

REPRESENTATION OF VIETNAM IN VIETNAMESE AND U.S. WAR FILMS:  
A COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF *CANH DONG HOANG*  
AND *APOCALYPSE NOW*

by  
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Title: REPRESENTATION OF VIETNAM IN VIETNAMESE AND U.S. WAR FILMS:

A COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF *CANH DONG HOANG* AND  
*APOCALYPSE NOW*

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. H. Leslie Steeves

This comparative semiotic study aims to examine and critically compare the portrayal of the Vietnam War in two award-winning films, one Vietnamese and the other American, both made in 1979: *Canh Dong Hoang* (The Wild Rice Field) and *Apocalypse Now*. This study employs semiology to examine the two films in the framework of post-colonial, ideology and hegemony theories to critically compare similarities and differences in the two films' portrayal of "the enemy," nationalism and individualism, and women, in order to understand how dominant perspectives of the times are reflected, reinforced, and challenged. In *Apocalypse Now*, the "other" is faceless, which reflects an imperialistic standpoint toward the Vietnamese people; nationalism is promoted by calling on individual suffering and sympathy; and women are diminished. *Canh Dong*

*Hoang* gives “the enemy” a more balanced depiction; nationalism is woven naturally with individualism; and the women in the film play a much more significant role.

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To Virginia.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In early 2008, the National Geographic Channel aired a documentary film about the Vietnam-United States War. This “new” documentary film raised concerns and angry reactions from many scholars and well-informed citizens of both countries because it addressed only how the War was fought. The reasons for the War and its consequences were not examined. In fact, the War with the United States cost the Vietnamese 21 years to reunify their country, more than two million dead soldiers, millions of dead civilians, and millions of war victims, including Agent Orange and landmine victims, whose numbers keep growing every day.

The War is not yet over, but these lasting issues were not mentioned in that three-hour documentary film. Since the United States and Vietnam normalized diplomatic ties in 1995 and Vietnam has integrated more into the international arena and global market, the United States is playing an increasingly important role in the development of Vietnam (it has always played a role in Vietnam’s recent history, but now, it’s more direct). Therefore, a better understanding is crucial for both countries. Studying the War is central to this understanding because of many reasons: historical, social, political, and academic.

As a citizen of Vietnam coming to the University of Oregon to do a master's degree on a U.S. government scholarship, my initial intent for my final thesis was that I would not do anything related to the Vietnam War. My puerile mind was convinced that it was now time to leave the past behind; people in my country had suffered enough; this War had been well looked at from many angles in this country; and that American people did not want to have anything to do with it any more.

I, however, was wrong. The haunting memories of the War are still a lived experience for many people I encounter both on and off campus, both in Oregon and in many major cities in the United States I have visited, such as Seattle, San Francisco, New York, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. My impression is that there remain quite a few myths about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. I have been asked by the people I met questions such as, "Do Southern people still hate Northern people?" "Can you go study abroad even if you are from North Vietnam?" "Is the war still going on there?" "Do you have any family members fighting in the War?" "Are you a communist?" Those questions do not only show their interest in and their limited understanding of the War but also trigger strong emotions in me. The feeling was particularly strong when I was treated with hostility by Southern Vietnamese people who fled the country to come here more than 30 years ago.

I realize that it is impossible for me to "leave the past behind" because the War hasn't become a past, not only to me but also to the majority of the Vietnamese. In the United States, because the media stopped talking about it doesn't mean it is over. If ordinary people still talk about it, see its consequences, and feel the loss and pain from it,

it means the War is still felt and affecting their lives. The U.S. government seemed to hastily shut down and evaded the topic, as if wanting to sweep everything underneath the carpet and pretend the War never happened. Yet, just like a wound not being treated but bandaged by many layers of fabric, it looks fine but is aching inside.

The U.S. government waged a war in Vietnam with a clear “advertised” goal of preventing communism from spreading. This War, however, has inflicted tremendous casualties and legacy to the Vietnamese people and the country, yet rendered the U.S. government embarrassment, because of not only the military defeat and economic cost, but also because of the loss of many U.S. lives. Much of the population’s bitterness in both countries hasn't been resolved. Because of the lingering legacy of the War, mutual understanding is one of the ways for the two countries to reconcile and move forward. A great deal of this mutual understanding comes from bringing the two cultures together. This realization is the major factor that led me to choose a topic about the War for my final thesis in the hope that my study, even if insignificant, would contribute to the healing that is much needed for people of both nations.

The purpose of this study is to examine and critically compare the portrayal of the Vietnam War in films from Vietnam and the United States. In order to accomplish this mission, this paper compares one Vietnamese war film – *Canh Dong Hoang* (the Wild Rice Field, a.k.a, the Abandoned Field) and one U.S. war film – *Apocalypse Now*. Both films tackle the Vietnam-United States War, were produced in the same year, 1979, and received applause from film viewers. While there has been a great deal of prior scholarship about the War and Vietnam-United States war films, little has been done to

compare the views from opposing sides in the War. The paper highlights possible differences and similarities in the two views.

Post-colonial theories and theories of hegemony and ideology are the grounding theoretical paradigm for the thesis. The study also employs visual semiology as the main method. The guiding semiotic theories are Saussure's and Peirce's notions of a relationship between the signifier and signified, Barthes' and Hall's theory of connotation and denotation, and Muffoletto's and Barthes' theory of oppositional structures. The main goal of the examination of the two popular films is to compare and contrast the way they portray Vietnam and the Vietnam War and to attempt to provide an explanation of the portrayal. This study also aims to assess how these two cultural cinematic products sustain, reinforce, and challenge the hegemonic and ideological structure of the two societies during the time they were made.

In this thesis, although I use the term "Vietnam War" to refer to the War between the United States and Vietnam in the last century to be consistent with the literature I encounter, it is important to note that the Vietnamese people call the War "the American War." The name is to distinguish this War with wars against France or China, and most importantly, because it was the War against U.S. intervention.

Another point worth mentioning is that I also use the name "Vietnam" to refer to the country. In fact, the country's name consists of two words: Viet – the type of ethnicity/people, and Nam – the South. The name Viet Nam means "the people of the South," again, to be distinguished from the Chinese people from the North. The Vietnamese language is the combination of separate, singled vowels, thus the word



“Vietnam” does not exist. However, since the French occupied the country, the French people changed it into one word in order to save money while telegraphing. Since then, the international community, especially in the United States when covering Dien Bien Phu battle, continues to name the country this way despite its inaccuracy. Although I use “Vietnam” in this thesis, my hope is in the future people will use the name Viet Nam again, as an indication of respect toward the country’s identity.

The thesis starts by presenting the context of the research, which addresses the Vietnam War, the current relationship between the two countries, the Vietnam War films and the particular social and political contexts in which the two films were made. The next chapter presents the theoretical framework and literature review. This chapter is then followed by the chapter of methodological discussion, which outlines the main theoretical paradigms and methods to be used for the examination, including the research questions. In order to facilitate the understanding of the results and discussion section, the paper provides an overview of the films, in which readers learn about the characters, plots, and several general comparisons. The results and discussion chapter deals with three major differences of *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*: the portrayal of “the enemy,” the representation of nationalism and individualism, and the depiction of women.

## CHAPTER II

### CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In this chapter, I briefly present the context for the research, which includes the Vietnam (or American War), the current relationship between Vietnam and the United States, the Vietnam War films, and the social and political context when *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* were made.

#### ***The Vietnam (or American) War***

In his book *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, Mark Taylor lays out a fairly clear and detailed timeline of the recent history of Vietnam and how the War happened. Vietnam was occupied a number of times by China over thousands of years, with the longest occupation lasting almost a thousand years. For more than 2000 years of the country's history, the longest period of peace was a little more than 200 years during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Other than that, the country has been in a war situation almost every 100 years.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French came and settled in Indochina, which includes Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The French were expelled from Indochina in 1941 by Japan, and in 1945, Japan was defeated, marking the end of World War II. Ho Chi Minh and his aides seized this moment when France was absent and Japan was pulling out of the country to declare independence. The French came back shortly after

the declaration, and the Vietnamese had no choice but to resume the war in 1946 (Truong, Q. et al., 2001). It took nine more years for the country to defeat France.

