple amputee, and Nick has ended up killing himself in a game of Russian roulette in Saigon. Only Michael survives Vietnam relatively unharmed, though he, too, has trouble reconnecting to his hometown and friends, and cannot even bear to kill a deer anymore. His return trip to Saigon to save Nick ends with the latter dying in his arms, but his effort to bring Steven back together with his wife is successful.

Like many films before it, *The Deer Hunter* has been criticised for its racist portrayal of the Vietnamese, who "are viewed almost uniformly as a repellent, savage people" (Auster and Quart 63). In the words of Klein, "the Vietnam sections of *The Deer Hunter* are pervaded by racist and Cold War stereotypes: images of 'the yellow peril,' of 'Russian roulette' as a routine form of Communist torture and an expression of Oriental decadence" (23). Another point of criticism, which is likewise very common, is that the film "allows Vietnam to exist in a historical and political vacuum" (Auster and Quart 65). Indeed, the morality of America's involvement in the conflict or its military policies are never scrutinised in the film, and neither is there any sense of an anti-war movement even existing in the USA. However, as Berg has noted, *The Deer Hunter* "was less about Vietnam and more about the American community that fought that war" (60). Or as Klein has put it: "Its subject is not the war, or the effect of the war and the antiwar movement upon American culture from 1964 to 1973, but American culture and society after the war as the 1970s drew to a close" (22).

Finally, for all its tragedy, the film ends on an optimistic note, suggesting that in tight-knit communities lies the strength that will help America pull through. Interpretations of the ending — which has the remaining group of friends singing "God Bless America" in John's pub after Nick's funeral — are various. Auster and Quart read it as affirming "the characters' unambiguous belief in the country" (64), while Berg, on the other hand, considers it "not an attempt to reiterate the shoddy values of a hollow patriotism" but "a community shattered by Vietnam, trying to express a deeply rooted nationalism, with all its ironies and contradictions ..." (61). Leo Cawley counts *The*



*Deer Hunter* among Vietnam films in which “the rise of ‘lesser’ loyalties [family, ethnic groups, the Army, etc.] supplants such older causes as anticommunism or the loyalties of the World War II film to nation and democratic principle” (73) — an interpretation more in line with Berg’s view. Klein, concurring rather with Auster and Quart, has commented that “Cimino’s fable is fraught with contradiction and reveals more than it intends about the developing conservative climate of opinion in the United States in the late seventies” (23). Regardless of what the filmmakers’ intentions were, the remark about a developing conservative climate is insightful in that it associates *The Deer Hunter* with the strain of revisionist films which would appear in the 1980s.

The last ‘70s film to be discussed here is *Apocalypse Now*, written mainly by John Milius and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Based loosely on Joseph Conrad’s novella *The Heart of Darkness*, the film sees Martin Sheen’s “sweating, unshaven drunken Willard ... a burned-out government hit man with six kills to his credit,” take on a mission to find and eliminate a rogue Green Beret colonel named Kurtz (Marlon Brando) who continues to fight his own war in Cambodia, living as a god among the natives (Auster and Quart 66). As Willard makes his way towards Cambodia and Kurtz, we witness the absolute insanity of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam — an insanity so over the top that it warrants the statement, “everything in Coppola’s Vietnam is too hyperbolic” (Auster and Quart 70).

The film conveys a notion of the war as not only futile but often completely absurd. From Robert Duvall’s comically “swaggering, war-loving [Colonel] Kilgore” in search for a “perfect wave for surfing,” to the chaos that breaks out when U.S. soldiers on R&R cannot restrain themselves upon seeing “a USO bump-and-grind show of undulating Playboy bunnies,” to the nocturnal scene where “an officerless platoon of sweating, anxious, drugged black soldiers shoot into the darkness at an invisible enemy,” the film is filled with scenes illustrating the war’s madness (Auster and Quart 66–67). But although some of the scenes function as metaphorical critiques of the Vietnam War, “[f]or Coppola ... it is the moral and existential rather than the political and social elements of the story that are the most seductive” (Auster and Quart 65). Thus, *Apocalypse Now*, as impressive as its images are, still does what so many other Vietnam films have done: “it universalizes and abstracts the war by making its terror part of the human condition rather than a result of specific social and political forces” (Auster and Quart 70). As we will see below, even other critically acclaimed films like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* would later evade the same questions as *Apocalypse Now* — or *The Deer Hunter* for that matter — had evaded.

In the 1980s, at the dawn of the Reagan era, something changed in the way the war and its veterans were portrayed. The criminals and maniacs of the 1970s were replaced by a new kind of veteran — the macho action hero, personified especially by Chuck Norris' Colonel James Braddock from the *Missing in Action* trilogy (1984–1988) and Sylvester Stallone's iconic John Rambo, who also appeared in three films during that decade (entitled somewhat confusingly: *First Blood* [1982], *Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985], and *Rambo III* [1988]). The films of this new era often had their main characters return to the jungles of Vietnam as if to have a rematch, only this time coming out as the victors. According to Klein, these films sought to reinterpret history and glorify the Vietnam War to reaffirm the kind of ideology that would allow the U.S. to continue its interventions elsewhere in the world (20). "In these films," writes Klein, "Vietnam has become the setting for fables that ideologically reproduce their time with clear implications for the direction of American foreign policy" (23). In addition to the franchises mentioned above, Klein names *Uncommon Valor* (1983) and *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987) as notable films of this strain (23).

Other scholars have also recognised this distinct phase in the history of Vietnam War representations. Harry W. Haines calls it the "reintegrative phase," which refers to the reintegration of Vietnam veterans and the war experience "into the ongoing national story" (83). He considers it as having begun with the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or "The Wall" for short, in 1982 (83). Touching on the same themes as Klein, Haines describes the phase as follows: "Shifting away from themes of victimization and psychosis, more recent representations function therapeutically to rehabilitate the Vietnam veteran, positioning him as a warrior hero whose experience can now be used to justify a continuation of a modified version of the Truman Doctrine: intervention by proxy and internal subversion" (82).

Haines goes on to discuss in detail the birth and workings of this revisionism within the academia and the media. He calls it "a New Right project" which involved, among other things, reasserting military containment as a credible policy, discounting the Vietnam veteran's lived experience of ideological crisis, downplaying the atrocities of the war and U.S. involvement in them, and strategically likening Vietnam veterans to World War II heroes (84–87). What makes this revisionism particularly problematic, according to Haines, is the fact that, while these representations have served a therapeutic function for the marginalised veterans who certainly needed to be acknowledged and accepted, they have simultaneously "[required] veterans to abandon their historical position in favor of an ahistorical pose" (94).

Berg sheds yet more light on this process of revision, essentially suggesting that it was part of a collective attempt to cope with America's first lost war. In the immediate years after the war, Berg notes, "America took its loss on the chin," trying to forget the trauma as quickly as possible, and indeed the war was briefly forgotten about in both the academia and the culture industry (43). But in the eighties the war was brought back to life in all possible mediums, with "[p]ublishers and producers ... working it for all it is worth" (41). At this point, a rather extreme shift between mindsets had taken place. If the unspoken reason behind the need to forget the war had been that the loss was simply unbearable — or that America was repressing its intolerable guilt, as suggested by Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser (102) — the numerous stories which were told now sought to reverse the war's outcome as well as the ideological crises it had produced.

Writing in the midst of this boom, Berg states: "Film producers are also cashing in on the expanding market. ... Capitalizing on the synonymy of 'lost' and 'missing,' *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) have recovered Vietnam, and film audiences everywhere have discovered that what they once imagined lost was only MIA" (42). All three of these films deal with rescuing American POWs long after the war's end, which in Berg's view serves to symbolise the nation's need to recover from an even more profound loss: that of its honour. In these stories, the veteran "returns to 'Nam to retrieve his lost buddies and our lost honor and return them to the United States" (Berg 62). Cawley thinks along the same lines: "It can only signify some deeper sense of loss associated with the war, a nostalgia for our short-lived global preeminence and for a national unity now wrecked. ... Gene Hackman, Chuck Norris, and Sylvester Stallone have all infiltrated Indochina to bring back POWs. Is this a way of bringing back the dead we lost in the first war we lost? Is Rambo going back to retrieve the dead or to retrieve victory? Or is he helping us blame the Vietnamese for the dead not being here?" (73).

Cawley has read *Rambo* as suggesting that "the United States fights according to the rules, while its opponents don't" (70). He argues that Vietnam films in general posit Americans' decency and refrainment from brutality as an important factor in America's loss to the Vietnamese (70). This sort of reasoning in turn lets American audiences retain (or regain) the moral high ground and shift the blame to the subhuman monsters that are the Vietnamese. Admittedly, *Rambo* does portray the Vietnamese in stereotypical and racist fashion, furthering the chances of the film being interpreted this way. As Studlar and Desser have commented: "Rambo annihilates an enemy whose evil makes American culpability in any wartime atrocities a moot point" (108).

Studlar and Desser also bring up another insightful point regarding *Rambo* and the trope of POW rescue in general. They argue that Americans' need to believe in the rumour of POWs still being held captive in Southeast Asia "gives credence to the view that the Vietnamese are now and *therefore have always been* an inhuman and cruel enemy. Vietnam's alleged actions in *presently* holding American prisoners serves as an index of our essential rightness in fighting such an enemy *in the past*" (105; original emphases). In other words, regardless of whether the Vietnamese are blamed for America losing the war, the film can at least be said to retrospectively justify the war.

As for the allocation of blame, the Vietnamese would actually seem to receive the least of it. First of all, they are depicted as mere pawns in a game that is played between superpowers. Indeed, it is the evil Soviets who are in control in the film, while the Vietnamese are reduced to being their underlings. This brings us back to the role of such films as *Rambo* in reaffirming military containment as a credible policy and asserting that the spread of communism around the globe is a threat which the USA must relentlessly continue to deal with. In the view of Gregory A. Waller, this call for a rise of military patriotism and an anti-communist sentiment was the principal ideological function of the film (122–125). "With its present-tense call to arms and its picture of the Third World as a superpower battle zone," he argues, "*Rambo* obviously speaks of and to the resurgence of militarism in the early 1980s. Given the role of the 'Russian bastards' in the film, military action is the only viable American recourse" (124). This interpretation certainly has credibility, especially considering that *Rambo III*, released three years later, is no longer about Vietnam at all but instead sees the iconic hero venture into Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan War. His mission there is to rescue his friend and former commander Colonel Trautman from an evil Soviet general and, while he is at it, the country from Soviet armies.

But even the Soviets only appeared halfway through the second film. In Rambo's first appearance, *First Blood*, and for a good portion of the second film as well, the biggest antagonists come from within the United States itself. The story of *First Blood* opens as follows: after being arrested by a small town's unwelcoming sheriff for vagrancy, Rambo is brought to the local police station and, refusing to cooperate, subjected to physical abuse by the police. As the sequence progresses, Rambo has multiple flashbacks to being tortured in a prison camp in Vietnam. Eventually he snaps, makes a violent escape from jail, and tries to lose the police in the nearby wilderness. A manhunt ensues, resulting in one dead and multiple wounded chasers. Although Rambo will not physically return to Vietnam until the sequel, he is certainly already fighting the war all over again in his mind.

Between the torturelike scenes at the police station, the guerrilla tactics he uses to defeat his chasers in the junglelike forest, and the collapsed mine which he must escape — resembling the tunnel networks built by the Vietnamese — there is no shortage of imagery suggesting this.

But there is also another war being fought here, one of an entirely different nature. It is the war faced by the marginalised Vietnam veteran upon coming back home, “a war against all the soldiers returning,” as Rambo himself puts it in the sequel. At the end of *First Blood*, when Rambo’s old friend Colonel Trautman finally gets him to surrender, Rambo collapses and garners viewers’ sympathies with a powerful monologue detailing some of the horrors he had to endure in the war and the difficulties he has faced trying to settle back into society, not the least of which has been “[seeing] all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting... Calling me a baby killer and all kinds of vile crap!” We see here, then, that the hardest thing on Rambo has not been fighting the war itself but the way he has been treated by his own countrymen and women after it.

However, it is not just the American public that receives blame in the *Rambo* films. As already hinted at in *First Blood* and then elaborated on in *Rambo*, the U.S. government is also to blame, if not for the maltreatment of returning veterans, then for the disastrous outcome of the war itself. It is implied in the films that, firstly, Rambo and his fellow soldiers might have won the war had their efforts not been stifled by orders from higher authorities, and secondly, that the government was also responsible for sending them into battles they could never have won in the first place. In his monologue at the end of *First Blood*, Rambo says, “...I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn’t let us win.” Continuing that line of thought, he asks Colonel Trautman in the first scene of *Rambo*, “Sir, do we get to win this time?” to which Trautman replies, “This time it’s up to you.”

Of course, it is *not* entirely up to him, for the government plans to merely exploit Rambo. He is sent to Vietnam to take photographs of a prison camp (the same one he was tortured in during the war) and to find evidence of American POWs possibly still held there so that they can be rescued. The whole mission turns out to be a scam, however, for when Rambo discovers that there are indeed POWs still imprisoned in the camp and attempts to rescue one of them, the director of the operation (a deceitful bureaucrat named Murdock) orders his mercenaries to abandon Rambo and abort the mission. In the ensuing confrontation between Murdock and Colonel Trautman, the latter explains the government’s ruse for the viewer: “In ’72 we were supposed to pay the Cong four and a half billion in war reparations. We reneged, they kept the POWs.” Now, the government is covering up its actions and has sent Rambo on a mission designed to fail, to take pictures of a supposedly empty

prison camp which would serve as proof that no more U.S. POWs are held by the Vietnamese. “It was a lie, wasn’t it? Just like the whole damn war, it was a lie,” says Trautman in the beginning of the conversation. Thus, *Rambo* indicts the U.S. government for the catastrophe that was the Vietnam War. And so, the film’s advertising tagline, “They sent him on a mission and set him up to fail,” becomes an analogy referring to the war in its entirety.