However, the peace treaties that were negotiated between France and Vietnam in 1954 were manipulated by the then-superpowers: Russia, China, and the United States. The consequence was devastating to the Vietnamese. The country was divided into two regions (while the fact is geographically, culturally, and socially speaking, Vietnam has always consisted of three distinct regions<sup>1</sup>); the North was under “control” of a communist government; the South was under the supervision of a “southern government.” Although according to the 1954 Geneva agreement the division was “temporary” and a unification election would be held in 1956, the election never happened because U.S. politicians knew too well that if it had happened, 90% of the population would have voted for reunification and Ho Chi Minh’s regime (Truong, et al., 2001).

As implied above, the U.S. government has a great deal to do with Vietnam’s history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although in the early 1940s a unit of CIA agents was helping Ho Chi Minh’s combatants fight Japan, the U.S. government did not recognize Ho Chi Minh’s newly formed government in 1945. Instead, with the influence of the Truman doctrine, the U.S. government accelerated its provision of military and economic assistance to France from 1946 to 1954, which peaked in 1953, agreeing on an “additional \$385 million in aid, making the total amount \$2 billion” in aid to France until that time (Taylor, 2003, p. ix).

With China “falling” into communism and the increasing influence of communist Russia, the United States was trying its best to prevent Vietnam from “going the same path” by backing up the South Vietnamese government – a puppet government established by the U.S. government – blocking efforts to implement the agreed election and finally sending a large number of U.S. troops to the country starting in 1965. The first group of 3,500 U.S. soldiers were sent to Da Nang, a port city in South Vietnam on March 8, 1965. From 1965 to 1974, more than three million Americans served in Vietnam, including soldiers, logistics and infrastructure workers, and thousands of military advisors.

In 1968 alone, the U.S. government spent \$100 million each day for the War, which was half the amount of money the government spent for foreign aid between 1941 and 1960. The decision to interfere in Vietnam’s struggle for independence cost about 58,000 U.S. soldiers’ lives (Taylor, 2003). The last U.S. soldier who died in Vietnam was Darwin L. Judge on the 29, April 1975. There are different estimates of the financial costs of the War to the United States, but all of them show hundreds of billions of dollars. While the loss on the U.S. side is about 58,000 lives, there were millions of Vietnamese who died because of the War, including soldiers and civilians. There have been about 3.5 million victims of Agent Orange,<sup>2</sup> the major herbicide used by the U.S. military to destroy the Vietcong’s forest shelters, which contains one of the most poisonous chemical known to humans: dioxin. This chemical was sprayed on 12% of the country’s surface.

In 1973, U.S. President Richard Nixon promised to spend \$3.5 billion to compensate the Vietnamese for the war damages caused by the U.S. military interventions. The promise has never been realized (VietnamNews, 2009). The country's environment and population were highly poisoned. Dioxin causes cancers and many other illnesses, which U.S. soldiers (and their allies such as Australians, Canadians, and Koreans) have also suffered from. This substance affects the structure of the body's cells and thus causes birth defects for generations. Victims of Agent Orange are still being born, and there are still victims of landmines (mostly children), which were dropped by U.S. airplanes and buried underground (Truong, 2001). Why did the United States government fight a war in Vietnam? It is a complicated question. Taylor answers it quite well: "America's war in Vietnam was...a consequence of fear, misunderstanding and an optimism borne initially of arrogance and later of desperation" (Taylor, 2003, p. 5).

In sum, Vietnam, an ancient, small, but resilient country in Southeast Asia, found itself caught amidst the chaos of World War II, the emergence of Communism, an explosion of war technology, and the post-colonial world divided and manipulated by superpowers. As I will argue, a story like this deserves a better depiction than what is provided by Hollywood's Vietnam War films.

### ***Current relationship between Vietnam and the United States***

Leaving behind the historical War, Vietnam and the United States normalized diplomatic relations in 1995. The two countries have signed the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) that went into effect in 2001; this agreement also ensures the U.S. government's support for Vietnam in the process of applying for membership in the

World Trade Organization. In 2000, President Clinton was the first U.S. president to pay a visit to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and in 2005, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai<sup>3</sup> visited the United States on the occasion of 10 years of diplomatic normalization.

In terms of war issues, the U.S. government insists on finding Missing in Action (MIA) soldiers. On the other hand, the Vietnamese government is requesting that the U.S. government address the issue of Agent Orange victims and landmine victims in Vietnam. Regardless of the remaining political issues, the economic ties between the two countries have developed rapidly as U.S. investors increasingly seek business opportunities in Vietnam. The United States is now said to approach the first place in foreign direct investment in the country (Thuy, 2008).

### ***The Vietnam War films***

Vietnam has made many films about the War, especially since the 1960s because the northern part of the country became a war-free zone. Films made until the late 1980s were mainly about the War because war was still the preoccupying reality for Vietnamese in this era. This is understandable because for a country suffering from wars constantly from 1858, getting over it and moving on is not an easy task. During this time, the United States also made numerous films. However, few Vietnamese know about the existence of U.S. films about the War. This is probably also the case in the United States where not many people know about Vietnam War films made by the Vietnamese.

It is understandable that films made during the late 1970s and the 1980s (such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*) were still

preoccupied with the War because at that time the War had recently ended with the defeat of the U.S. military. However, *Heaven and Earth*, which was produced in 1993, 18 years after the War ended and 20 years after the U.S. troops withdrew from the country, is still about the War and victims of war. In 2002, almost 30 years after the end of the War in Vietnam, the remake of *The Quiet American* was released, a film that attempts to tackle war issues as far back as the beginning of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the early 1950s.

Films about the Vietnam War made in the United States moved from “War is heroic” (*The Green Berets*) to “War is horrible” (*Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*). Wilson (1982) holds that the film industry in the United States shied away from the subject as the War became too controversial. However, Hollywood later turned the topic of the Vietnam-United States War into a major commercial industry as I will later discuss in the literature review.

### ***The contexts in which the two films were made***

*Canh Dong Hoang* was made within one year in 1979. The War with the United States had just ended a few years earlier, and the country was still severely devastated. The happiness of national reunification and independence had only lasted for a few years until Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime started attacking Vietnam in 1977 in the far southwestern area, killing many unarmed civilians. Subsequent assaults continued throughout the year, and finally Vietnam had to defend itself. *Canh Dong Hoang* was produced during this period of victory euphoria and state of war at the same time. Because the cinema and television in Vietnam used to be and continue to be state-owned

and funded, it could be that this film was one of the attempts by the government to mobilize the population, already weary of continuing wars, to go to war with Cambodia.

In the United States in the 1970s, the Watergate scandal undermined the authority of the president. Demonstrations against the U.S. intervention in Vietnam took place frequently, yet the loss of the Vietnam War discouraged many Americans. The oil crisis affected not only the United States but other countries as well, which caused Americans to question the nation's administration. It can be said that the U.S. government was undergoing major pressures from its own citizens and the state power was tested. *Apocalypse Now* was made during this period and thus it was possible for Director Francis Ford Coppola to employ a more critical approach to the representation of the War. This historical and political context also enabled him to enjoy much power of questioning "the authority" by threatening that the U.S. government would appear "ridiculous to American and world public" (in *Apocalypse Now*) if he did not receive sufficient military assistance from the government (Suid, 1977). This will be discussed in depth in later chapters.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup>The country was initially formed in the North in the Red River Delta several thousands of years ago. Archaeological evidence shows the first formal formation of a nation-state administration about 2600 B.C. The population gradually moved southward in search for new lands and resources, forming the Center and the South. Part of the central area of the country used to belong to Champa kingdom, which was eventually conquered by the Vietnamese and has long become part of the country's territory. Each region has its own characteristics and dialects, which the Vietnamese recognize easily. The North is known for its long tradition; the Center is famous for the people's diligence against frequent natural disasters; and the South is known for the easy-goingness of the people and the abundance of resources.

<sup>2</sup> This number does not account for thousands of U.S. soldiers who have also been severely affected by Agent Orange.

<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese names place the family name first; thus his name in American order would be Khai V. Phan.



### CHAPTER III

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *Theoretical framework*

Theories of hegemony and ideology, post-colonial studies, and neorealism constitute the theoretical framework for this thesis.

##### *Hegemony and ideology*

Critics of capitalism such as Marx and Althusser argue that capitalism depends on unequal social classes or strata, of which ideology and hegemony are inherent characteristics. Wealthy minority rulers govern the majority through the state apparatuses. The state secures its ideological and hegemonic powers by employing direct and coercive forces militarily and by producing consent through ideological apparatuses.