In the end, Rambo manages to save the POWs on his own and flies them back to the U.S. base in Laos. In the final dialogue, Colonel Trautman tells him not to hate his country despite the fact that “the war, everything that happened here, may be wrong.” Rambo replies by saying that he would die for his country, and that all he wants is what every veteran wants: “for our country to love us as much as we love it.” Thus, the film ends with its focus returning from the untrustworthiness of the government to the marginalised role of the Vietnam veteran.

To conclude the present discussion on the first two *Rambo* films, let us consider two interesting ways in which the films’ focus on these two particular issues can be explained, as elucidated by Studlar and Desser. In their essay entitled “Never Having to Say You’re Sorry: *Rambo*’s Rewriting of the Vietnam War,” they describe two strategies that have been utilised in Vietnam films of the 1980s to ease America’s guilt about the war. Firstly, through “scapegoating,” i.e. blaming the war on the country’s past leaders, America has victimised itself, with even President Reagan himself stating: “We are just beginning to realize how we were led astray when it came to Vietnam” (Studlar and Desser 104, 107). The second strategy has been to substitute one question for another; in this case, “the question ‘Were we right to fight in Vietnam?’ has been replaced (displaced) by the question ‘What is our obligation to the veterans of the war?’ Responsibility to and validation of the veterans is not the same as validating our participation in the conflict in the first place. Yet answering the second question mythically rewrites the answer to the first” (Studlar and Desser 103–104). As we have seen above, the first two *Rambo* films utilise both of these strategies. (The notions put forth here by Studlar and Desser are doubly important to this thesis, as they will also be utilised in my own analysis of *We Were Soldiers* below.)

Towards the end of the 1980s, there was another distinct “wave” of Vietnam films — “the ostensibly more realistic strain ... emerging with *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)” (Studlar and Desser 104). Written and directed by Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam veteran, *Platoon* was and still remains perhaps the greatest milestone in the history of Vietnam combat films. Stone’s “semiautobiographical film” tells the story of Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), a Yale dropout

who has enlisted in the Army to fight in Vietnam (Auster and Quart 132). His journey from an innocent newcomer to a battle-hardened veteran is guided by the opposing forces of good and evil as embodied by Willem Dafoe's Sgt. Elias and Tom Berenger's Sgt. Barnes. The benevolent Elias, who takes Chris under his wing and becomes his role model, fights the war without wavering from his moral principles. Barnes, on the other hand, is more jingoistic, a cold and clinical killer who believes that the ends justify the means. Sometime after a violent confrontation between the two sergeants (which takes place after the Americans brutalise a Vietnamese village), Barnes shoots Elias in a jungle and leaves him for dead — an act for which Chris retaliates by killing Barnes at the end of the film. The story is as much about the fight for Chris' soul as it is about the war, with Chris eventually coming to terms with his capacity for evil and becoming "the child born of those two fathers," as he puts it in his final monologue.

But aside from its metaphorical dimensions, *Platoon* is arguably the most realistic portrayal yet of the ordinary American soldier's experience in Vietnam. Writes Haines:

*Platoon* is the first Vietnam War film to provide extensive visual representation of the "hump," the physically demanding and often fearful movement through dense jungle. These highly detailed scenes accompany the representation of base-camp life. Soldiers swap stories, eat, brush their teeth, shave, bathe, write letters home, smoke dope, play poker, and burn feces. These scenes provide *Platoon* with an element of authenticity missing in films like *Rambo*, which rely solely on action. (92)

*Rambo*, it could be argued, is not exactly difficult to top when it comes to realism, but even when compared to the depictions of Vietnam in more serious contenders like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, or *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon* still reigns as the most believable one.

The film is highly critical of the war, portraying the soldiers as having poor morale, fighting each other, and, especially in the village-torching scene, losing their self-control and committing atrocious war crimes. Auster and Quart describe the scene thusly:

Exhausted, frightened, and possessed with the need to avenge their tortured and murdered buddies, a number of GIs in the platoon crack and turn into a murderous rabble who go on a rampage, murdering and raping Vietnamese peasants and finally torching the village suspected of harbouring the enemy. Even the morally sensitive Taylor momentarily loses control and turns into a brute, repeatedly firing his rifle at a retarded villager to make him jump, although he ultimately recoils in guilty tears and regains his moral balance. (134)

As Auster and Quart have remarked, Stone's skilful handling of the subject manages to make comprehensible for the viewer how such events could possibly unfold and what factors lead to the soldiers' mental breakdown and "blood thirsty state of mind" (134–135). But herein lies also the matter for which *Platoon* has been criticised, i.e. the substitution of "a psychological and metaphysical interpretation for a historical understanding of the genocidal aspects of the war" (Klein 25). Klein argues that the film "fails to situate the American military presence in Vietnam in political or historical perspective ... and exempts the U.S. government, military, and power elite from being called to account for their policies" (25), instead choosing to explain away any atrocities merely by "the dark side of human nature" which emerges in extreme conditions (27). Haines further points out that in focusing on the American platoon's internal conflicts, the film fails to address the question of "how, why, and in whose interest he [Chris] fought the Vietnamese" (93).

Auster and Quart also note the lack of political perspective in the film, pointing out that rather than criticising or defying the war, the soldiers "attribute their anguish to the death of buddies, the atrocities they see or commit, and a general revulsion toward being mired in a living purgatory" (136). However, they immediately continue: "Of course, it makes little sense for Stone to graft a developed political consciousness onto men who are mainly interested in survival. These are men who don't and wouldn't ask what political forces brought them there, and once in Vietnam they discover that nothing else exists, the outside world turning into a dream or being obliterated by what they must confront daily" (136). This is an important point that seems to be often overlooked. Indeed, in criticising Vietnam War films for being apolitical, the commentators usually seem to disregard the idea that the troops (whom the films are about, after all), especially volunteers, maybe did not object to the war until (possibly) after having returned home — a circumstance exquisitely explored by Stone in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Moving on to another highly acclaimed Vietnam film of the late '80s, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* is remembered for its astounding depiction of boot camp life as well as its in-country mayhem. The boot camp section of the film follows the endeavours of Privates "Joker" and "Pyle," played by Matthew Modine and Vincent D'Onofrio, respectively, as they are trained by R. Lee Ermey's merciless Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (who also gives them the nicknames). Especially in the beginning, *FMJ* feels a lot like a spiritual successor to *The Boys in Company C*, not least because of Ermey, who also played the drill instructor in Furie's film. The eight weeks of training are depicted as dehumanising and indoctrinating, with the overweight and simple-minded Pyle receiving the bulk



of Hartman's wrath as well as the resentment of his peers, who end up battering him in retaliation for constantly getting them in trouble. In one foreboding scene, Hartman proudly talks to the platoon about how Lee Harvey Oswald and Charles Whitman (the "Texas Tower Sniper") both learned how to shoot in the Marines. As it soon turns out, the one thing Pvt. Pyle is any good at is shooting. The boot camp part of the film subsequently ends with the famous scene where Pyle, now completely deranged, shoots and kills Hartman and himself in the lavatory the night before graduation day.

If the first part of the film portrays the Marine Corps in a negative light, the U.S. war effort depicted for the rest of the film does not fare much better. Serving as our eyes on the conflict is the now-promoted Sergeant Joker, whose ironic remarks and contradictory attitude towards the war — as manifested by the peace symbol he wears on his jacket while his helmet says "Born to Kill" — are part of the detached and darkly comic way in which Kubrick images the war. (Klein has described the film's style as "[i]nvoking Brecht's 'alienation' effect" [30].) Joker is a war correspondent for *Stars and Stripes*, whose reportage is depicted as mere lies and propaganda. During his time in the field, we witness a genocidal helicopter gunner shooting civilians, U.S. troops getting killed by booby traps and ambushes, and wasting their ammunition by shooting mindlessly at buildings whenever they come into contact with the (often invisible) enemy. In other words, we witness "[Kubrick's] portrait of the disintegration of the American war machine in combat" (Klein 29). In addition to being portrayed as "panic-stricken, ill-disciplined, and decidedly unheroic," the Americans "know what they are fighting against but have little sense of what they are fighting for" (Klein 29, 31).

As a final point on *Full Metal Jacket*, Klein as well as Auster and Quart have noted that the film, while impressive in many respects, still fails to address the faultiness of U.S. policies that led to the Vietnam War and sustained it. Klein points out that *Full Metal Jacket* lacks a viewpoint that had been present already in Kubrick's World War I drama *Paths of Glory* (1957) which, by shifting between the perspectives of generals and ordinary soldiers, "explores related issues of class dominance and privilege while it indicts a military caste system for its role in bringing about and perpetuating the war" (34). Auster and Quart, in turn, have remarked that "[b]laming it all on the innate brutality and corruption of man ... is an evasion of the political issues and culture surrounding the war and its specific historical context," and thus "*Full Metal Jacket* seems more in need of another version of *Dr. Strangelove's* [1964] war room than a reconstruction of the killing fields of Hue" (145).

John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* tells the story of U.S. Airborne troops who, in May 1969, took the so-nicknamed hill held by the North Vietnamese Army. The first act of the film focuses on introducing the American soldiers to the viewer as they spend their R&R drinking beer and indulging in prostitution, and prepare to return to the feared A Shau Valley. Once the troops are mobilised, the rest of the film sees them attack the NVA again and again, going up and down Hamburger Hill for multiple days until they are finally able to conquer it. In between the brutal combat scenes, the film addresses many of the hardships the soldiers must endure, from the tensions that occasionally erupt into fights within the unit, to dealing with the deaths of their comrades, to being disowned and scorned by loved ones and society at large back in the States. Through it all, the GIs are only able to stay sane by numbing themselves with the mantra, "It don't mean nothing." Almost all of the characters are killed in action during the film, with only three of them left alive at the end.

As Auster and Quart have noted, *Hamburger Hill* "falls short when it tries to provide even a semblance of a moral or political overview of the war" (146). As usual, the film's point of view is restricted to that of the grunts, and though it does address issues of race and class, the reasons behind America being in the war in the first place are left unaddressed. According to Haines, "*Hamburger Hill* claims the dead for the revisionist agenda" (93). Although it is certainly a more realistic portrayal of war than the macho warrior films discussed above, *Hamburger Hill* nonetheless uses similar tactics in retrospectively justifying the war. As Haines states, "The soldiers' struggle against the Vietnamese is also a struggle against critics of American policy. Like *Rambo*, *Hamburger Hill* dislocates the source of the veteran's shattered belief system; the source resides not in the lived social experience of the war's contradictions but in the actions of 'college kids,' 'hairheads,' and 'pretty little things' who toss 'bags of dogshit' at returning troops" (93).

Indeed, the anti-war movement and 1960s counterculture in general are definitely the biggest evils in the film, with the soldiers constantly ranting about hippies stealing their girlfriends and the people back home loving everyone (even the NVA) equally except for them. As Auster and Quart have remarked, these kinds of scenes, "although probably an accurate rendition of the view of many grunts, demonstrate just how limited the film's perspective on the war can be. The anti-war movement may have been insensitive and condescending to the GIs, but neither they nor the media (who are depicted here as callous voyeurs) were the people and institutions who made the decision to entrap the grunts in Vietnam" (146). Still, the film does manage to strike an emotional chord, and

its message should not be entirely written off as mere revisionist propaganda even if it is conveyed in an awkwardly extravagant manner.

The rush of Vietnam films begun by *Platoon* reached its peak at the end of the decade, and depictions of the war continued to be largely negative. Writing about *Eye of the Eagle 2* (1989), Devine sums things up neatly: “It begins in the bush with punji sticks, chaotic firefights, fraggings, heroin addiction, and convoluted justifications for the nudity of comely Asian women. It is as if a checklist of the ills of the U.S. war effort has now been prescribed for every B movie” (280).

One trend which had already been established in television series like *Magnum, P.I.* (1980–1988) and *Miami Vice* (1984–1990) also became increasingly common in feature films: that of Vietnam veterans serving as cops. Christopher Crowe’s *Off Limits* (1988), “a major studio attempt to repeat the success of the stateside vets-turned-buddy cops adventure *Lethal Weapon* [1987],” featured Willem Dafoe and Gregory Hines as military police in war-time Saigon (Devine 280). According to Devine, “the filmmakers try to ground this generic story in Vietnam, but it remains merely background locale” (279). In Andrew Davis’ *Above the Law* (1988), Steven Seagal “portrays a Chicago police officer who continues the shift for veteran characters from outlaws to law officers” (Devine 286). The film’s plot deals with CIA drug trafficking; “As yet another example of an immoral exercise of government power in the context of this dirty war, the story has resurfaced many times and is depicted in several films” (Devine 286). One such film would be *Air America* (1990), Roger Spottiswoode’s comedic take on the activities of the CIA dummy company in Laos.

The macho action heroes Rambo and Braddock also returned for their third adventures in 1988, with the former going to Afghanistan and the latter returning to Vietnam. *Rambo III* has its hero fight alongside Arabs against the communists, and “[t]he notion that Afghanistan is the Soviet Union’s Vietnam is both implicitly and explicitly stated” in the film (Devine 285). *Braddock: Missing in Action III*, for its part, has Chuck Norris lead his son, whom he has never met before, and “a ragtag band of Amer-asian children to the border” (Devine 284). According to Devine, “[t]he continued use of POWs, wives, or kids trapped in Asia seemed to connote a longing or sense that Americans had left something over there. Being able to identify and find ‘it’ was a comforting psychological balm for the intangibles that in reality could never be retrieved, such as youth, innocence, goodness, health, and, for some, life itself” (284).

Yet another group of films released in the late '80s focused on the psychological traumas of American Vietnam War veterans and the healing processes of them and their families. Belonging to this category were Rick Rosenthal's *Distant Thunder* (1988), Norman Jewison's *In Country* (1989), and David Jones' *Jackknife* (1989). Of course, the most notable film to deal with the subject of traumatised and disillusioned Vietnam veterans was Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, another 1989 film which was already discussed above. As James Amos Burton has posited, "representations of the Vietnam veteran on film, from 1987 onwards, attempted to revise the stereotypes of the violent and unpredictable veteran that Hollywood had helped to create, offering a more sympathetic view in line with changes in broader cultural attitudes as the 1980s progressed" (47).

Another notable Vietnam film to come out in 1989 was Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War*. Starring Michael J. Fox and Sean Penn among others, the film tells the story of an American squad of soldiers who kidnap, rape, and murder a Vietnamese woman during the war. The film is based on the true story of the Incident on Hill 192, which took place in 1966 and was originally covered by Daniel Lang for the *New Yorker* in 1969. In short, the view provided by De Palma's film of American troops in Vietnam is very similar to that of *Platoon's*; their morality is brought into question and condemned, with only Michael J. Fox's Eriksson and a couple of minor characters serving as beacons of hope in the otherwise grim depiction of the war. In addition to the atrocities committed to the Vietnamese woman, the story also includes an attempted fragging of Eriksson by another member of his squad, rounding out the *Platoon*-esque portrayal of U.S. troops in Vietnam.

As we can see, the Vietnam film continued to be split into different subgenres throughout the 1980s, with some films continuing in the anti-war tradition and focusing on "the ills of the U.S. war effort," others depicting Vietnam vets as action heroes or hard-boiled cops, and yet others portraying traumatised veterans attempting to reintegrate into society. In the 1990s, however, cinematic portrayals of the war and its veterans became more scarce. To wrap up this film-historical account, then, let us briefly discuss the evolvement of the Vietnam film up until the mid-90s.

The first thing worth discussing is the Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991) and its relation to the movies. Regarding the effect of the war on the American national psyche, Devine states the following:

More than any film or additional years of healing, the conflict helped dispel the ghost of Vietnam and restore pride in the United States' armed forces. ... In terms of pride, honor to the veterans, and the possibility of a new world order, the conflict's results were good. But in the context of the danger of glorifying war, the compromising of heartfelt reluctance to commit American troops to combat, and future reaction to the options in conflict resolution, the conflict's results could be bad. (335)

One hawkish Vietnam film whose release coincided with the Gulf War was *Flight of the Intruder* (1991) by John Milius. Starring Willem Dafoe, Brad Johnson and Danny Glover, the film deals with A-6 Intruder bomber pilots who only fly futile bombing missions in South Vietnam until two of them decide to go rogue and bomb "SAM City," a depot in Hanoi filled with surface-to-air missiles. As far as Vietnam War movies are concerned, the film received "unprecedented cooperation" from the Defense Department (Devine 335).

Although the film's story is mostly about the bonds that form between the Navy pilots, it also "uses Vietnam as the ultimate illustration of a compromised effort, purposeless policy, and effrontery to the virtues extolled in the camaraderie of the fighting soldier" (Devine 336). Devine quotes Milius as having said the following with regard to his country's mistakes in Vietnam: "One, it was a lie between the President and the grunt.... And two, you can't walk away from a fight. If you get in a fight, for whatever reason, you fight to the end" (336). According to Devine, this is where the "greatest potential resonance between the film and concomitant world events" lies (336). What the film is ultimately criticising are not the war's root causes but rather its half-hearted execution on the United States' behalf. The protesters at home also get their share of criticism in a vein similar to that of *Hamburger Hill*. When President Nixon orders "the resumption of sustained bombing of the [North Vietnamese] capital," the court-martial charges against Dafoe and Johnson are dropped (Devine 339). "All the fliers are delighted to be allowed again to let loose against strategic targets," writes Devine, "This is not only a way to hit the enemy; it is also revenge against what is going on back home. After all there are riots, and people are spitting on returning soldiers. The soldiers conclude that all they really have is each other" (339).

The quick U.S. victory of the Gulf War and the concurrent end of the Cold War both helped to "relegate Vietnam to ancient history" (Devine 347). By late 1991, "with the passage of time and intervening events Vietnam had become a part of the American tapestry, along with many other threads of history" (Devine 347). In Devine's view, a film that illustrates this change particularly well

is Mark Rydell's *For the Boys* (1991), which tells the story of "two USO performers and showbiz personalities [Bette Midler and James Caan] who entertain the troops, sing, laugh, cry, love, and hate each other." Devine writes:

It reflects the prevailing wisdom that war is hell and that the Vietnam War was a particular waste of lives. America lost its direction and what better way to illustrate that than in a film that stretches from World War II to the present [the mid-1990s]. In covering three wars and five decades, the musical melodrama cannot help but lend an air of sentimentality and nostalgia to the bygone eras. It does not glorify the conflict; it merely underscores the new post-Gulf War status of Vietnam as no longer the United States' immediate past war. (351)

Another noticeable shift that took place in the 1990s was that the war in Vietnam could now be used as a setting for comedies. Of course, the more serious portrayals of the conflict had already long been accompanied by action movies which sought mainly to entertain, but now, it seems, enough time had passed for purely comedic takes on the topic to be acceptable. Aside from the already mentioned *Air America*, which featured Mel Gibson and Robert Downey Jr. as pilots of the CIA dummy corporation, another '90s Vietnam comedy was *Operation Dumbo Drop* (1995), a Disney production directed by Simon Wincer. A pure family comedy, the film stars Ray Liotta and Danny Glover as two Green Beret captains who set out on a crazy mission to find an elephant and fly it into a friendly Montagnard village near the Ho Chi Minh trail. Along for the ride are three other Americans as well as the elephant's handler, a Vietnamese boy named Linh, whose family members have all been killed in the war either by the Vietcong or the Americans. The film pictures the Americans as liberators and good guys and the NVA as oppressors of the civilian population. It seems to be consciously working to gloss over any American atrocities and ease the nation's guilt over the war, with the lead characters agreeing that they must do "one good thing before we go." That one good thing, the film tries to convince us, might just be enough to compensate for all the not-so-good things.

Another less serious film to feature scenes in Vietnam was the 1994 comedy drama *Forrest Gump* by Robert Zemeckis, which featured Tom Hanks as the obtuse but lovable Alabamian title character. While the Vietnam section of *Forrest Gump* certainly serves as a comedic medley of different elements from earlier Vietnam films, Burton identifies "traces of the 'original' contexts ... in the film's pastiche" (248). "The evocation of *Full Metal Jacket* in *Forrest Gump* can be seen to subvert any hegemonic rewriting of past films which [Robert] Burgoyne associates with *Forrest Gump*,"

writes Burton, “If anything, the presence of a black drill sergeant in the barracks, as well as Forrest’s excelling at basic training as a consequence of his stupidity, makes these scenes explicitly critical of white male conceptions of the military” (248). In response to Burgoyne’s critique of the film as “[implanting] revisionist memories of Vietnam” and “[changing] audiences’ memories of the tropes of other Vietnam films, including the traditional representations of segregation and racial hostility in *Platoon*,” (this being Burton’s paraphrase) Burton points out that Forrest’s friendship with the black character Bubba (Mykelti Williamson) serves to underline the fact that “class as well as race predicated the make-up of the Army” (250). In the character of Lt. Dan Taylor (Gary Sinise) Burton sees allusions to both *Platoon*’s Elias and, more importantly, *Born on the Fourth of July*’s Ron Kovic (249). In Burton’s view, the latter allusion “enables *Forrest Gump*’s audience to take a ‘short-cut’ to the psyche of Dan’s character” (249). “[T]he last time Dan appears in the film is at Forrest’s wedding, apparently ‘cured,’ both literally and mentally, of his veteran’s anger through his ‘new legs’ and Vietnamese bride,” yet still “standing apart from the rest of congregation,” which to Burton “indicates a continuing separation from the congregation of ‘nation’ (as many Vietnam veterans remained despite the ‘healing’ intentions of cultural representations of them)” (249–250).

What Burton aims to demonstrate throughout his analysis of *Forrest Gump* is that, while “the film can be read as conservative and clearly it was used by conservatives to political effect, ... this was not inevitable, nor intended by its makers: this was historically contingent upon the discursive cultural moment of its release” (255–256). The moment Burton is referring to is that of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, a period during which American opinions regarding the social changes of the ‘60s became highly polarised, with people on the political left embracing them and people on the right seeing them as a threat to traditional American values. In the words of Stephen Macedo, the heated debate centred around “whether the changes associated with that notable decade represent a fuller realization of American ideals or their betrayal” (as quoted in Devine 24). While the culture wars will not be delved into in any more detail here, it is important to remember going into the analysis of *We Were Soldiers* what kind of cultural climate it was released into. The film’s distinct celebration of traditional values when it comes to religion and family, for example, takes on a much greater significance in this context.

As the final film to feature in this history, I have chosen what is arguably the 1990s’ most significant attempt to seriously deal with the topic of Vietnam. Not surprisingly, it comes once again from Oliver Stone. In 1993, the acclaimed grunt-turned-filmmaker finished his Vietnam trilogy with *Heaven &*

*Earth*, a story about the experiences of Le Ly Hayslip and based on her two autobiographical books, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*. “[Typifying] the development of the genre and the recognition of the universality of human suffering which the war brought,” the film pictures the Vietnam War from the point of view of Le Ly (Hiep Thi Le), a Vietnamese country girl whose life is ravaged by the war and who eventually moves to the United States with his American love, a Marine Gunnery Sergeant named Steve (Tommy Lee Jones) (Devine 360–361).

*Heaven & Earth* provides a harrowing look into the experiences of Vietnamese villagers whose lives are turned upside down time and again by both foreign and domestic forces. Le Ly herself ends up being tortured by ARVN forces for information (with a U.S. military advisor also present) and then raped by members of the Vietcong who suspect her of ratting them out. Later, when she lives in the cities, “[t]he theme of the corruption of a society by the immoral hegemony of the burgeoning U.S. presence continues, as an MP implores Le Ly to have sex with a GI about to return stateside,” while her sister leads an undignified life working as a prostitute (Devine 363). The film is very harsh on the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, save for the initially positive impression we get from the character of Steve. At first, Steve serves to personify the benevolent intentions of some of the Americans who served in Vietnam, but even he is later consumed by guilt and rage and ends up committing suicide, completing the film’s pessimistic take on American involvement in the conflict.

And thus, we have reached the end of the present film-historical account. While it has been a rather wide look into how the Vietnam War was portrayed in American cinema of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the analysis ahead will mainly focus on a few key themes, making some of the films I have discussed above inevitably more pertinent to my thesis than others. However, my hope is that a more comprehensive background section (as opposed to a narrow and deep one) will help any readers of this thesis to better situate *We Were Soldiers* into the overall context of the history of American Vietnam films and perhaps enable them to make connections and comparisons which lie outside my own purview.



### 3. Data and method

The film that is analysed in this thesis is the 2002 combat film *We Were Soldiers*. Written for the screen and directed by Randall Wallace, the film tells the story of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore who, in 1965, commanded a battalion of American soldiers in the Battle of Ia Drang. It is based on the 1992 book *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* which was co-written by Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, a war journalist who was covering the events in the Ia Drang Valley during the battle. In the film, Moore and Galloway are portrayed by Mel Gibson and Barry Pepper, respectively, with the latter also serving as the story's narrator.

As for why I have chosen this film in particular to be the subject of my thesis, the answer is twofold. Firstly, I wanted to pick a film that was actually set in Vietnam and would provide as many meaningful points of comparison as possible when analysed in relation to earlier depictions of the war. By this criterion alone, *We Were Soldiers* was the best choice. However, there was also another notable reason for its selection, namely the fact that it still remains the biggest and most prominent Hollywood Vietnam War film of not only the 2000s, but the entire 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far. Indeed, very few films about the Vietnam War have been made in the last twenty years in the first place, and only a handful of those have been theatrical films with well-established directors at the helm. The three films initially considered as possible candidates for this thesis were *Tigerland* (2000) by Joel Schumacher, *Rescue Dawn* (2006) by Werner Herzog, and *We Were Soldiers*. (Both *Tigerland* and *Rescue Dawn* are briefly discussed in section five.)

Neither *Tigerland* nor *Rescue Dawn* matched the production size or box office returns of *We Were Soldiers*. *Tigerland*, with an estimated production budget of \$10 million, only earned a domestic total gross of \$139,692 (Box Office Mojo; IMDb). *Rescue Dawn*, which was also produced for approximately \$10 million, managed to earn a domestic total gross of around \$5.5 million (Box Office Mojo; IMDb). The numbers for both films pale in comparison to those of *We Were Soldiers*; Wallace and Gibson's war epic had a production budget of \$75 million and earned a domestic total gross of just above \$78 million, plus another \$36.5 million internationally (Box Office Mojo; IMDb). Thus, it can be said that *We Were Soldiers* is by far the biggest film about the Vietnam War released in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both in terms of scale as well as the audience it has reached. Therefore, it can

be considered the single most representative film when it comes to evaluating the state of the Hollywood Vietnam film at the turn of the millennium.