... the “reproduction of the submission to the ruling ideology” requires the *cultural institutions*, the *church* and the *mass media*, the *political apparatuses* and the overall management of the state, which, in advanced capitalism, increasingly takes all these other, “non-productive” apparatuses into its terrain.” (Hall, 1977, p. 395)

While direct forces are obvious and easy to observe, indirect ruling of the state and dominant class is much more subtle and hard to challenge. It takes the forms of traditions, customs, religious beliefs, and most importantly, common sense. This is the

common sense that renders the hegemony and ideology invisible because it enables us to think, talk, reason, and experience without being aware and conscious;

... common sense does not require reasoning, argument, logic, thought: it is spontaneously available, thoroughly recognizable, widely shared. It *feels*, in deed, as if it has always been there, the sedimented, bedrock wisdom of “the race,” the content of which has changed hardly at all with time... It is precisely its “spontaneous” quality, its transparency, its “naturalness,” its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time, “spontaneous,” ideological and unconscious. (Hall, 1977, p. 235)

Also, because common sense does not require reasoning, logic ,or thought, you “cannot learn through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into existing scheme of things” (p. 235). This common sense helps maintain the rule of the state without challenge because in most cases, the mass live and experience but do not question the way they live or what they experience. Brecht’s story “If sharks were men” illustrates this well. Through their upbringing and education, little fish no longer question their submission and sacrifice to the sharks. For them, swimming into the sharks’ jaws is common sense, which everyone knows and everyone does.

There would, of course, also be schools in the big boxes. In these schools the little fish would learn how to swim into the sharks' jaws. They would need to know geography, for example, so that they could find the big sharks, who lie idly around somewhere. The principal subject would, of course, be the moral education of the little fish. They would be taught that it would be the best and most beautiful thing in the world if a little fish sacrificed itself cheerfully and that they all had to believe the sharks, especially when the latter said they were providing for a beautiful future. (Brecht, n.d.)

In the case of one country, the little fish are the majority, and the sharks are, of course, the ruling class. Without questioning the “common sense,” the majority live and work under the suppression of the rulers yet think they are free. This story can also be applied in the world context where richer, more militarily powerful countries dominate weaker and smaller ones. In the colonial era, this is more obvious and easy to detect. European colonization of much of the world betrayed the values Western European countries advocated: democracy, self-determination, civil society, state, equality (Shome & Hedge, 2002, p. 254), and this was the reason for the independence movement that liberated many colonized countries in the last century.

In the post-colonial period under capitalism, the colonization is much more subtle, and the U.S. government “positions itself as the new world of democracy, and space for the production of new and liberatory forms of selfhood” (p. 255). In the world where the United States sets the capitalist order, it is hard to recognize the exploiting forces as people are no longer colonized, their hands no longer tied behind their backs, and the foreign presence not always military. Like little fish that have their own environment, schools, and food, people have their physical freedom but they no longer question authority. Thus, it is common sense that sustains dominant ideology and hegemony. Curtin (1995) argued, “Ideology also is not hidden or concealed, but openly manifest within society: what is hidden is the foundation of ideology...” (p. 5).

People are convinced they are acting according to their own free will, but little do they know, they are swimming freely in a small pond, and there is a power that supervises that pond often without their knowing. As Hall (1977) put it,

the operation of one class upon another in *shaping and producing consent*... is rendered invisible: this exercise of ideological class domination is dispersed through the fragmentary agencies of a myriad individual wills and opinions, separate powers; this fragmentation of opinion is then *reorganized* into an imaginary coherence in the mystical unity of “the consensus,” into which free and sovereign individuals and their wills “spontaneously” flow. In this process, that consent-to hegemony whose premises and preconditions are constantly structuring the sum of what individuals think, believe and want, is represented, in appearance, as a freely given and “natural” coming-together into a *consensus* which legitimates the exercise of power. (p. 339)

Once the state establishes its dominance and produces “the ideological common ground, or a degree of collective consciousness,” its ruling is the relatively secured, but it is never “fixed or uncontested.” Rather, its hegemony is “historically situated,” “constantly formed and reformed by social practices” (Steeves, 1997, 2008). Because ideology and hegemony are constantly negotiated in people’s everyday lives, mass media and popular culture play an important role in this process as they “*bring together* that which has selectively represented and selectively classified” and construct an *acknowledged order* (Hall, 1977, p. 342).

In this process, however, subordinate groups might find effective ways to challenge and change the existing hegemonic order (Steeves, 1997, p. 5). As Hall (1977) argued, “...room must be found for other voices, for ‘minority’ opinions, for ‘contrary’ views, so that a shape, to which all reasonable men can begin to attach themselves, emerges.” Therefore, while we can find signs of hegemonic domination, we can also detect signs of resistance in many cultural, educational, or religious items. Not surprisingly, those signs are present in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*. As it will be discussed in depth later in the thesis, the two films both sustain in their own

way the given cultural political order, yet demonstrate oppositional views to this very order.

Post-colonial studies

Because Vietnam was colonized by France for about 80 years and invaded by the United States for the subsequent 20 years, a theoretical framework based on post-colonial theories is appropriate for this comparative study. Post-colonial studies started when Said (1978) revisited the notion of Orientalism and how the Orient has been shaped, conceptualized, and represented by the West to match with the West's desired understanding and use of the Orient. On the one hand, the Orient was *made* to be Oriental (Said, 1978, p. 6). On the other hand, the Orient influenced the European material civilization and culture; to a great extent, the Orient "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (p. 1, 2), as being made into the "other."

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other (p. 2)... as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imaginary, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. (Said, 1978, p. 6)

Said also employed Gramsci's notion of hegemony in his *Orientalism*, stating that it is "an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West (p. 7). He also argued that it is hegemony that gives the West "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans,... reiterating European

superiority over Oriental backwardness.” This remark will later be discussed in depth in the portrayal of Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*.

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony and quite accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Pankkar’s classic *Asia and Western dominance*. The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – *made* Oriental. (Said, 1978, p. 5,6)

Other post-colonial studies scholars further conceptualized the concept of post-colonialism. According to Shome and Hegde (2002), post-colonial scholarship theorizes “the problematics of colonization and decolonization.” This scholarship is also suitable for this thesis because it is “interventionist and highly political... it attempts to undo (and redo) the historical structures of knowledge production that are rooted in various histories and geographies of modernity” (p.250). Post-colonial studies have also examined how media and other texts have included dominant and oppositional perspectives and how media reinforce the existing hegemony while incorporating interests of subordinate classes into the dominant view (p.258).

In this study, post-colonial theories form the ground for examining Vietnamese representation in Western media (in this case, it is the cinematic representation in *Apocalypse Now*) and expressions of resistance against the First World from a Third World country (Vietnam’s *Canh Dong Hoang*). In the case of the former, a close study of the representation of the Vietnamese through the lens of a Westerner<sup>1</sup> reveals how this cinematic item reinforces and challenges the post-colonial hegemony and ideology. In the

case of the latter, it is the opposite. *Canh Dong Hoang* was produced in the cinematic movement called “Third World cinema,” which, according to Shohat and Stam (1994), attempted to rewrite colonial history (p. 249).

This movement first started after the independence of India from Britain in 1947 and the Chinese Revolution in the late 1940s and blossomed after Vietnam’s Dien Bien Phu victory in 1954, which put an end to the country’s 80-year occupation by France. Since then, many films were produced during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in Africa, Asia and South America. Many of those Third World films “conduct a struggle on two fronts, at once esthetic and political, synthesizing revisionist historiography with formal innovation” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 251). During this period, films played an important role in the independence struggles of the Third World nations against Western colonizers in the sense that they did not only mobilize the Third World population to fight for freedom but also redefined their own identity.

In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, Third World and minoritarian filmmakers have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their own images, spoken their own voices. It is not that their films substitute a pristine “truth” for European “lies,” but that they propose counter-truths and counter-narratives informed by an anti-colonist perspective, reclaiming and reaccentuating the events of the past in a vast project of remapping and renaming. (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 249)

If post-colonial studies provides a theoretical framework for *Canh Dong Hoang*, *Apocalypse Now* was produced in the wake of neorealism.

### Neorealism

Neorealism in film came to existence in Italy in during and after World War II as a form of resistance against fascism. Because of the war situation, Italian filmmakers had to resort to non-professional actors/actresses and make use of natural settings. Neorealism became a popular movement in the 1950s and 1960s, not only in Italy, but was welcomed in United States and France (Shiel, 2006, p. 5).