The analysis of *We Were Soldiers* presented in this thesis will mainly focus on the film's narrative, its characters and dialogue, etc. — in other words, the film's content rather than its form or style. The aim of the analysis is to describe the film's portrayal of the war and its participants and to reveal some of its ideological undertones. The findings will also be compared to the trends established in earlier Vietnam films to better understand the trajectory that the genre has taken in the early 2000s. That will be done in the Discussion section of the thesis.

As for the method used in conducting the analysis, it has been a reiterative process of watching the film closely, identifying themes that are relevant to my thesis, and then describing and interpreting key scenes which somehow embody those themes. Although the process originally began without adherence to any rigid methodology, with myself merely studying the history of Vietnam War cinema and then producing my own film analysis, the research has since been informed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's ideas around thematic analysis. However, having already done much of the thinking involved in interpreting the film and having established the key points of my thesis before coming across Braun and Clarke's guidelines, their work has mainly helped me to retrospectively describe my analytical process and thus add some transparency to it.

In the words of Braun and Clarke, "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data," (6) and they consider it "a useful and flexible method for qualitative research in and beyond [their own field of work] psychology" (2). Their detailed instructions on how to conduct such an analysis are not relevant here, as I have not based my film analysis on said instructions, but there should be some utility in reviewing the process by which I have come to choose the central themes of my analysis. If nothing else, at least it will provide better grounds for readers to evaluate the validity of my analysis and the relevance of this thesis as a contribution to the academic study of Vietnam War cinema.

Braun and Clarke make a distinction between "inductive" and "theoretical" thematic analyses (12). An analysis is inductive when the themes are "[not] driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area or topic," and the data is coded "*without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (12; original emphasis). "In contrast," write Braun and Clarke, "a 'theoretical' thematic analysis would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or

analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data” (12). By this definition, the film analysis presented in this thesis can be considered “theoretical,” as I have watched and analysed the film with specific research questions in mind, consciously ignoring aspects of the film in which I have little or no theoretical interest.

The research questions that have guided my analysis have not been chosen randomly, however. Rather, they have been heavily influenced by the theoretical framework provided by the existing literature on Vietnam War cinema. For example, two of the key questions guiding my analysis are, “how does *We Were Soldiers* portray the Americans who fought in Vietnam?” and “how does it portray the North Vietnamese?” My inquiry into the first question is crucially informed by the concept of “revisionism” put forth in the literature, whereas my inquiry into the second question is informed by my knowledge of how America’s Vietnamese enemies (whether VC or NVA) have traditionally been portrayed in Hollywood war films.

Consider the following paragraph from Braun and Clarke:

There are different positions regarding when you should engage with the literature relevant to your analysis – with some arguing that early reading can narrow your analytic field of vision, leading you to focus on some aspects of the data at the expense of other potential crucial aspects. Others argue that engagement with the literature can enhance your analysis by sensitising you to more subtle features of the data (Tuckett, 2005). Therefore, there is no one right way to proceed with reading, for thematic analysis, although a more inductive approach would be enhanced by not engaging with literature in the early stages of analysis, whereas a theoretical approach requires engagement with the literature prior to analysis. (16)

In my own research, I have certainly noticed the “sensitising” effect of familiarising myself with the relevant literature before conducting my own analysis, and have in fact considered it a prerequisite for achieving my research goal. After all, the aim of this thesis is not to examine *We Were Soldiers* in a theoretical vacuum but rather to relate my findings to previous academic discussions on the broader topic of Vietnam War cinema. This approach has undoubtedly narrowed my “analytic field of vision” to some degree, but it has also helped me to craft a thesis that meaningfully complements an existing body of research in the field of film history.

According to Braun and Clarke (13), the researcher must also decide whether to focus on themes that are “semantic” (explicit in the data) or ones that are “latent” (requiring interpretation). Since my analysis is largely concerned with the uncovering of ideological and political undertones in a Hollywood film, it is arguably the case that I have focused more on the film’s latent themes. In the words of Braun and Clarke, “a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations - and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (13; original emphasis). This seems a fairly accurate description of my own analytical process; although my analysis largely consists of describing the film’s actual, explicitly visible and audible content, it is definitely predicated on the assumption that there are deeper ideologies “shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.” Furthermore, as Braun and Clarke write, “for latent thematic analysis, the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work, and the analysis that is produced is not just description, but is already theorised” (13). This, too, applies to my own analysis, for I have construed the film through the lens provided my background research, and have consciously looked for aspects in the film which would enable meaningful comparisons to earlier trends of the Vietnam film.

Lastly, a few words regarding my own stance towards my thesis topic and how it might affect the results of my analysis. As a Finn with no ties to either Vietnam or the United States, I have no personal relationship to the Vietnam War. During the course of my research, I have become fascinated with the war as a vastly complex and controversial historical topic, but I have no personal stake in it either way. Although this might make me less sensitive to the ideological nuances in Vietnam War films, I would argue that it also makes me less biased than if I had strong cultural ties to the conflict. Indeed, there seems to be this cultural assumption guiding much of the writing on the topic, according to which any film dealing with Vietnam should be unilaterally cynical towards the war and portray it in a negative light. While this is certainly an understandable and, to a degree, even a reasonable position, it is not one that I can honestly share. As a cinephile, I evaluate films mainly based on their merits as art and entertainment, not as politico-ideological artifacts. Thus, my interest in analysing the ideological undertones of *We Were Soldiers* is purely intellectual, stemming from my fascination with how American cinema has dealt with the Vietnam War, rather than being driven by some preconceived notion of how the war should be portrayed.

That brings me to my final point: my intention is not to make value judgments about the film, even when using an inherently negative term like “revisionist” which refers to a “revision of the *real* history.” Rather, I use the existing terminology simply because it helps to place the film in its film-historical context. Also, I do not wish to question the film’s honesty when discussing its all-round positive depiction of the troops who fought in Ia Drang and the things they did and said, as I am well aware that the film is based on true events and real people, and I mean no disrespect to any of them or their families.

## 4. Analysis of *We Were Soldiers* (2002)

The following analysis of *We Were Soldiers* is divided into three sections. The first one contains a brief retelling of the film's plot, introducing the basics of the story to readers who have not seen the film themselves, as well as making it easier for all readers to follow the other two sections of the analysis. The second section delves into the film's portrayal of the Americans, both as individual characters as well as collectively. In that section, I examine the character-building processes of several central characters and how the film conveys a uniformly positive image of American fighting men. Also under scrutiny are the way the film portrays military training, the way American forces function in battle, and the role of their superior technology and firepower in defeating the North Vietnamese Army. Finally, the third section is about the film's depiction of the North Vietnamese, which, I argue, is on the whole exceptionally positive. (NB: the quotations from North Vietnamese characters that appear throughout this analysis have been translated to English from Finnish subtitles, so the wording may not always be precisely accurate or true to the original language.)

### 4.1 Plot description

The film opens with shots of the Vietnamese countryside, with Galloway/Pepper narrating:

These are the true events of November 1965. The Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam. A place our country does not remember, and a war it does not understand. This story's a testament to the young Americans who died in the Valley of Death, and a tribute to the young men of the People's Army of Vietnam who died by our hands in that place. To tell this story I must start at the beginning. But where does it begin? Maybe in June of 1954 when French Group Mobile 100 moved into the same Central Highlands of Vietnam where we would go eleven years later...

The story begins with a short prologue set in 1954 in which a unit of French soldiers is ambushed and defeated by the Viet Minh. At the end of the brief battle, the French soldiers that are left alive are lying on the ground, held at gunpoint by the Vietnamese. A Vietnamese soldier then asks his commanding officer, (then Lieutenant) Nguyen Huu An, whether they shall take the French as

prisoners. “No,” An replies, “If we kill them all, they won’t send more.” Then, in a point of view shot filmed from the perspective of a wounded French soldier, the Vietnamese soldier fires his rifle towards the camera. The screen goes black with the bang, but other shots and screams can still be heard for a few seconds.

The first act of the film depicts Hal Moore’s life in a stateside Army base as he assumes command of the newly-formed air assault unit he must lead into battle and begins to train a new batch of officers. Among other things, the men practice getting in and out of battle zones using helicopters, since that will be the unit’s specialty. Despite the Americans’ advanced technology and tactics which should give them an advantage over the Vietnamese opposition, Moore keeps reading over his notes about the French defeat in Vietnam and is afraid he will lead his men into a massacre (as it happens, the battalion which he commands is the same one that was led by George A. Custer in the infamous Battle of the Little Bighorn some 90 years earlier). In addition to the training scenes and Moore mulling over how to defeat the Vietnamese, the first act also establishes him as a devout Catholic and a happy family man who says goodnight prayers with his kids and is very much in love with his wife.

Once in Vietnam, Moore’s battalion is ordered on a retaliatory search and destroy mission following the NVA’s attacks on Plei Me. They are transported by helicopter from their base to Landing Zone X-Ray, an area in the Ia Drang Valley right next to a mountain with a large NVA base on it, and soon begins the battle that will last for most of the film’s runtime. As the troops on the ground fight to keep the numerically overwhelming NVA forces at bay, the helicopter pilots keep flying back and forth between the U.S. base and the valley, bringing reinforcements in and transporting wounded soldiers out. Over the course of three days, Moore commands his troops with such tactical brilliance that they are able to withstand the continuous NVA attacks and ultimately push back the enemy lines and win the battle. Sprinkled throughout the last two acts of the film are also scenes in which the North Vietnamese commander, Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu An (who first appeared in the prologue), gives orders to his men inside an underground bunker, as well as scenes where some of the American officers’ wives (who live on base back home) receive word of their husbands’ deaths.

The story ends with Moore returning home to his family and Galloway typing up his account of the events. Lastly, we see Moore visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., after which the names of the U.S. casualties of the battle are commemorated and the end credits roll.

## 4.2 G.I. Joe is a hero and winner: portrayal of the Americans

In this section of the analysis, I will examine how the film portrays the American side of the story. First of all, I will demonstrate how it establishes its central protagonists as exceptionally competent warriors and leaders, and all-round respectable and likable characters. The analysis will largely be centred around the character of Hal Moore, but a number of side characters will also be discussed. As I examine how the film portrays the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, I will also consider how that is meant to affect the audience's views on Vietnam veterans and, by extension, the war itself. In short, I argue that the film follows in the footsteps of earlier revisionist films in that it likens Vietnam veterans to WWII heroes and foregrounds their bravery in an attempt to change people's attitudes towards them.

Also included in this section will be my observations of how *We Were Soldiers* portrays the U.S. military in general. For example, I will consider the film's depiction of military training as well as how the Americans' superior technology and weaponry help them defeat the North Vietnamese in battle. Along the way, I will also make remarks on how the film avoids dealing with questions about the war's root causes or the faultiness of U.S. military policies during the war.

For the most part, *We Were Soldiers* portrays its American characters and their actions in combat in a very positive light, which is quite rare in post-war Vietnam films. As was discovered in the film-historical background section, U.S. troops in Vietnam — officers included — have often been depicted either as incompetent or as having poor morale and ending up fighting each other. None of this applies to *We Were Soldiers*. In fact, the opposite is true regarding all of those points; Hal Moore is portrayed as a perfect leader who also makes great leaders out of the officers he trains, the battalion's fighting morale is unwavering, and their solidarity is something that has probably not been seen in Vietnam films since *The Green Berets*.

Let us consider first of all the extremely positive characterisation of Hal Moore and how it is carefully constructed from the start. Indeed, the construction of Moore's character begins before he is even introduced to the viewer, in a scene that follows the prologue and the film's brief opening credits sequence. Along with some aerial shots of Fort Benning, Georgia, we hear Galloway/Pepper continue his narration: "Maybe the story begins in America when the Army first realized a new kind



of war was heading its way.” Next, we are indoors, inside some military facility, with a pair of two-star generals — true-life figure Harry Kinnard (Jim Grimshaw) and a fictitious general named Richter (Patrick St. Esprit) — walking briskly along a hallway and having the following conversation:

Richter: “The White House anticipates a build-up and wants a victory over cavemen in black pyjamas.”

Kinnard: “We wouldn’t be there if they hadn’t already beaten the French army.”

Richter: “French army? What’s that? The problem with Vietnam is the terrain. Jungles, mountains, rivers — manoeuvre’s a nightmare. That’s why we came up with the plan to use helicopters, leap in and out of battle. We want you to run the test on the idea.”

Kinnard: “It’ll take a hell of a combat leader. [brief pause] I know a young lieutenant colonel named Hal Moore. He led a combat company in Korea. After that he volunteered to test experimental parachutes.”

Richter: “Experimental parachutes? Sounds like just the guy.”

There are two important things to note in this scene, one being that it makes the “Richter” character seem highly arrogant, for his dismissive comment about the French also implies that he does not take the Vietnamese opposition seriously. This is the first of a couple of instances in which the film subtly employs the revisionist strategy of scapegoating by bringing up the poor judgment of high-up U.S. decision-makers. The other important thing is that the conversation is what gives the viewer their first bit of knowledge about the film’s lead character, Hal Moore. By having two high-ranking officers talk about Moore with such respect and by emphasising his past accomplishments, the film sets high expectations for its main protagonist before even showing him to the viewer.