Although it was a movement, it was not an organized movement. André Bazin, the most famous critic of neorealism, contributed to developing a theory of neorealism and promoting its application worldwide (Shiel, 2006, p. 9). However, “even among upholders of neorealism... there is much debate about definitions, rules, and influences” (Marcus, 1986, p. 21). Some of the characteristics of neorealism are, nonetheless, agreed among film critics, such as the preference for location filming, the use of non professional actors, the avoidance of ornamental mise-en-scène, a preference for natural light, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, the continuity of time and space (Shiel, 2006, and Marcus, 1986). These are common traits manifested in many neorealist films. However, a neorealist film does not have to employ all of them.

While Shiel emphasizes on “authentic human experience and interaction” (p. 13) of neorealist films, Marcus underlines active viewer involvement, and social criticism (p. 22).

Neorealism is first and foremost a moral statement... whose purpose was to promote a true objectivity – one that would force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the “others,” be they persons or things... this united filmmakers... dissolving their petty stylistic differences into basic



agreement on the larger issues of human concerns and general worldview (Marcus, 1986, p. 23).

Apart from theories of ideology and hegemony, post-colonial studies, and neorealism, film semiotics also constitutes part of the theoretical paradigm for this study. Semiotics is, however, also considered a method. Therefore, a discussion of semiotics will be presented in chapter IV – methodological discussion.

### ***Literature review***

A number of studies have dealt with the topic of Vietnam in films. The many studies include analyses such as: U.S. myth and national inspiration (Watson, 2007); recreation and distortion of historical events (Taylor, 2003; Wilson, 1982); actual battles and military strategies; strategic, social, and political reasons for the U.S. loss; blaming “the left” for buying into “false casualty reports and deceptions” (McAdams, 2002); gender representation (Jeffords, 1990); disabled Vietnam veterans (Norden, 1990); the relationship between men and women through the war turbulence (Bates, 1990); opinions of Americans about Vietnam reflected in Hollywood films (Rollins, 2008); gritty realism (Litchy & Carroll, 2008); symbolic nihilism (Palmer, 1990); technology (Berg & Hall, 1990), and rehabilitation of Vietnam veterans (Haines, 1990).

In these writings there is a common thread: the authors rarely mention how Vietnam and the Vietnamese people are depicted. It’s all about Americans. “As a consequence, initial scrutiny of the Vietnam war by Americans had not much to do with history. But everything to do with being an American” (Gilman & Smith, 1990, p. xiii). Even when the authors of these studies discuss the portrayal of “the other side,” they

focus mainly on war aspects. They rarely question whether Vietnam should be portrayed in a different way than as merely a battlefield in films.

Yet in a few cases, authors argue that Hollywood's Vietnam films do not provide a fair picture of the War and the Vietnamese or that the films had wrong factual scenes. Dittmar and Michaud (1991), introducing the book *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, state that the book's critical essays address "the failure of most films to raise the question of what got us into Vietnam in the first place; the failure of most films to address the consequences of the war for the people of Vietnam" (p. 12). Wilson's *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (1982) takes a critical viewpoint toward Hollywood's Vietnam films, stating that many books and films "have simply obscured the reality of the war: its origins, its reasons, its consequences" (p. 6).

According to Wilson, the films fail to cultivate the Vietnamese tragedy: "they do not even so much as suggest that the Vietnamese might have suffered too," and "Hollywood has derealized the war by packaging and selling a simplistic, sentimental, soap opera of America in Vietnam" (1982, pp. 80-81).

Among the films studied in this book, the author opined that *The Quiet American*, (1958) as "Hollywood's first and unsuccessful, venture into the subject, provides an extreme example of distortion" by neutering "the English novelist's attack on American involvement in Vietnam." Furthermore, *The Green Berets* "demonstrates another Hollywood simplification of the war: the cowboys and Indians, good versus evil melodrama" (Wilson, 1982, p. 80). The latter, according to Wilson,

relies on the same clichés, the same one-dimensional characters, and the same Manichean struggle between ‘the Communists’ and the heroic Americans... (W)hat is disturbing is that many later, more sophisticated Vietnam films fail to portray the war in any more depth. (p. 80)

To illustrate, Wilson analyzed three successful Vietnam movies (in terms of box-office statistics): *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *Coming Home*, while being the least controversial, “degenerates into the soap opera love story between Luke and Sally,” the two main characters, (Wilson, 1982, p. 83). “How do we make it okay? How do we come to terms with Vietnam?” become the questions posed by the film. Unfortunately, director Hal Ashby cannot finally produce an answer to that crucial question” (Wilson, 1982, p. 83).

If *Coming Home* is the “safest” film about the war, *The Deer Hunter* is “probably the most controversial of all Vietnam movies” and “elicited angry responses from leftist reviewers who found it racist and distasteful” (Wilson, 1982, p. 84). Wilson holds that this film distorted what happened in Vietnam (p. 88), and he found the director’s intention questionable:

Cimino has publicly stated that he did not intend to make a “Vietnam film” or a “political film.”... To take this statement seriously one would have to be very foolish, for how could a director make a movie about a subject as emotionally charged as Vietnam and avoid political significance? (Wilson, 1982, p. 84)

Among the three films, Wilson devotes much of his work to *Apocalypse Now*. He argues that despite its shortcomings, such as “the surrealistic third of the film” and its over-reliance by the director on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “this movie provides the most powerful cinematic portrait of the war to date” and “portrays the effects of the war

on the Vietnamese people” (1982, pp. 88-89). However, here Wilson also fails to address the question of in what way *Apocalypse Now* “derealized the war by packaging and selling a simplistic, sentimental, soap opera of American in Vietnam,” as he stated earlier.

Of many scholarly writings about Vietnam war films, Cawley (1990) presents perhaps the most inclusive and critical argument regarding the distortion of the Vietnam War in Hollywood films. In his critical essay, he presents findings of falsifications in the over-emphasis on the individual: “Americans admire heroes who act alone, and they are encouraged in this by movies to a ridiculous degree.” He also critiques the myth that Vietnam was still holding MIAs and in combat and the unrealistic portrayal of war tactics. “Acting alone” is played out, according to Cawley, in films such as: *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Coming Home*.

Regarding MIAs, *Rambo* deals with the myth that there were U.S. soldiers held by the Vietnamese. This film is described by Cawley as “militarist stupidity” (1990, p. 72). The author also argued that *Rambo* presented “the doctrine of restrained ferocity,” which holds that “the United States fights according to rules, while its opponents don’t,” thus diminishing the Vietnamese people’s combat capability and civility (1990, p. 70).

Cawley laments the fact that the Vietnamese people are underrepresented, or simply ignored in the war films. If they are ever mentioned, they are reduced to “gooks,” or simply “them”; they appear in non-combat roles such as “laundresses and whores and barbers...” (p. 78), and their stories or perspectives are not addressed. Unfortunately, the

author does not elaborate this point by providing supporting evidence in those films, only a brief observational statement. However, his overall argument is quite strong:

And, of course, there are the Vietnamese. It would seem lopsided if the films kept focusing exclusively on our story. Will we keep thinking the tragedy is that of the invader, of his losses, of his painful self-knowledge, his loss of innocence, his recognition of limits? This suits the national character so depressingly well. It would be interesting to take other lives into account. There should be scenes about the little circle of laundresses and whores and barbers and spies that the American troops know, who were all of Vietnam most Americans ever knew. (Cawley, 1990, pp. 78-79)

Few writers, such as those mentioned above, recognize the flawed picture of Vietnam and the War provided by Hollywood films. In these few cases, the image of “the other side” is often mentioned very briefly in several sentences or a few paragraphs.

Cawley is one of the few who attempts to provide an explanation of this distortion, which, he argues, is based on U.S. culture – the culture of not wanting to know. However, Cawley does not explain this in detail. He also fails to consider other factors that can help explain, such as political and economic factors.

Moreover, while many studies have looked at various aspects of U.S. war films picturing the Vietnam War, gender has been neglected. U.S. women played a significant role in the War, not only by being the caretakers and the source of emotional support, but also by being social and political activists. However, this underrepresentation of women has not been looked at in U.S. scholarship.