After the hallway scene, the film cuts to a car full of happily singing children (three boys and two girls to be exact), with the camera moving slowly to the left to reveal Moore (Gibson) in the driver’s seat with his wife Julia (Madeleine Stowe) sitting next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Soon, the family arrives at their new home on base at Fort Benning. While they are carrying their things from their trailer into the house, two officers standing in a neighbouring yard — Captains Edwards (Dylan Walsh) and Metsker (Clark Gregg) — have the following conversation about their new boss:

Edwards: “Tom... How much you know about our new colonel?”

Metsker: “He was in Korea. Has a master’s in international relations from Harvard.”

Edwards [suspicious]: “Harvard? He’s not one of those academic pussies, is he?”

Metsker [implying that Moore is anything but]: “Hal Moore?”

This conversation is another instance of the same sort of character construction that was just discussed above — two minor characters talking about Moore and his past, handily giving the viewer more information about him while strengthening the conception of him as a highly competent individual. Not only has he already seen one war and tested experimental parachutes, he also has a master’s degree from one of the world’s leading universities. Of course, by this point we have also already been given a glimpse into Moore’s family life, rounding out the image of, for all intents and purposes, a perfect man. In a matter of minutes, before the story has even properly begun, the character of Hal Moore has been established as both highly intelligent and exceptionally tough; someone equally comfortable reading books as he is waging war; and to top it all, a family man whose private life seems blissful.

There are a few scenes in the first act of the film that showcase Moore’s skills (for lack of a better word) as a father. For example, there is a scene where Moore comes home in the evening and finds his five children playing on the bed, and then ushers them to say their goodnight prayers. They all kneel around the bed, and Moore recites the Hail Mary with them. It is a heart-warming scene of a father who is dedicated to his children and acts as the spiritual leader of his family. The scene takes a more humorous turn, however, when the youngest of Moore’s children, Cecile, announces that she wants to be “Methodist, like mommy,” so that she can “pray whatever [she wants].” In another similarly endearing but also sad scene, Moore is about to read a bedtime story to Cecile when the latter suddenly asks him what a war is. Moore does his best to explain it in words understandable to a child, and in the course of the conversation ends up promising his worried daughter that he will not let the enemy take his life when he goes to war.

And it is not only in the context of his family life that Moore takes the role of a caring father and spiritual leader; this characterisation of him also applies in relation to the soldiers under his command. In one of the training scenes of the first act, he advises his officers to fight as a family like the Sioux Indians did, telling them to “take care of [their] men” and to “teach them to take care of each other,” because in Vietnam, “each other is all we’re going to have.”

One of the officers paying close attention to his words is Lieutenant Geoghegan (Chris Klein), whom Moore soon perceives to be a natural leader. Indeed, Geoghegan already implements Moore’s

advice in the very next scene where, during a hiking exercise, he orders all of his men to take off their boots and socks and to check each other's feet for blisters.

In a scene that takes place a few minutes afterwards (a few minutes of runtime, that is), Geoghegan is praying in a chapel when Moore walks in to congratulate him on becoming a father, for Geoghegan's wife has just given birth to a baby girl. In the ensuing conversation, Geoghegan asks Moore what he thinks "about being a soldier and a father," to which Moore replies: "I hope that being good at the one makes me better at the other." Geoghegan then explains to Moore how he and his wife spent a year in Africa building a school for war orphans, and that he hopes that God's plan for him is "to help protect orphans, not make any." "Well, why don't we ask him?" says Moore, and so the two approach the altar to kneel in prayer. Of the lines that Moore speaks during the prayer, the following are the most relevant:

I pray you watch over the young men like Jack Geoghegan that I lead into battle.  
You use me as your instrument in this awful hell of war to watch over them.  
Especially if they're men like this one beside me, deserving of a future in your  
blessing and good will.

The scene in the chapel is essential to the characterisations of both Moore and Geoghegan. Firstly, it reinforces the already established image of Moore as a protective and wise father figure to his troops as well as his own children. Secondly, it evokes in the viewer sympathy and admiration towards Geoghegan, fortifying the notion of him as a selfless and noble person.

Finally, the third and possibly most important point to be made about this scene is the way it projects Jack Geoghegan as a model of "the typical young man who fought in Vietnam." Implied in Moore's prayer is the idea that the young men who he would soon lead into battle are "men like Jack Geoghegan," men "deserving of a future in [God's] blessing and good will." By giving such importance specifically to the character of Jack Geoghegan, the film projects a very particular kind of image of the typical young American who fought in Vietnam. Even if the film never makes the equation outright — which it almost does, given how positively it portrays all of the American soldiers during the Battle of Ia Drang — it can be argued that the people who are given the most attention in the film serve to represent the supposed character of the entire U.S. fighting force.

Geoghegan is later killed in Vietnam, and his death will be discussed among other death scenes below, but let us first rewind a bit and examine a few other characters before moving on to the Vietnam part of the film.

One of the more prominent side characters in the film is Major Bruce Crandall (Greg Kinnear), who first appears in a scene where a group of helicopter pilots are playing baseball on the tarmac. Moore interrupts the baseball match to have a private conversation with Crandall, informing him that he and his men have been chosen for the highly dangerous and demanding job of serving as the pilots of his new Air Cavalry unit. Nicknamed 'Snake Shit' by his men because he "flies lower than snake shit," Crandall is established from the beginning as a skilful pilot and diligent leader who commands the respect of his men. When Crandall asks Moore the question, "Why us?" Moore replies: "Well, you guys look like shit, but your equipment is immaculate. Yesterday was Sunday. You didn't have to be training, but you were." Referring to the pilots under Crandall's command, Moore says: "They wanna fly with you for some reason. I guess it's 'cause they think you're the best."

Crandall next appears in the scene that begins the training section of the film. The scene is set inside a hangar, where Moore gives a brief speech to his new officers, beginning with the following words: "At ease, gentlemen. Welcome to the new cavalry. We will ride into battle, and this will be our horse." At this point, a helicopter flown by Crandall appears at the hangar's doorway, landing briefly and then moving on after Crandall salutes Moore from the cockpit. As the helicopter flies away, two more follow in its wake, making for an impressive exhibition of the Air Cavalry's new "horses."

This is one of several scenes in the film which highlight the sheer impressiveness of the helicopter gunship. Other such moments can be found in the Vietnam part of the film, and all in all, the way the film treats helicopters could be described as follows: it is like the famous "Ride of the Valkyries" scene from *Apocalypse Now* but without the irony. The overwhelming destructive power of the helicopter is celebrated in an ultraviolent scene near the end of the film where NVA soldiers are ripped apart in slow motion by rockets and minigun fire. Of course, in addition to this, the helicopters are absolutely crucial to American survival as they are constantly used to transport men in and out of the battle zone. Thus, they certainly play an important role in the film's overall positive depiction of the U.S. military and its capabilities, reassuring the viewer that the country's superior technology and weaponry will help them win any battle — even if they did not win the war.

Back in the hangar, with the helicopters gone, Moore continues his speech by stating that even this new technology will not keep the men out of danger's way. He then goes on to talk about the importance of serving as an example to one's troops and introduces the officers to another prominent side character in the story, Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley (Sam Elliott). A veteran of both the Second World War and the Korean War, Plumley is the epitome of the grumpy, experienced soldier who seems to care little for anyone's feelings but is an invaluable asset on the battlefield. Aside from his humorously gruff lines that serve a comedic purpose, his character serves to strengthen the impression given by the film that the war in Vietnam was fought by "real men" instead of a bunch of "green" youngsters (although the "greenness" and youth of Moore's battalion is pointed out in the first act's dialogue many times, the choice of actors by and large does not convey the same sentiment). However, beyond these general remarks, delving into Plumley's character in any great detail will not be vital to the analysis at hand.

Another character who plays an important part in the Battle of Ia Drang is Sgt. Ernie Savage (Ryan Hurst). In the first act of the film, we see him wish either a good or beautiful morning to Plumley on two occasions, only for the latter to baffle him — to comedic effect — with answers like, "How do you know what kind of goddamn day it is?" and "What are you, a fucking weather man now?" In addition to these two brief scenes, Savage also appears in a scene where the officers practice jumping out of helicopters. As Savage's helicopter touches ground, Moore runs over to it, pretend-kills the platoon leader, Lt. Herrick (Marc Blucas), and starts yelling, "Your officer is dead! What do you do? What do you do?" When Herrick's second-in-command, Sfc. Palmer (Forry Smith) fails to react quickly enough, Moore "kills" him too and continues, "Alright, he hesitated — *he's* dead! What do you do?" He points at Sgt. Savage who immediately provides the right answer: "Get off the chopper!" The scene then ends with Moore instructing Savage as well as all the other officers to learn the job of the man who ranks above them and to teach their own job to the man below them, because some of them will inevitably die. The scene serves to foreshadow events to come, for as we will see below, Savage actually ends up taking command of his platoon in Vietnam once both Herrick and Palmer have been killed in action.

There are two more scenes I wish to examine before moving on to the Vietnam part of the film. The first one contains what can be considered another instance of scapegoating — the revisionist tactic in which past U.S. leadership is blamed for the war and America as a whole made to look like their victim. In this scene, the American troops are having a party after receiving the news that they will

be sent to Vietnam soon. Away from the crowd, Moore is having a conversation with — if I am not mistaken — Harry Kinnard, whom we saw talking to the other two-star officer earlier. The conversation between Moore and Kinnard goes as follows:

Moore: I didn't hear the president mention a state of emergency.

Kinnard: No, he didn't.

Moore: Well, without that declaration it means our enlistments won't be extended.

Kinnard: I'm sorry, Hal.

Moore: Forgive me, sir, but let me get this straight. We form a division using techniques that have never been attempted in battle, against an enemy with twenty years of combat experience on his ground, 12,000 miles away from our ground... And right before the Army sends us into the fight, they take away a third of my men — the most experienced third, including the officers.

Kinnard: I don't like it any better than you do, Hal.

Moore: You saw this coming, didn't you? Yes, that's why you gave me that new crop of platoon leaders. [sighs] Korea didn't teach them anything...

Kinnard: Politicians?

What we see here is a direct, albeit vague, rebuke to the “politicians.” It is too bad that the characters never go into any more depth regarding what Korea should have taught them — as someone unfamiliar with the particularities of that conflict, I, for one, do not understand the precise meaning of this reference. In any case, the conversation still functions as a means of scapegoating, fortifying the notion that the country and its finest young men were merely victims of their arrogant and foolish leaders at the time of the Vietnam War. Yet it still remains the case that *We Were Soldiers* does not take this line of thought any further; it does not show the politicking that took place behind the scenes, nor does it point its finger to any particular people or foreign policy decisions. Indeed, it seems like the film is content with simply admitting how sad it is that these soldiers were ever even sent to Vietnam, with no desire to delve into the intricate reasons behind that fact.

The other scene I wish to address before proceeding to the scenes in Vietnam is one that exemplifies particularly well the film's tone when it comes to portraying the U.S. military and the camaraderie within it. Before the troops are sent to Vietnam, Moore gives them a solemn speech at a sports stadium. With helicopters ceremonially flying over the field, Moore begins his speech: “Look around

you. In the Seventh Cavalry, we got a captain from the Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico. We've got Japanese, Chinese, blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indians. Jews and gentiles. All Americans." He goes on to talk about how some of these groups face discrimination at home but none of that will matter going forward, as they will all be watching each other's backs regardless of colour or creed. Appearing like he is fighting back tears, Moore finishes the speech by swearing "before you and before Almighty God" that he will be the first one on the battlefield and the last to leave it, and that he will bring every one of his men back home, whether dead or alive. Throughout the scene, the sorrowful musical score in the background works to heighten the emotional impact of his words.

The scene makes for a perfect summary of how *We Were Soldiers* strives to portray its American heroes. The military is depicted as a melting pot that turns people of different backgrounds into a band of brothers who fight and die for the man next to them. The appeal of the phrase, "no one gets left behind," is invoked, and all in all the scene serves to make war, and dying in one, sound like honourable, if regrettable, affairs. In this aspect, the film resembles traditional Hollywood war films more than most portrayals of Vietnam. It employs once again the revisionist tactic of likening Vietnam veterans to World War II heroes, strengthening the notion that, regardless of the nature of the war, G.I. Joe is an honourable and good guy. However, it is notable that there is no talk of fighting for one's country or for any higher value such as freedom or democracy — or, say, against the spread of communism. Thus, to borrow a term used by Cawley above, *We Were Soldiers* can be considered a Vietnam War film in which "lesser loyalties" such as family and the Army have supplanted the older ones of anticommunism, nation, and democratic principle (despite one soldier's dying words being, "I'm glad I could die for my country").

Now, let us move on to the Vietnam section of the film and examine how the characters we have thus far discussed fare in battle, starting with Sgt. Savage. Upon reaching Landing Zone X-Ray, his platoon almost immediately gets isolated from the rest of the American forces. Led by the overeager Lieutenant Herrick, they run after a North Vietnamese scout hoping to take him prisoner but are soon ambushed. Several soldiers, including Herrick and his second-in-command, Palmer, are hit by enemy gunfire, leaving Savage in charge. Unlike the now wounded lieutenant, Savage keeps his calm, yells for everyone to stay down, pinpoints an enemy position, and clears it out with a rifle grenade. "Form a perimeter, conserve your ammo, and stay down," he shouts, as the camera shows the wounded lieutenant being tended to and then zooms out to reveal multiple casualties lying in

the grass. The scene is one of several in the film that display Savage's natural leadership and ability to function in extremely stressful circumstances.

Meanwhile, the bulk of the American troops have also come under attack at LZ X-Ray. Radio operators Metsker and Ouellette are trying to reach the patrols that have already gone out and get everyone to regroup, but they are not getting the job done. In the first of many moments exhibiting his coolness in the heat of battle, Hal Moore approaches them and starts shouting over the gunfire: "Hey! Hey! Calm down! Understand the situation and communicate clearly!" Just as he finishes the last sentence, a bullet hits the flashlight attached to his uniform, prompting him to lift his rifle and casually shoot two enemies before continuing giving orders to the radio operators. The scene is highly reassuring, convincing both the viewer and the side characters of Moore's ability to maintain his composure and lead his men even under heavy fire. In fact, the film portrays Moore not merely as a commander doing his job as he is supposed to, but as the very force that keeps the U.S. lines from crumbling in front of the well-organised enemy attacks. This becomes apparent as the battle continues, as we see the NVA commander Nguyen Huu An repeatedly attempt to outmanoeuvre the American forces only for Moore to anticipate and counter all of his tactics.

Switching over to the isolated platoon, the film gives us a first taste of how the deaths of American soldiers will be portrayed. Of course, we have already witnessed the deaths of many faceless and nameless soldiers, but it is the deaths of more central characters which dictates in what light all this loss of life is presented to the viewer. First, we see Lieutenant Herrick die of his wounds, passing on his responsibilities to Sgt. Savage before saying his last words: "I'm glad I could die for my country." A mere moment later, Palmer also dies — his last words to the soldier at his side: "Bungum... Tell my wife I love her."

After their deaths, the platoon comes under attack once again. They get close to being overrun, but Savage does exactly what Moore ordered his radio operators to do just moments before — he understands the situation and communicates clearly, calling in artillery fire which decimates the enemy forces. This scene is yet another indication of Savage's ability to function even in the direst of situations, but it is also one of many moments in the film where the U.S. forces are able to defeat the NVA thanks mainly to their superior firepower (in addition to the artillery, helicopters and bomber planes are also employed to great destructive effect, but this aspect of the film will not be delved into in any further detail than has already been discussed).



Now, let us take a moment to consider the way *We Were Soldiers* depicts the deaths of its American characters. Death scenes like the ones described above are a far cry from the ones seen in most anti-war films, where men often die in the most horrible ways, e.g. choking on their own blood, looking down at their severed limbs and crying for their mothers, or otherwise in a state of shock or panic. In contrast, here we have two characters who seem to be relatively peaceful at the moment of their death, even managing to utter something beautiful and touching before taking their last breath.

Another common occurrence in the death scenes of the film is American soldiers sacrificing their lives for others. For example, Cpt. Metsker, having already been wounded himself, gives his place onboard a rescue helicopter to another badly wounded soldier named Ray. "You hang on! I'll see you back there, Ray!" he yells when he is suddenly hit by two bullets from behind and drops dead on top of Ray as the helicopter takes off. Lt. Geoghegan, for his part, gives his life trying to save his friend, Willie Godboldt. As the two are retreating from an NVA onslaught towards their own platoon, Godboldt is hit by enemy gunfire. Geoghegan runs back to Godboldt to carry him to safety, and with his buddy on his shoulders, he is hit by enemy bullets himself.

There is one truly unsettling death that is depicted in the film, that of Pfc. Jimmy Nakayama, who dies after being severely burned in a friendly napalm strike. Just moments before, he has told Joe Galloway that he "got a baby being born today," and then he is screaming as his flesh burns from his legs and face. But even he is able to cry to Joe Galloway, who drags him into a helicopter, "Tell my wife I love her. And my baby. You tell her." While his last words certainly do not diminish the sense of tragedy in the scene — if anything, they heighten it — they do change its character. It becomes the widowing of Nakayama's wife and the fact that his baby will grow without a father which the viewer senses to be the principal tragedies here, not the fact that his death was caused by an American napalm strike.

How, then, do all these scenes play into the film's portrayal of the war and the Americans who served in it? Firstly, they comprise a very consistent view of American troops dying in combat, one that oozes courage and camaraderie and denies feelings such as fear and regret. Indeed, by having its characters face death in such a dignified manner, the film softens the tragedy of it all. The moving last words and the heroism displayed by the dying soldiers divert attention away from the futility of their demise when looking at the big picture of the battle and the war. Instead of the sense of futility which has been a trademark of classic Vietnam films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal*

*Jacket*, the film conveys a feeling that the American soldiers' deaths are intrinsically meaningful because they died bravely for their country and friends. Also, the loss experienced by their families is emphasised through a subplot that has Moore's wife deliver death notices around the Army base. This, too, serves to make each death feel meaningful, if only on the grounds that these people were someone's husbands and fathers. In this way, the film dodges the question of whether these deaths were necessary in the first place. In focusing on how heroically these soldiers died rather than why they died, *We Were Soldiers* takes another page out of the revisionist playbook.

However, for all the bravery on display, the film still attempts to convey the notion that war is hell. For one, even if they generally do not compare to, say, the D-Day part of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, there certainly are gruesome scenes and moments in the film (Nakayama's death among them). In addition, the film emphasises on a few occasions the mental toll the war takes on the men, e.g. by having Sgt. Savage break into tears once his platoon has finally been rescued, or by having Moore — also in tears — lament to Joe Galloway that he will never forgive himself "that my men died and I didn't." Major Crandall, for his part, ends up vomiting next to his helicopter after making his final flight on the first day of the battle, and then pulls a gun on the medevac CO (Daniel Roebuck) who confronts him for leading his pilots into a hot landing zone (while this scene lightly hints at the common theme of internal disputes among Americans in Vietnam, its main function is to foreground the psychological stress that Crandall is under).

It seems at first, then, that there is an incongruity between the film's supposed message that "war is hell," on the one hand, and the way it celebrates its characters as heroes, on the other. However, I would argue that the former feature serves merely to enhance the latter, for it is exactly the hellish conditions that the soldiers overcome which makes their actions seem so heroic in the first place. Indeed, all the characters who have been discussed in this analysis are able to keep going despite the horrific circumstances and do their duties willingly to the end. It is impossible not to feel admiration towards Sgt. Savage, for example, when he, having already been to hell and back, requests Moore's permission to re-join the fight. The moment conveys in a nutshell the kind of image the film aims to project of the fighting morale and mental fortitude of the U.S. forces in Ia Drang.

Back to the role of Hal Moore in the American victory at LZ X-Ray; all throughout the battle, the film certainly drives home the point of how centrally important Moore and his tactical mastery are in fending off the North Vietnamese attacks. Switching back and forth between the American and

North Vietnamese perspectives, the film shows Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu An coming up with different tactics to crush the American forces conclusively, only for Moore to order his men to reinforce the exact locations where An has just sent his troops. At one point, An is on the radio with one of his men in the field, who tells him the Americans just received reinforcements right where they (the NVA) attacked them. Frustrated, An tells him to “use the creek bed” and slams down the receiver. The film then immediately cuts to Moore giving orders on the radio: “Captain Nadal, that creek bed is vital! Vital! They’ll be coming right at you. Do not let them flank!” It is a humorous moment that serves to underline Moore’s tactical brilliance. We see here how the film indeed portrays Hal Moore as the very force that keeps the U.S. lines from crumbling, as implied earlier. It is just like Sgt. Maj. Plumley says to Moore in a preceding scene: “If you go down, we all go down.”

In addition to keeping the American lines intact with his tactical decisions and showing great personal bravery and capability in battle, Moore is also portrayed as a leader who truly cares for his men. In the course of the story, we see him lift the morale of his troops, pray for the ones who have lost their lives, and, as mentioned before, mourn over the American casualties. Like he promised to his men in the speech he gave at the sports stadium, his feet are the first to touch ground in the Ia Drang Valley and the last to step off of it. As a concluding demonstration of how his leadership is portrayed, this is what Moore says to General Westmoreland on the radio when ordered to return to Saigon for a debriefing (apparently, the Army considers the battle lost and wants to at least save the lieutenant colonel): “I am in a fight... And I object to this order to return to Saigon. Now, I will not leave my men. Is that clear? Out.”

Finally, let us consider the role of Joe Galloway in the story. Jumping right to the scene where he has arrived in the valley a while ago and is having his second chat with Moore, Galloway explains that he actually comes from a long family line of soldiers but chose to be a reporter because he did not think he could stop a war. “So, I thought maybe I might try and understand one,” he says, “maybe help folks back home understand. I figured I could do that better shooting a camera than I could shooting a rifle.” This line is highly meaningful because it essentially posits that the entire film is an effort to “understand” the Vietnam War. After all, the story is narrated from the start by Galloway, which gives the impression that all of it is merely a war reporter’s objective take on what happened “over there.” The line also plays on the need of 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences to understand the Vietnam War, for the conflict has left a lasting mark on the American national psyche and is still being analysed by historians and documentary filmmakers even in the 2010s. In a sense, Galloway’s

character serves as a proxy for the viewer themselves, letting them see what “really happened” in Vietnam and to try and make some sense of it.

Anyway, as the story continues, the situation in the valley soon becomes so desperate for the Americans that even Galloway has to pick up a rifle and join the fight. “I’m a non-combatant, sir,” he says to Sgt. Maj. Plumley as the latter throws an M16 into his lap. “Ain’t no such thing today, boy,” Plumley answers, and thus Galloway ends up becoming a soldier despite his best attempts not to. In the ensuing battle, he participates in the shooting and killing of NVA soldiers and witnesses the horrors of war first-hand. After he carries the badly burned Nakayama to the helicopter, there is a dramatic sequence where Galloway throws away his rifle and picks up his camera again, after which we are shown real-life photographs of the battle overlaid with shots of the reporter snapping away with his camera. It is a moment that serves to emphasise the fact that *We Were Soldiers* is based on a true story, while also further solidifying the idea that we are merely following Galloway’s sincere account of the events.

Not to take anything away from the American soldiers who fought in Ia Drang and the bravery they exhibited, but it is curious that this is what Galloway turns his viewfinder towards. Just consider the following: he has just witnessed and obviously been shocked by the ghastliest of views — that of people being burned to death by napalm, arguably one of the most inhumane weapons ever used in a war. Not only that, but the strike has also hit friendlies, including Jimmy Nakayama, whose newborn child is rendered fatherless as a result. Could there even be a greater tragedy than that? Yet it is not the senselessness of the war or the horrors he has seen which Galloway (as the film tells it, at least) is the most impacted by and decides to document, but rather the mental fabric of the U.S. soldiers. This is not to say that one aspect of the story is intrinsically more worthy of telling than the other, but a bit of reflection does reveal a choice being made here. Without questioning the truthfulness of the film when it comes to the bravery of the American characters, it can be concluded that there is another, equally true but more tragic story which is not focused on.

By the end of the film, Galloway is a changed man. When the long battle has finally ended and an entire group of war reporters arrives in the valley, they are astonished to see him all dirty and battle-worn. As a series of explosions goes off in the background, the reporters are startled and all of them duck — all but Galloway, who explains stoically: “It’s American artillery. Friendly fire.” Now a war-hardened man, there is no going back for Galloway to the naïveté of his colleagues. All in all, the character arc of Galloway serves to convince the viewer that, due to his experience at Ia Drang, he

is qualified to tell the story of American soldiers in Vietnam in a manner that other war reporters and commentators perhaps are not. Of course, the counter-argument to this would be that, precisely because of his close involvement with the soldiers and participation in the battle, his account of the events is likely to be more subjective than objective.

In any case, in his final chat with Moore, Galloway says he does not “know how to tell this story.” “Well, you got to, Joe,” replies Moore, “You tell the American people what these men did here. You tell ‘em how my troopers died.” Galloway promises to do so. At the end of the film, we see him typing at his desk, overwhelmed by emotion. We also hear his voice-over narration a couple more times as the story is wrapped up in a brief montage of different scenes. A final touch is added to the film’s portrayal of the American troops who fought in Vietnam through the following line:

“Some had families waiting. For others, their only family would be the men they bled beside. There were no bands, no flags, no honour guards to welcome them home. They went to war because their country ordered them to. But in the end, they fought not for their country or their flag. They fought for each other.”

Thus, the film ends by reminding the viewer of the marginalised status of American Vietnam War veterans during and immediately after the war. This is the final move in the film’s revisionist-style portrayal of the war, which on the whole relies on the strategy described by Studlar and Desser above: validating the veterans instead of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam in the first place. At the same time, the last two sentences of this line confirm what was already noted above — that *We Were Soldiers* is a Vietnam film in which “lesser loyalties” have taken the place of, for example, country and flag.

#### 4.3 A tough and determined enemy: portrayal of the North Vietnamese

It is often the case in war films that the story is told exclusively from one point of view and, in accordance with that, the enemy is left faceless. Whether the purpose of such a one-sided depiction of war is to dehumanise the enemy or not, that is usually how it is perceived. Of course, it could be argued that this sort of approach merely reflects reality. After all, it is surely the case that dehumanising the enemy and stripping them of their individuality can sometimes be a prerequisite

for being able to do one's duty in war. In any case, that is often how war films are shot, and this applies to Vietnam War cinema as well. In Vietnam films, leaving the enemy faceless or even entirely invisible has perhaps been even more common than usual, as it serves to illustrate the guerrilla nature of the war and how the Americans were often ambushed by what seemed like an invisible enemy.

*We Were Soldiers* does not take the usual one-sided approach in its depiction of the war. It is an atypical Hollywood war film in that it actually shifts between the viewpoints of American forces and their enemies. There are a number of scenes in the film that focus on the North Vietnamese side of the story, with two characters in particular being given considerable attention. This alone makes the film stand out from the vast majority of Vietnam combat films, even though it is still very much an American story. However, the truly distinguishing feature of *We Were Soldiers* is its positive characterisation of the Oriental enemy, which serves to evoke respect rather than hatred or disgust. In the following pages, I will analyse the film's characterisation of the NVA, focusing on their war-fighting competence as well as their depiction as ordinary human beings rather than the horde of brutal savages we have seen so many times before.