To conclude, studies of the presentation of the Vietnam War in U.S. films deal mostly with the U.S. side. Apart from the missing pieces mentioned above, we need to also acknowledge that in Vietnam war films, perspectives of other people are often not

taken into consideration; government and political involvement is not addressed; the history and culture of Vietnam is not presented; the Vietnamese people have no “face,” and the reason why they fought is never mentioned. In the few cases in which the perspectives of the Vietnamese are taken into consideration, the picture presented is not complete. As Woodman put it: “Although this film (*Apocalypse Now*) does examine the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective, it does not focus on America’s opponents in the war, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong” (2003, abstract).

Although most scholarship in the United States on the representation of Vietnam in U.S. war films has not focused on the incomplete portrayal of the country, the War, and the people, there have been even fewer studies that compare the presentation of the War from both sides, if none at all. Westrup (2006) attempts to compare some Vietnamese films and some American films representing the Vietnam War, in which she utilizes both *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now*. This is, however, a journal, not a substantial study; and the two films are used among other films; they are not compared directly with each other. On the other hand, Vietnamese filmmakers have produced quite a few films about the War, including various types from movies to documentaries. Yet Vietnamese scholars have also neglected this domain: How is the War portrayed by U.S. filmmakers, and is that portrayal similar or different? Therefore, a comparative study is necessary and of scholarly benefit to academia on both sides.

This study compares *Apocalypse Now*, produced by Americans, and *Canh Dong Hoang* (The Wild Rice Field), produced by Vietnamese. Many have written about *Apocalypse Now*. Almost all of the writings mentioned above included this film.

*Apocalypse Now* received wide praise from the audience and many analyses and comments in the United States after its release in 1979, in a way similar to *Canh Dong Hoang*, which was released in the same year and received the highest prize in Moscow's International Film Festival. However, this study is the first to compare these two famous movies in the Vietnam War film scholarship, thus contributing a new angle to look at the domain.

### ***Research questions***

As indicated above, most scholarship of Vietnam war films does not deal with how Vietnam and the Vietnamese people are represented. In a few cases, if scholars mention the misrepresentation and the lack of the Vietnamese representation, they fail to address the issue in detail. Plenty of films have also been made by the Vietnamese about the War; however, little has been done to compare the portrayal of the War by the two countries. Therefore, my thesis focuses on these issues.

My main research question is: What are the similarities and differences in the way *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now* represent the War? More specifically, I ask:

- How are Vietnamese and Americans portrayed; in other words, how is “the enemy” represented in the two films?
- How are nationalism and individualization conveyed in the two films?
- How are women represented in these two films?

There are many aspects to be considered when comparing two cinematic items; and as mentioned above, this study employs semiology as the main method, which allows texts and signs to be examined closely from various angles. However, I choose the above

aspects that likely differentiate the two because to some extent, they were made by people from two opposite sides of a war. It is important to study how the portrayal of the “enemy” differs because in a war film there is always the depiction of “us” and “them.” It is particularly interesting to study the portrayal of “the enemy” in *Apocalypse Now*, because in this film the familiar war convention, in which “us” is the hero and “them” is the villain, no longer works. Similarly, it is also interesting to see how the Vietnamese portrays the aggressors after defeating them. Throughout their thousands of years of history, they are known to be quite forgiving toward the invaders, and very often after each victory, the Vietnamese people would be the first to hold out their hand for reconciliation (Truong, 2001).

Most importantly, considering the era where the two films were made, it is important to examine how *Canh Dong Hoang* depicts “us” and the “other” as an attempt to assert Vietnamese identity in a post-colonial world. It is equally important to study how the United States – a superpower, views its opponent, especially when the opponent is a small, poor, third world nation that defeated the superpower. Moreover, it is particularly necessary to compare the two depictions because this seems to be one of the major flaws in the United States’ Vietnam War films literature that more often than not focuses on “us” and ignore “them.”

Generally, nationalism is a often strong element in Vietnamese war films, and individualism in American war films. The media in Vietnam have always been state-owned since the day a democratic Vietnam was established in 1945. Therefore, it is understandable all filmic products are supposed to support the nationhood (which means



the state), especially in the wartime. At the same time, they need to be personalized enough for the Vietnamese people to relate to, otherwise the propaganda purposes wouldn't be realized. Therefore, it is of importance to examine how nationalism and individualism are conflated in *Canh Dong Hoang*. Equally significantly, nationalism and individualism should be compared and contrasted with those in *Apocalypse Now*, a cinematic item produced in a so-called democracy where everyone is supposed to be free to express him/herself. It is interesting to see how nationalism and individualism in *Apocalypse Now* are reflected and exploited, especially when the film is about a complex yet infamous event in United States' history.

Apart from studying the portrayal of "the enemy" and nationalism/individualism, it is important to see how women are depicted in the two films. From my observation and academic knowledge, women in the Vietnam and the United States are treated differently. Women in the United States enjoy more personal freedom than their Vietnamese counterparts do, yet they are discriminated in professional life. Although the Vietnamese women have enjoyed the popular praise for their talents and strength in times of war, they are confined within the patriarchal order that the country adopted from China more than a thousand years ago, both in their private and professional life. The question is, therefore, if they are also treated differently in the films.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> Coppola is Italian American, but Americans are also often considered Western because the term often implies belong to the developed world or the First world.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

As discussed in the literature review, the Vietnam War and the defeat of the U.S. military have been closely examined by journalists, historians, politicians, and scholars of different fields. A quick search in the University of Oregon library database with the key word “Vietnam” shows how the Vietnam topic is mainly approached. Apart from the U.S. government’s official documents concerning human rights in other countries (including Vietnam), most of the materials available on the library database are about the Vietnam War. A search in the database on Vietnam films renders the result that most of the films made about Vietnam in the United States and by Americans are about the War. I have not found any films that only depict Vietnam without the war elements. Films not about the war have only been made by non-Americans.

I choose to examine films because films can have a powerful impact on the public because of their visual and sound effects. Film texts are accumulations of signs. The study of signs is complex because the meaning of signs vary depending on how they are perceived and interpreted. As Rose puts it:

there are three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences... each of these sites has three

different aspects... that can contribute to a critical understanding of images: technological, compositional, social. (Rose, 2007, p. 13)

This study is more complex because the signs are a combination of words, images, and sounds. Moreover, the nature of the research itself is complicated because it examines a controversial event in recent world history: the Vietnam War. Therefore, the examination of the films cannot be accomplished without analyzing the political, economic, and historical contexts in which the war occurred and in which the films were produced.

Choosing the texts for visual semiotics required careful scrutiny. Although semiological analysis emphasizes mostly aspects of data analysis, “equal care must be given to the text selected. The researcher must choose text that can be profitably decentered to reveal the larger cultural implications of its production...” (Curtin, 1995, p. 21). I chose to study *Apocalypse Now*, the third highest grossing U.S. film about the war, with gross revenues of \$83,471,511 in the United States only (“Box Office Mojo,” n.d.). This film received much criticism among both academics and the public as it “might be categorized as both a prowar movie and an antiwar movie in that the film’s cinematic and political ambiguity both conceals and reveals a national ambivalence toward the Vietnam War” (Tomasulo, 1990, p. 147). A search on the Film & Television Literature Index, MLA International Bibliography, and Communication and Mass Media Complete databases with the key term “Apocalypse Now” results in hundreds of hits, including writings in other languages such as Finnish, Swedish, and French, showing how popular this film was.

Interestingly, at the same time as *Apocalypse Now* was released, the Vietnamese film *Canh Dong Hoang* (The Wild Rice Field), picturing the war in South Vietnam, won the Moscow International Film Festival's highest prize. This film also received much public acclaim and won a number of the most prestigious prizes in Vietnam. It is worth comparing these two films given their simultaneity, quality, and popularity among the two "blocks" during the Cold War period.

This comparative study uses semiology as the main method and theory paradigm. The guiding concepts are Saussure's and Peirce's of a relationship between the signifier and signified; Barthes' and Hall's notions of connotation and denotation; Muffoletto's and Barthes' theory of oppositional structures; and Hall's concepts of dominant codes, ideology, and myth. The paper follows closely the method outlined by Rose in Chapter 5 of her book *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2007).

The study also involves a great amount of translation because the two films are made in their native languages. Because it is impossible to obtain a copy of *Canh Dong Hoang* with English subtitles, I translated all the conversations in this film into English, which means the English citations of *Canh Dong Hoang* in this study are my version of translations. Many quotes, stories, and other materials were also translated. Although I tried my best to maintain the true meaning of the language, it is important to note that there might be variations when it comes to subtle use of phrases or idioms.