Let us first consider the film's portrayal of the NVA from the angle of fighting competence and ethics. To put it briefly, the film depicts America's enemies as a well-organised, expertly commanded fighting force willing to pay whatever price to repel what they see as foreign invasions into their land. However, while they are portrayed in the prologue as utterly ruthless when it comes to killing all their enemies, even those who have already yielded, so "they won't send more," they are far from the inhuman torturers and mass murderers of certain Hollywood films of the past. Rather than making them appear sadistic or vicious, the film merely conveys an image of the North Vietnamese as extremely resolute.

The most prominent North Vietnamese character in the film is Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu An (Duong Don), the commander of the NVA troops at LZ X-Ray in the Battle of Ia Drang. He is portrayed, first of all, as a brilliant tactician whose manoeuvres would surely have resulted in the obliteration of the American battalion had it not been led by an equally terrific commander. As discussed in the previous subsection, there are moments throughout the battle where the film cuts from one lieutenant colonel to the other, with An commanding his troops to make some sort of clever manoeuvre and Moore countering the very move they are about to make. But since there is not

much to be said about this aspect of the story that would not be redundant at this point, let us proceed straight into some other scenes and devices that play into the film's characterisation of An and his fellow countrymen.

Of the scenes that are set inside the NVA command bunker, one is arguably more essential than the rest, as it properly starts the process of humanising the North Vietnamese. In this scene, An is giving a pep talk to his men after a long day of fighting. "We fought well today," he begins, and then stops to take a look at the wounds of one of his men; he is bleeding from his wrist as well as his face. Nodding sympathetically, An continues: "We tested their tactics and found out their capabilities. Their artillery is effective. We must get so close they cannot use it. We will grab them by their belt buckles!" In the middle of An's speech, the camera momentarily focuses on a soldier wearing glasses (Lam Nguyen) who sits a bit farther back from the crowd; the trooper listens intently and nods. After the talk, when the troops rush out of the bunker, the same soldier is shown writing in a journal, with a picture of a woman — presumably his wife — stashed between the pages. He then tucks the journal inside his uniform and runs after his fellow soldiers.

What this scene does, first of all, is that it gives the viewer a chance to properly see some of the faces of the North Vietnamese troops and realise that they are just ordinary human beings just like the Americans. It is such a simple but effective way to add a layer of humanity to them, but one that is often missing in Vietnam films — hence the impression of a "faceless horde." The scene also shows their commander in a new light by having him speak to his men in a non-combat situation and exhibit some emotion, rather than just shouting out tactics in the heat of the battle. Lastly, the introduction of the glass-wearing soldier is important, as he will return in later scenes. In this first appearance, what is perhaps most significant is the picture of his wife inside the journal. It brings yet another dimension to the humanisation of the North Vietnamese characters, as it reminds the viewer that these people also have families and loved ones waiting for them back home just like the American soldiers do. This point is driven home at the end of the film when we see the woman from the picture reading his husband's journal and mourning for him (he is killed in the course of the battle, in a scene that will be described below).

Before further considering the importance of the glass-wearing soldier to the story, let us first examine two other scenes that add to the characterisation of Nguyen Huu An in a meaningful way. In the first, he is out alone in the early morning, seemingly praying out loud. With a bleak expression

on his face, he says: "To the bravery of the dead, and to the ones who are going to die, I am grateful." The film then cuts to a medium close-up shot of a dead NVA soldier, with the camera panning left to reveal more dead bodies right in front of the American defence line at the creek bed being held by Cpt. Nadal's unit. It is another moment that effectively drives home the point that the NVA are also fighting and dying bravely for their cause. Also, it gives us yet another glimpse of the "softer" side of their commander, for lack of a better word, further strengthening the impression that the North Vietnamese are human just like the Americans.

The other scene of importance takes place towards the end of the film, after the three-day battle has finally ended and the American forces have been transported out of the valley. In it, the North Vietnamese are carrying their dead off the abandoned battlefield. Looking at the devastation and the piles of bodies left behind by the Americans, An solemnly states to one of his subordinates, "What a tragedy. They think this was their victory..." Referring to the First Indochina War, he continues: "This will be the Americans' war. And the end result will be the same, except for the number of casualties before we get there."

What makes this scene interesting is that, aside from making An seem wise and perceptive, it outsources the admission of the war's inevitable outcome to the NVA commander. Clearly, the filmmakers have wanted to emphasise that, despite the fortunate outcome of the battle (for Moore's battalion, that is), the film's purpose is not to make it seem as if the Americans had been in any way victorious in Vietnam. As for why it has to be a North Vietnamese character who states that the Americans never had a chance to win the war, it can be speculated that this is the film's way of avoiding controversy and having to address the painful fact that U.S. leaders knew the score all along.

Next, let us examine what happens with the NVA soldier with glasses who was writing in his journal in the pep talk scene described above. In a battle sequence that takes place sometime after that scene, the film actually shows the events from his perspective for a little while. First, we see the soldier take cover behind a large tree and ready himself for a charge. With war raging all around him, he reloads his rifle and attaches a bayonet to the barrel. Then, he gathers courage for a few more seconds before finally leaping out from behind the tree and beginning his charge towards the American lines. Suspenseful background music drowns out most other sounds as he runs across the battlefield and, as we soon realise, straight towards Hal Moore. In the end, Moore manages to turn



around and shoot the approaching soldier before he reaches him, ending his life with one pull of the trigger.

In combination with the pep talk scene, this brief switch to the perspective of an individual NVA soldier in the middle of the long battle sequence makes a big difference when it comes to showing the North Vietnamese side of the story. As readers familiar with WWII or Vietnam War cinema will know, scenes of hordes of Orientals endlessly charging American positions are not uncommon. However, Hollywood films have usually depicted such battles solely from the mental point of view of American forces, making the Oriental enemy seem maniacal, if not downright possessed. This is one key aspect in which *We Were Soldiers* differentiates itself from its predecessors. Firstly, the pep talk scene provides important context for the relentless North Vietnamese attacks and the charging soldiers; we learn that engaging the Americans up close is in fact a necessary tactical decision if the NVA wish to be victorious, so it can be said with confidence that they are not charging the American lines out of bloodlust or any other “savage” impulses. Secondly, the soldier stopping to gather his courage before making his attack serves to show us that the North Vietnamese troops are not immune to fear but must simply overcome it in order to act courageously, just like their American counterparts.

Lastly, to finish this section of the analysis, a few remarks are in order regarding what the American characters think and say about the North Vietnamese, for this, too, constitutes a part of their characterisation. The first point worth making is that, in the course of the entire film, not a single ethnic slur (such as “gook” or “dink”) is uttered by anyone in reference to the North Vietnamese. The only line in the film that can be considered derogatory towards the North Vietnamese comes from Hal Moore at the end of the chapel scene where he prays with Lt. Geoghegan. Having already finished his prayer, Moore makes an addition: “Oh, yes, and one more thing, dear Lord... About our enemies? Ignore their heathen prayers and help us blow those little bastards straight to hell. Amen again.” However, even this is clearly intended as a comedic moment to lighten the mood, with the humorous value of the line deriving from its abruptness as well as how it leaves Jack Geoghegan visibly confused.

Another point worth making is that the word “communist” is used but once in the film, by President Lyndon B. Johnson in a television broadcast. “We intend to convince the communists that we cannot be defeated by force of arms,” says the president. Of course, the viewer already knows the outcome

of the war, making this line more of a reminder of the U.S. government's arrogance than an actual call to anti-communism. After this quickly passing moment, there are zero references in the film to communism or the domino theory, nor are there any insinuations about the North Vietnamese being mere puppets of their country's communist "big brothers," China and the Soviet Union.

The LBJ clip is the closest the film ever comes — and it is not close at all — to addressing the reasons why the Americans are fighting in Vietnam in the first place. Indeed, it seems as if the film's only answer to this question can be found in Moore's explanation to his daughter of what a war is: "It's something that shouldn't happen, but it does... It's when some people in another country, or any country, try to take the lives of other people. And then soldiers like your daddy have to — you know, it's my job to go over there and stop 'em."

All in all, the film goes to great lengths to avoid offending anyone. It does not provide any real historical or political context for its story and focuses instead on delivering an emotional and entertaining experience for its viewers. As the film's name suggests, *We Were Soldiers* is a story about the men who fought on each side in the Battle of Ia Drang, the horrors they experienced, and the bravery they exhibited. If it strives to portray its American characters as heroes, it certainly does not do this at the expense of their opponent. On the contrary, the film makes every effort to treat the North Vietnamese with respect, portraying them, in the words of Hal Moore, as "a tough and determined enemy."

## 5. Discussion

In this section, I will further discuss the findings of my analysis in the context of the history of Vietnam War cinema which was provided in section two. The aim here is to compare *We Were Soldiers* to earlier depictions of Vietnam in order to shed some light on the direction of the Hollywood Vietnam film in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section will focus on the same aspects of the film which were addressed in the analysis section, with some additional points being briefly discussed at the end as well as in the Conclusion.

Let us first consider the film's portrayal of the American troops who served in Vietnam and how it compares to earlier Hollywood trends. In *We Were Soldiers*, most of the American characters are portrayed in a highly positive light, as exceptionally skilful soldiers, pilots and combat leaders who work together seamlessly and are ready to sacrifice themselves for each other and their country without hesitation. Their actions in combat situations are each more heroic than the other, and their morale is unwavering — in other words, they do not question America's involvement in the conflict or their own part in it. To put it concisely, the American fighting men of *We Were Soldiers* are portrayed as noble warrior heroes every bit as courageous as their World War II counterparts.

It can be said, then, that *We Were Soldiers* follows in the footsteps of the revisionist films which have attempted to fix the image of the Vietnam veteran since the 1980s. One of the basic principles behind revisionist depictions of Vietnam has been that, by focusing on the heroism of American troops and their maltreatment by society upon their return, the films could avert the nation's attention away from the war's controversial root causes as well as the ideological crises faced by many who served in Vietnam. All of this is certainly applicable to *We Were Soldiers*, a film which glorifies war in general and the deaths of American soldiers in particular.

Of the films released after the war, perhaps the closest in comparison to *We Were Soldiers*, at least when talking about this aspect of the film, is *Hamburger Hill*. Both films are about battles which actually took place during the Vietnam War, and both films highlight the bravery of the Americans who fought there. *We Were Soldiers* even borrows from *Hamburger Hill* the idea of including shots of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the film to commemorate the dead soldiers.

However, the striking difference between the two is that, while *Hamburger Hill* made a point of criticising the counterculture and emphasising how the American troops were hurt emotionally by being disowned by their society, *We Were Soldiers* only refers to the latter issue in passing at the very end. Instead of ranting about the ungrateful fate of the veterans, as *Hamburger Hill* and the first two *Rambo* films did, *We Were Soldiers* takes a much subtler approach. First, it tells the incredible survival story of a heroic American air cavalry battalion and their amazing combat leader, showing absolutely no signs of a counterculture or resistance to the war ever even existing. Then, it is only briefly and humbly mentioned how “there were no bands, no flags, no honour guards to welcome them home.” This kind of humility serves to evoke even greater compassion and admiration for the soldiers/veterans, for it is almost as if the film were saying, “these soldiers fought and died for their country and were entirely forgotten, but they were humble enough to not even complain about it.”

Another feature that differentiates the characters of *We Were Soldiers* from those of *Hamburger Hill* is their morale and team spirit. In John Irvin’s film, the grunts sometimes argue and fight amongst themselves, and there is even some altercation between the white and black soldiers of the unit. Also, as was noted in the background section, the American soldiers in the film seem to be fighting against critics of American policy as much as their North Vietnamese enemies. *We Were Soldiers*, on the other hand, depicts the air cavalry battalion as a coherent fighting unit, the members of which do not quarrel with each other or question the purpose of their mission in Vietnam (the scene with Crandall and the medevac CO is not enough to subvert this).

Similar comparisons to other films are easy to make as well. Consider, for example, the way *Platoon* portrays the American troops. First of all, they are split into two camps, “team Elias” and “team Barnes,” which alone makes the situation quite adverse. But to make matters even worse, the infighting within the platoon eventually leads to fraggings and becomes the driving force of the entire story — not to mention the horrifying incident at the civilian village. Another good example would be *Full Metal Jacket*, a film which emphasises the lack of a sense of purpose experienced by the U.S. Marines, as noted earlier. Indeed, this kind of portrayal of American troops in Vietnam has been commonplace in the past, making *We Were Soldiers* feel very different from most of its predecessors, almost more like a traditional World War II movie than a film about Vietnam.

In addition to the moral character of American troops, comparisons can be made concerning the way they function in combat. In this aspect, *We Were Soldiers* is perhaps the most favourable depiction of the Vietnam War produced by Hollywood since *The Green Berets*. Starting with Hal Moore, who is portrayed as nothing short of a perfect leader and all-around perfect man, the film is filled with heroic American officers who lead their men through example. Everyone's trust in their lieutenant colonel is unwavering, and at no point in the film is there any sign of mutinous sentiments among the troops, nor does anyone ever question the (undeniably tactically smart) orders they are given. In other words, the chain of command works perfectly, thanks to the battalion's immovable trust in their commander and how he has trained his officers.

Again, *Full Metal Jacket* offers a strikingly different view of American troops in combat, as do films like *The Boys in Company C* or *Apocalypse Now*, to give two other examples. As remarked in the background section, in *Full Metal Jacket* the American war machine completely breaks down, with the squad getting lost in the city and then ambushed as they change direction, soldiers disregarding their orders and shooting mindlessly at the general direction of the enemy in a state of panic, etc. *The Boys in Company C* offers a similar, darkly comic depiction of Americans in combat, albeit focusing more on the utter incompetence of their captain and the senselessness of the U.S. military policies he carries out (such as bombing a village to rack up the body count). *Apocalypse Now*, for its part, portrays the entire war as chaotic and American troops as accordingly disorganised, which is perhaps best exemplified by the nocturnal scene where the leaderless group of drugged-out black soldiers fight the enemy from the trenches.

Both *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Boys in Company C* also portray military training in a rather negative light, as does *Tigerland*, for that matter (the latter will be discussed briefly below). All three include mean drill instructors, bullying, and internal fighting among the draftees. *FMJ* especially depicts boot camp as a place where the Marine recruits are stripped of their own individual identities and brainwashed into killing machines whose sexualities, even, are reprogrammed through the fetishisation of guns. In contrast, *We Were Soldiers* offers an utterly positive depiction of military training, as we have seen in the course of this thesis. Of course, its starting point is entirely different, for it is not basic training that the film depicts, but nonetheless, the impression left on the viewer regarding military training — and thus the U.S. military in general — is far more positive.

Yet another aspect of *We Were Soldiers* which adds to its positive portrayal of the American war effort in Vietnam is the way it depicts the United States' superior technology and firepower as key reasons behind the American victory at LZ X-Ray. In the context of the history of Vietnam War cinema, this can be considered a reaffirmation of the country's military might. Indeed, in earlier films, the Americans' more advanced weapons have not always been so useful; on the contrary, it has often been the booby traps and shrewd guerrilla tactics of the enemy which have proven more effective in scenes of jungle warfare (even Rambo is so deadly precisely because he has adopted the guerrilla tactics of the enemy). Another thing worth noting is that, in some past films, the Americans have used their overwhelming firepower to questionable ends, e.g. to needlessly destroy civilian settlements. These kinds of scenes have usually served as either satirical or simply tragic commentaries on U.S. military policies in Vietnam. In *We Were Soldiers*, however, the Americans' use of their superior technology and weaponry is portrayed mainly in a positive light, the use of napalm and instances of friendly fire notwithstanding.

All in all, then, the American military and its efforts in Vietnam have rarely been presented as favourably as in *We Were Soldiers*. The one other film that stands in comparison is *The Green Berets*. Interestingly enough, *The Green Berets* and *We Were Soldiers* share other, more specific similarities as well. For example, both feature a journalist character who comes to see for himself what the war is like, and both have well-known conservative movie stars in the lead roles. Indeed, in some respects, *We Were Soldiers* feels like a spiritual successor to the infamous John Wayne film. However, the two also differ from each other in two major ways: firstly, their stances on America's Oriental enemies are complete opposites, and secondly, while *The Green Berets* was a highly political film, *We Were Soldiers* does its best to strip its story from any explicit political views.

The apolitical nature of *We Were Soldiers* is nothing new per se. As became clear in the background section, most Vietnam films made after the war have refrained from explicitly commenting on U.S. politics, even the ones that have portrayed the war in a very negative light. In fact, apart from rare exceptions like Oliver Stone's anti-war classic *Born on the Fourth of July*, the films that have been more or less openly political (both before and after the war) have usually represented conservative, even pro-war views. Consider, for example, the numerous films with anti-communist sentiments or, say, *Hamburger Hill* with its rants against the counterculture and the people in the United States who opposed the war. What makes *We Were Soldiers* seem novel, however, is the fact that, while it glorifies war in general and the Americans who died in Vietnam in particular, it does not put forth

any explicit pro-Truman Doctrine or anti-communist sentiments, nor does it exactly exploit the trope of returning veterans being maltreated by society. Thus, it is a new kind of amalgam of different elements that has not really been seen in Vietnam films before.

Of course, a huge part of this new amalgam is the manner in which the North Vietnamese are portrayed in the film. In the past, Hollywood had usually depicted the Vietnamese enemy — whether Vietcong or NVA — either as sadistic and repulsive torturers and murderers, feeding into the “Yellow Peril” stereotype, or simply as a faceless, at times even invisible “other.” Films like *The Green Berets*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* represent the former tradition, while films like *The Boys in Company C*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket* exemplify the latter. As far as mainstream American combat films go, other traditions than these two have not really existed. In other words, probably never has a major Hollywood combat film dedicated so much of its runtime and attention to the other side of the story and portrayed the United States’ enemies in Vietnam with such respect and humanity as *We Were Soldiers* does (outside the genre of combat films, though, Oliver Stone had already done a commendable job of depicting the war from the point of view of Vietnamese civilians in *Heaven & Earth*).

Finally, to finish this section, let us briefly review the other two notable American theatrical films about the Vietnam War which were released in the 2000s, Joel Schumacher’s *Tigerland* (2000) and Werner Herzog’s *Rescue Dawn* (2006). This should help round out the picture of how the conflict has been portrayed in American cinema of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Tigerland* tells the (fictional) story of Pvt. Roland Bozz (Colin Farrell), a rebellious draftee who tries to make the Army expel him while also helping others to get discharged. Unlike the previously discussed Vietnam films that include training camp sections, *Tigerland* is entirely about training and has zero scenes set in Vietnam. The film’s take on military training and the Vietnam War is extremely grim: the recruits are constantly either bullied and beaten by their drill instructor or fighting amongst themselves, and many of them break down under the pressure. The main character is against the war, repeatedly antagonises his superiors, and occasionally makes references to things like the My Lai massacre or “[killing] women and children in rice paddies.” Thus, the film continues in the anti-war tradition of *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, offering a vastly different take on its topic than *We Were Soldiers* does.

*Rescue Dawn*, on the other hand, is a story more about the universal theme of survival than about Vietnam. The film tells the true story of German-American U.S. Navy pilot Dieter Dengler (Christian Bale), who was shot down over Laos during a secret bombing mission in 1966. After crashing his plane, Dengler is captured and tortured by the Pathet Lao, then moved to a Vietcong POW camp where other American pilots are also being held. He eventually escapes and is rescued by friendly forces. *Rescue Dawn* offers a very limited view of the Vietnam War, focusing on the experience of POWs, and does not really take any stance with regard to the war. Perhaps it could be argued that the film's portrayal of Dengler's captors as rifle-toting hotheads who enjoy making him suffer might strengthen the old stereotype of the sadistic Oriental, but other than that, there is little to go on when comparing *Rescue Dawn's* portrayal of the war to earlier Vietnam films.

Together, the three films make for a diverse selection indeed. One is a universal story about the strength of the human spirit in which the Vietnam War serves merely as the backdrop, another is an anti-war film set in U.S. Army training camps, and the third is a rather traditional glorification of war and also the only one that is actually set in Vietnam. What all of this tells us is that, as of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the jury still seems to be out on how the Vietnam War should be portrayed on film — and it looks as though it might stay that way. Indeed, the Hollywood Vietnam film has practically been dead for over a decade now, with the war film genre focusing rather on America's more recent conflicts in the Middle East (along with WWII, of course).

Although coincidental, it is nonetheless fitting that *We Were Soldiers* was released only a few months after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and about a year before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. From the standpoint of the U.S. government and military, the film came out at a perfect time, as it glorifies war and paints a picture of American soldiers as heroes to be revered. But herein lies a great and tragic irony: for the Vietnam generation of Americans (i.e. baby boomers), it had been the gung-ho WWII films of John Wayne and Audie Murphy which had (in part) instilled them with such a strong sense of patriotism and desire to go to war for their country. However, during and after the Vietnam War, many of them became disillusioned by its reality and felt deceived. The cinematic portrayals of the American war effort which followed were largely critical of it and serve to this day as reminders of the country's mistakes when it came to Vietnam. Therefore, it seems quite ironic that, in 2002, a film about that very war might actually serve the same old, patriotism-inducing function for a new generation of Americans.



## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have firstly examined the history of American Vietnam War cinema, particularly how the war was portrayed in Hollywood fiction films up until the mid-1990s. To recap: Hollywood initially produced films endorsing U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, but that stopped after the controversial release of John Wayne's *The Green Berets* in 1968. For the next decade, direct portrayals of the conflict were avoided, and the war was only dealt with obliquely, for example by critiquing it allegorically through different genres or by depicting Vietnam veterans as twisted criminals or vigilantes. In 1978, the actual war finally returned to cinema screens, with new Vietnam-themed films appearing regularly until the mid-90s, after which there have been few Hollywood productions on the topic.

Most of the post-war Vietnam films that have become classics, such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, or *Born on the Fourth of July*, have portrayed the American war effort in a very negative light, essentially as aimless killing and dying without a righteous cause. However, there have also been so-called revisionist films which have been seen as attempts to justify America's involvement in Vietnam and in the global war on communism more generally — *Rambo: First Blood Part II* being perhaps the best-known example. Other films categorised as revisionist have merely focused on portraying U.S. troops in a more favourable manner, whether fighting the war in Vietnam or trying to reintegrate into society afterwards.

In addition to the film-historical account, this thesis has concerned itself with analysing what is arguably the most prominent Hollywood Vietnam film of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers*. Broadly speaking, the aim of the analysis was to investigate how the film portrays the war and its participants, i.e. the Americans and their Vietnamese (in this case North Vietnamese) enemies. The more specific themes of the analysis were chosen so as to enable meaningful comparisons between my own findings and the earlier trends of Hollywood Vietnam films discussed in section two. Hence the focus on, for example, the film's revisionist aspects like the glorification of war and the foregrounding of the bravery of American troops.

In my analysis of *We Were Soldiers*, I argued, for instance, that the character of Hal Moore is established from the start as an exceptionally capable combat leader as well as a caring father figure,

both to his children and the soldiers under his command. I also examined the construction of the character of Lieutenant John “Jack” Geoghegan, stating that the foregrounding of his noble and admirable qualities serves to instil in the viewer’s mind a positive conception of “the typical young American who fought in Vietnam.” This idea was then reinforced through further analyses of other American characters, their heroic actions in combat and unwavering fighting morale.

After analysing the film and comparing its portrayal of the American war effort to previous Vietnam films, I reached the conclusion that *We Were Soldiers* depicts U.S. troops and the U.S. military in general in a more positive light than most post-war Vietnam films have. In highlighting the bravery and glorifying the deaths of the soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam, the film clearly utilises the revisionist strategy of likening Vietnam veterans to WWII heroes. Other aspects linking the film to the revisionist strain of Vietnam films include a couple of instances of scapegoating and a reminder at the very end of the film about how returning troops were often treated with indifference.

In addition to analysing the film’s take on the American side of the story, I also delved into its portrayal of the North Vietnamese. This line of inquiry led me to the conclusion that, for all its revisionist-style qualities, *We Were Soldiers* is surprisingly respectful to America’s Oriental enemies. Indeed, the NVA are portrayed as well-organised and their commanding officer, Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu An, as a skilful tactician. Also, instead of remaining a faceless horde to be slaughtered without second thought, the North Vietnamese troops are humanised to considerable extent and the notion put forth that they are merely young men fighting bravely for their country, just like the Americans. This is an important point that sets the film apart from many of its predecessors.

All in all, *We Were Soldiers* is a rather unique blend of different elements when compared to other American films about Vietnam, and it is also clearly a product of its time. Although this was not a major point of discussion in my analysis of the film, a few closing remarks are in order regarding the film’s relation to the culture wars. Firstly, considering the film’s exaltation of traditional values through its depiction of Hal Moore as a perfect family man and devout Catholic, it is easy to see how it may have appealed to conservative audiences upon its release. The same goes for the film’s overall militaristic nature and its depiction of American fighting men as heroes. While all of this might have been commonplace a few decades earlier, or in films dealing with WWII, it is actually a rather fresh take on the Vietnam War and its era. What is especially noteworthy, however, is that the film does not acknowledge the existence of either a counterculture or an anti-war movement, which enables

it to promote a certain set of values in a non-combative manner, i.e. without haranguing against any other values. Similarly, its unilateral portrayal of American soldiers as heroes does not seem inappropriate because it does not rely on their enemies being inhuman or evil.

Indeed, the distinctly conservative sentiments at the film's core are all softened in some way. Whether or not the filmmakers have done this consciously to avoid alienating less conservative viewers is up to speculation. (Either way, this does not undercut the film's sincerely respectful treatment of the NVA.) In any case, while the end result is certainly a film that is in good taste, it is also somewhat dehistoricised, providing a view of the war and its era that differs little from what one would expect to see in a WWII film. For better or worse, the impact of the culture wars is definitely discernible in the film, as there is a careful balancing act going on between its obviously conservative sentiments and the distinctly inoffensive manner in which they are expressed.

As mentioned many times throughout this thesis, American-made Vietnam War films have been a rare occurrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps this can be read as a sign that Americans would rather forget the Vietnam debacle altogether, which in turn would seem to connote that the topic is still highly sensitive. Another possible explanation might be that, with the United States having begun its Global War on Terrorism after the events of 9/11, the studios of Hollywood have been disinclined to remind everyone what their country's global war on communism resulted in. In any case, it will be most interesting to see a new generation of filmmakers take on the topic of the Vietnam War when that inevitably happens. Hopefully, instead of merely recycling the clichés of past films, future movies will offer original perspectives on the conflict and attempt to understand its complex root causes and far-reaching effects.

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