### ***Semiology theories***

According to Lapsley and Westlake (1988), semiology (or semiotics) is one of the major films theories that include psychoanalysis, realism or the avant-garde. Lapsley and

Westlake emphasize on Peirce's and Saussure's studies of signs and languages, their analyses of signifiers and signifieds, codes, and ideology. Other film scholars, such as Peter Wollen, adopted Peirce's take on signs to point out that "cinema operates with all three categories of sign: index (by virtue of being the effect of the photographed real, icon (through sound and image) and symbol (in that it uses speech and writing)" (Lapsley and Westlake, 1988, p. 36). Barthes and Hall also contributed to film semiotics by furthering the role of ideology.

The following section explores the concepts of film semiotics, such as signifier and signified, oppositional structure, connotation and denotation, and dominant codes and dominant ideology.

#### Signifier and signified

Saussure examined "signs" in his 1959 book *Course in General Linguistics* in which he stated that there are two elements of a sign: signifier and signified. "I propose to retain the word sign to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* and *signifier*" (Saussure, 1966, p. 67).

Although Saussure was mostly concerned with language, his notion of the relationship between the signified and signifier plays an essential role in semiotics in general. According to Saussure, this relationship is arbitrary; in other words, what is signified is not necessarily what the signifier conveys. This was then explored further by Peirce.

Peirce adopted Saussure's notion of sign/signifier/signified, but he added *interpretant* (mental idea; Peirce, 1932) to Saussure's elements of signs. The *interpretant*

is the idea provoked in a person's mind by the sign. Therefore Peirce's model is more flexible and complex because it takes into account the interpretation of the audience.

### Oppositional structures

As Muffoletto (1994) explained, "meaning is derived in terms of 'this is not that'." This is also the logic behind meaning,..." (as cited in Moriarty, 2005, p. 230). Barthes (1968) examined the oppositional structures in his work *Elements of Semiology* (pp. 71-82) by classifying oppositions in semiology into various categories such as privative oppositions, equipollent oppositions, semiological oppositions or binarism. Moriarty summarizes this as follow:

... to define something you state what category it belongs to, and then you delimit the definition by indicating what isn't included. The oppositional structures contribute to meaning based on the same logic – you can understand "pretty" only by understanding "ugly." So a sign, particularly a visual sign, defines what something is, but also what it isn't. (Moriarty, 2005, p. 231)

The oppositional structures approach is important in my comparative study of the two films. By studying what is shown in those films, I can also point out what is not.

### Connotation and denotation

Barthes (1968) and Hall (1999) extended the concepts of signified and signifier by adding the notion of *connotation* and *denotation*.

Connotation, being itself a system, comprises signifiers, signifieds, and the process which unites the former to the latter (signification)... The signifiers of connotation, which we shall call connotators,... are made up of signs... of the denoted system... The units of the connoted system do not necessarily have the same size as those of the denoted system. (Barthes, 1968, p. 91)

Denotation is the direct and literal meaning of objects or signs. It is mostly descriptive or representative. Connotation, on the other hand, is the interpretive meaning of the object or sign, made up of subjective perceptions of the viewer. According to Moriarty (2005), as examining Barthes' semiology, "connotation reflects cultural meanings, mythologies, and ideologies. A connotative meaning is the 'cultural baggage' attached to or associated with the object" (p. 231).

*Dominant codes and dominant ideology*

Dominant codes and dominant ideology are the key terms in visual semiology. According to Rose (2007, p. 94), "A code is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people." Hall (1980, p. 134, as cited in Rose, 2007, p. 95) stated, "At the connotative level, we must refer, through the codes, the other orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology," because codes "contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society." Hall described such ideologies as "metacodes" or "dominant codes."

Curtin (1995) examined ideology thoroughly based on Hall's and others' work such as that of Althusser's, emphasizing the relationship between ideology and language (ideology exists through language), and between ideology and hegemony (hegemony works through ideology).

Certain ideological domains will be fully inscribed ideologically in one social formation, thoroughly articulated in a complex field of ideological signs, while others will remain relatively "empty" and undeveloped. Rather than speaking of such relations as "having a meaning" we must think of language as *enabling things to mean*. (Hall, 1977, p. 329)

The process of “enabling things to mean,” according to Hall (1977), is an “encoding” process that translates “real events into symbolic forms” (p. 343). Assessing the relationship between the media and ideology, Hall called the media “ideological apparatuses” that play the role of signifying agents (1982, p. 64) that select preferred codes to be represented (1977, p. 343), and in most cases, preferred codes are dominant codes. This is precisely how the media (including films) exercise their ideological roles, and thus sustain existing hegemony. As ideology and hegemony are negotiated in people’s everyday lives, dominant codes are not fixated, as Hall (1982) argued, “meaning was not determined by the structure of reality itself, but conditional on the work of signification being successfully conducted through a social practice” (p. 77). “There are significantly ways in which events... can be encoded” (Hall, 1977, p. 343) and “the meaning of an event may be reported to favor the dominant ideology while including some views of subordinate groups” (Steeves, 1997, p. 5).

Concerning media producers, “the professional ideologies are unconscious, subverted as routine practice, news institution. They instead subconsciously operate only within the limited range of dominant ideology, which permits a narrow diversity of meaning and interpretations but not alternative readings” (Curtin, 1995, p. 6). In the case of film, the choice of plots, characters, and discourses always reflects this ideological and hegemonic negotiation.

In the study of signs, “myth” is of important as it is also directly related to ideology in the sense that there are various ways to interpret myth. According to Curtin (1995), “Hall’s notion of how ideology is conveyed is similar to Barthes’s (1973)



explication of myth,” remarking that Barthes puts the accent on the masking and connotative powers of myth, the polysemic interpretations that allow ideological power to be realized.

### ***Visual semiotics***

Moriarty (2005) presents a comprehensive summary of visual semiotics. Moriarty sums up various aspects of visual semiotics such as the definition of sign, the sign relationship, the theory of signification, codes, and interpretation.

While Moriarty’s work is a summary of theories concerning visual semiotics, Rose (2007) outlines a systematic method guide to do semiology in her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. Visual semiotics (or semiology) is, according to Rose, used when studying a small number of texts. Hence, it is useful to examine these two films. Moreover, regarding the complex circumstances surrounding the films, the method suits the study best because it is not simply descriptive, as compositional interpretation appears to be; nor does it rely on quantitative estimations of significance, as content analysis at some level has to. Visual semiotics offers a range of tools for looking at images carefully, tracing how they work in relation to broader systems of meaning. It is centrally concerned with the ways in which social difference is created, i.e., the social effects of meaning (Rose, 2007).

Rose suggests a critical approach to visual culture. One of the suggestions is to “take images seriously.” It is equally important when doing semiology to “think about the

social conditions and effects of visual objects,” and “consider your own way of looking at images” (Rose, 2007, p. 12). The method Rose suggests consists of the following steps:

- decide what the signs are;
- decide what they signify ‘in themselves’;
- think about how they relate to other signs ‘in themselves’;
- then explore their connections (and the connections of the connections) to wider systems of meaning, from codes to ideologies;
- and then return to the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology. (Rose, 2007, p. 98)

### *Self-reflexivity*

Being self-reflexive is important in doing qualitative research. It is crucial that the researcher is aware and conscious of the surroundings, of the academic and personal positions when doing the research. Barthes was right when emphasizing the “situation of writing” (Barthes, 1982), Rose likewise argues that “watching your favourite movie on a DVD... with a group of mates is not the same as studying it for a research project” (Rose, 2007, p. 12).

A semiological study is an insightful examination of texts, albeit visual or written. The researcher does not attempt to draw conclusions that can be applied to a larger group, but rather to individual experiences when studying a particular text. As Sontag (1994, p. 14) put it: “The importance of such criticism is to make ‘our own experiences... more, rather than less real to us” (as cited in Manghani, 2003, p. 34).

Therefore, while I examine, interpret, and decode texts and signs, it is essential for me to be aware of my personal and academic background and how it may play a role in this examination. As Bal argues, it is necessary to reflect on how the researcher, as a critic of visual images, are looking at them (in Rose, 2007, p. 12). My pre-perceptions and personal judgmental attitudes will affect the analysis. I should be very aware of my position doing the study as a Vietnamese scholar, earning a master's degree in the United States on the U.S. Government's funding; as somebody who was strongly opposed to the War, opposed to the U.S. invasion, supportive of the unification of the nation, and has strong emotional reactions to the war in general. I simply cannot ignore those factors. As Rose puts it, "...non-reflexivity, I think, cannot be part of critical visual methodology" (2007, p. 104).

### ***Limitations of method***

The main challenge of doing semiology is to achieve the balance between direct descriptions of the texts and ideological/interpretive meanings beneath the surface. Semiology concerns particular examples of texts, and employs techniques to look at them carefully. Thus, examining these two films requires a great deal of work. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the social, economic, and ideological interpretations of these films, i.e. we can't study them in an isolated context or environment. This task equally requires time and work. Within the limit of a master's thesis, it is challenging to balance these two aspects.

Similarly, researchers doing semiology may fail to address what are the important details that need to be looked into and what are not. This debate was presented in

Manghani's essay (2003) as the author examined the debate between Bal and Elkins regarding subsemiotics. Elkins criticizes Bal for paying too much attention to details, whereas Bal holds that we should be paying strong attention to seemingly meaningless details because subsemiotic details are what push an initial passive gaze into dynamic activity of the viewer.

Another limitation of doing semiology is the complicated set of terms. As Rose stated: "Semiology is conceptually elaborate. Each semiological term carries substantial theoretical baggage with it, and there is a tendency for each semiological study to invent its own analytical terms" (Rose 2007, p. 78). This complexity can cause great confusion for researchers.

Semiology deals with texts, albeit visual, verbal, or written. In this paper, the texts are films, a sophisticated combination of languages, images, and sounds. However, the analysis is presented in language and thus, there is a risk that language might fail to capture or express the analytical content.

In order to assist readers to understand the study better, I devote one chapter to the overview of the two films. The first section is to narrate the plots and the second section is to generalize and analyze major similarities in the content of the films as well as their making process.

## CHAPTER V

### OVERVIEW OF THE TWO FILMS

#### *Apocalypse Now*

*Apocalypse Now* portrays the War through the journey of Captain Willard, played by Martin Sheen. Willard was a depressed and war-obsessed soldier at the time he received the mission (or any mission he was longing for) from his superiors to terminate an Army colonel. This colonel is Kurtz, a brilliant high-ranking U.S. soldier who used to be in the U.S. Army. He has a bright, promising career in the military but has become insane. He has set himself up as a spiritual leader among indigenous people in a remote area in the Cambodian jungle, fighting both the Vietcong and the U.S./South Vietnamese Army. Although the making of *Apocalypse Now* began in 1976, the version presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979 was still an incomplete version. It won, however, first prize – the Golden Palm.

Willard departs from Nha Trang, a port city to the northeast of Ho Chi Minh City (Sai Gon), and works his way up to Cambodia. He is equipped with a boat and four subordinates: Chief, Chef, Lance, and Mr. Clean. As he made his way from Nha Trang to the Cambodian border where Kurtz had built his base, he encounters various situations that gradually reveal to viewers the atrocity of the War. First, there is a Vietcong village on the way that needs to be eliminated. The military commander of the region, Kilgore,

orders a crew of 12 helicopters to attack the village while having music (The Ride of the Valkyries by Richard Wagner) blaring loudly on every helicopter. After they land, he orders some of his soldiers to go surfing. Three airplanes drop napalm bombs as an act to finalize the assault and mark what Kilgore calls “victory.” One of the most important signifiers of this sequence is Kilgore’s delivering cards to dead Vietnamese soldiers.

The crew stops for fuel along the way and watches a night show by sexily dressed American girls. As they continue their journey, they encounter a boat where all of the boat people, three men and one woman are murdered. Willard fires his only shot in the entire film at the half-dead woman when Chief insists on taking her to the hospital. His reasoning is “We’d cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a Band-Aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of them, the more I hate lies” (Coppola, 1979). Coppola later stated that this scene was inspired by the “notorious My Lai massacre” where ordinary people were killed and he concluded, “who has to blame? We all have to blame” (Coppola, 2006).

They come to Do Lung Bridge, the last U.S. Army outpost near Cambodian territory, “the asshole of the world.” Willard tries to find the officer commanding the area, but there doesn’t seem to be one, just soldiers who seem to be delirious. Before they reach Kurtz’ compound, Willard loses two of his men. Both of the attacks are carried out by ambushed people, and it is impossible to tell who they are, if they are Vietnamese guerillas, Vietcong, or Cambodians. Kurtz’ headquarters is an old and run-down Angkor-style temple by the river. Lance has joined the group of followers. Chef has been decapitated when he was trying to call for an air strike according to Willard’s

instructions. The film ends with Willard terminating Kurtz when the tribe is carrying out a buffalo-killing ritual. Willard grabs Lance and quietly leaves the crowd that is worshipping him in the place of Kurtz.

### ***Canh Dong Hoang***

*Canh Dong Hoang*, directed by Hong Sen (in Vietnamese as Hồng Sên), portrays the War through the life of a couple and their baby son who live in a tree house in the far South of Viet Nam (Dong Thap Muoi). The main characters are Ba Do (in Vietnamese as Ba Đô), played by Lam Toi (Lâm Tới), Sau (Sáu), played by Thuy An (Thúy An), and their son Vu (Vũ), played by Hong Thuan (Hồng Thuận.) Their location is a “clear zone” or a “free zone” on the borders between the zone occupied by the Vietcong and the other by the U.S./South Vietnamese Army. The U.S. Army has already forced all villagers and residents in this area into strategic hamlets, the so-called *urbanization*. They want to make sure this region is clear so that they can detect the presence of the Vietcong. This zone – or the wild rice field – is covered with water almost all year round. There are no hard shelters such as mountains or buildings. The only way to avoid helicopter search-and-destroy missions is to dive under the water and use water plants as cover.

Both Sau and Ba Do are Vietnamese guerrillas who support the Vietcong. Their particular job is to lead the Vietcong from their zone into the U.S. occupied zone. Their 12ft x 12ft tree house is built right above the surface of the water,<sup>1</sup> covered with the leaves of the trees. Their boats are sheltered underneath the house. Every year when the floodwaters come from Cambodia down the Mekong River, they have to raise the house

and lower it once the flood is over.<sup>2</sup> *Canh Dong Hoang* evolves around their daily survival, their job as guerrillas, and their battle against the frequent U.S. air assaults.

Sau is often the first to wake up at dawn to prepare Ba Do's morning kit, which includes his tobacco, cigarette papers, and a lighter. The first attack on her is one of the major scenes of the film in which the helicopter gunners discover and destroy the boat even if they do not see her because she has left the boat to hide in water bushes. The pilot, Jean, reports the event to his boss, Mitscher, showing him the pictures taken. Mitscher assigns him a "special" mission to terminate whoever is left in the field and encourages Jean to accomplish his mission as a gift to his "country and family." The conversation between Jean and Mitscher is followed by a similar conversation between a Vietcong leader and his guerrilla platoon, in which the leader praises all of his comrades and reminds them that even if "the U.S. enemy is accelerating their war capacity to try to destroy our supply lines and lines of communication. They are determined to thwart our courage. But they are wrong. *Sharp nails for thick citrus skin.*"<sup>3</sup>

The subsequent attack on the family is more severe and they have to evacuate. All they take with them are a plastic bag for the son and two long bamboo sticks that are often used for boating. They thrust the sticks into the soft, muddy bottom of the field near thick water bushes and plants. Whenever the helicopters come close, they will dive with the son in the plastic bag. Finally, the helicopters leave; Ba Do and Sau come back to their house and continue their day as if nothing has happened

The last part of *Canh Dong Hoang* is the direct combat between Jean's crew and Ba Do's family. Jean starts his usual search-and-destroy mission after his son's birthday



party. Ba Do is working in the field where there is not much shelter. The helicopters come suddenly without him suspecting. At home, Sau hears the sound. Jean's crew sees Ba Do. They want to catch him alive. He runs to try to escape and fights back. Frustrated, they drop a grenade on him. Sau comes to find him dead. She takes his rifle, with some of other guerrillas who also come to their rescue; she shoots down Jean's helicopter, which lands on the field and explodes. Jean is killed. The picture of his wife and son fall out of his chest pocket. The film ends with Sau carrying Vu toward the audience, leaving the burning helicopter behind.

### ***General comparisons***

Before examining the representation of Vietnam and the Vietnam War in *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*, it is necessary to draw some general comparisons of the two films. First, both Coppola and Nguyen S. use a "termination mission" as the main theme. In *Apocalypse Now*, Willard has to terminate Kurtz, and in *Canh Dong Hoang*, Jean is to do the same with Ba Do. Second, helicopters play an important role in both films whether they serve as war equipment or a symbolic representation. The two films are different concerning surrealism, which is a major cinematic aspect of *Apocalypse Now*, whereas *Canh Dong Hoang* is more straightforward. Last, the making process of both films received a great deal of assistance from the military and the government.

### **Termination mission**

Both *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* revolve around the same theme: Willard's mission to terminate Kurtz and Jean's mission to terminate Ba Do. The

environment where the assignment takes place is almost identical: confidential conversations among military officers at headquarters, outside which helicopters are circling around and fully equipped troops come and go with haste. However, although both films revolve around a termination mission, their missions are fundamentally different. Willard is sent to kill his own comrade and Jean is assigned to kill his enemy. Willard's mission is not supposed to "ever exist" but Jean's mission would be a special gift "for his wife and country."

Though the straightforward "termination mission" and the reliance on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* should have given Coppola an easy route to develop the plot, it turned out to be quite challenging. Toward the end of the making, Coppola felt as if he could not find a satisfying ending to this story. In a sense, this coincides with the fact that the more the United States military people became involved in the War, the more they found themselves going into an impossible mission.

Coppola admitted that the film crew came to the Philippines with abundant money and the latest technology and equipment just as the way the Americans went to Vietnam (Coppola, F., 2006). The original plan was to make the film in more than 200 days and it ended up being three years. During this period, Coppola changed his own script repeatedly yet could not find a satisfactory ending for this film, just as the U.S. government could not achieve a happy conclusion in this War. In addition, *Apocalypse Now's* plot, in which an American soldier was sent to murder another American soldier is a signifier that can be decoded as a snake biting its own tail in a strange land. The snake is certainly feeling hurt, but it is too caught up in the mist of its own agony, confusion,

and aggression to see the vicious circle it was in. Instead, it keeps biting, getting more hurt and more aggressive until it is exhausted and gives up only to find out that it has made a terrible mistake.

### Depiction of helicopters

Helicopters present one of the most important signifiers in the two films, carrying many symbolic messages. Even though helicopters are common in the Vietnam War, just like tanks in World War II, they carry special meaning in the former, and it is of no coincidence that both directors use helicopters extensively in their plot. *Apocalypse Now* starts with a close-up of Willard lying in a hotel room in Saigon, staring blankly and endlessly at a ceiling fan whose spinning blades resemble almost exactly the blades of a helicopter whose riotous buzz seems overwhelmingly loud. Helicopters are not only a dominant image in the first part and carry on throughout the film, but also appear near the end when Willard instructs Chef to call for an air strike if he does not come back from Kurtz' compound.

Helicopters could also have played an even more central role in *Apocalypse Now* if Coppola had not altered its ending. Coppola's initial attempt was to make "a big Hollywood war film" (Coppola, F., 2006) and the film's ending a combat scene. However, because the story was becoming increasingly surreal<sup>4</sup> as the making moved forward, Coppola decided that a conventional war film ending would not work (Coppola, 2006). Therefore, the combat scene with the presence of a large number of helicopters was never made.

Similar to *Apocalypse Now*, Hong Sen's *Canh Dong Hoang* makes extensive use of the imagery of helicopters to represent the warfare capacity and tactics of the American Army. Helicopters threaten the family all-day and everyday. Helicopters are portrayed in every way possible: in close-ups, medium shots, and long shots. The violent sound of helicopters, together with the sound of shootings and bombings, and scenes of Ba Do and Sau's struggle to protect their son and way of life keep the audience on the edge of their seats. They even learn by heart the schedule and habits of helicopter missions, as implied by Ba Do's question during their meal. "How come they come so early today?" Nevertheless, although the helicopters are a menace to Vietnamese familial life (Westup, 2006), they are no longer able to terrorize the Vietnamese people as if they have been inured. In a scene, they hear the helicopters come with sounds of shootings while they are napping:<sup>5</sup>

Sau: - *Honey, here they come again! You should go check on our fellow comrades.*

Ba Do (with a half-awake voice): - *They just shoot aimlessly. If they know our men are there, they'll drop bombs, no shots like that!* (He turns, apparently wanting to go back to sleep as if the helicopters are nothing more than a mosquito bite.)

One might ask why helicopters play such a central symbolic role in both films that were released at the same time soon after the end of War. The following numbers might provide an answer:

Total helicopters destroyed in the Vietnam War was 5,086 out of 11,827... Total helicopter pilots killed in the Vietnam War was 2,202. Total non-pilot crew members was 2704. Based on a database I got

recently from the Pentagon, we estimate that over 40,000 helicopter pilots served in the Vietnam War. (Roush, G., n.d.)

Helicopters and airplanes played such an important part in the War because they are the vehicles that can travel a great distance at extremely fast speed to almost anywhere, carry large loads of ammunition, weapons, and troops, and kill people without having to confront them face-to-face. As Fallaci described it when she was on an airplane with an U.S. pilot, who carried out an air strike on a village in South Vietnam, the pilot was completely phlegmatic when he swooped down, dropped the bombs, and killed the villagers who were running like ants below. The total time of the attack that destroyed the whole field was about 2 hours with tons of bombs used. The pilot, when asked how he felt when killing people during the mission, responded that he didn't feel because he didn't see them (Fallaci, 1972).

Helicopters and other aircraft are important in any war, but they were crucial in the Vietnam War because much of the country's land was covered with jungle.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Professor Nguyen's (1981) description best explains this:

It is no accident that the diabolical round of helicopters predominates in many sequences of the film. Wasn't it the ideal anti-guerilla weapon for the counter-insurgency experts? The French had proved pitifully powerless against the elusive guerillas, for their vehicles could not penetrate deep into the villages. But here from the sky those diabolical engines would unexpectedly swoop down on poorly armed people, like "hawks on sparrows" (the simile used by the authors of these tactics), machines that are able to go any place, scrutinize the remotest corner, and pour on it a deadly fire. The helicopter could also help force villagers to leave their land – the ideal tool for conducting "forced urbanization," that corner-stone of American strategy in Vietnam" (p. 42).

While Coppola was making the film with helicopters as the central war equipment, in Vietnam, director Nguyen also made them into the major representation of U.S. war technology. The image of black crows circling in the sky and swooping down on baby chickens always elicits terror (Nguyen, 2005). However, while the viewers might feel some kind of pity toward the helpless chickens in *Apocalypse Now*, they do not feel the same way in *Canh Dong Hoang* because the chickens fight and win. It is difficult to deny that the enormous, diabolical flying engines carry such significant connotations, which explains why both well-known directors of the two countries utilized the same war symbol.

### Surrealism

*Canh Dong Hoang* does not have as much of a surrealistic element in it as does *Apocalypse Now*. Its plots and mise-en-scènes are quite identifiable with Vietnamese people living in the area. Its director and screenplay writer were both born locally; thus, it is difficult to find ethnological mistakes in the film.

The only unrealistic detail arguable about the film is that Ba Do's family is quite isolated, which is unusual because Vietnamese people in general and people in the region in particular often live in close communities so that they help each other when needed. Perhaps director Sen Nguyen isolated this family to symbolize the brutality of the War and the bravery of the family. This also symbolizes the tactic of "hawks and sparrows" invented by Americans who advocated using helicopters to eliminate the Vietcong. Many people would see this isolation of the family as an artistic and surrealistic method in creating conflict in *Canh Dong Hoang* and making it more successful.

*Apocalypse Now*, as commented by Coppola, is a completely surreal film, especially as the story moves on from the second half. Why does a film made about an actual historical episode right after the episode have to be so surreal? Is that because we can't face what happened?

“Oh my God... it's so surreal! This isn't a war film after all. This is something else. This is a journey into some kind of surreal weirdness, a journey into issues related to morality in modern time when we have the reach through our technology to amplify all of the evil instincts or negative instincts because ultimately we lie about what we're doing...because we lie that it is the kind of vaseline that labels these terrible things that happen. Because if you tell the truth, you couldn't possibly support some of the actions that go on...” (Coppola, 2006)

Therefore, even though Nguyen, V. (1981) praised Coppola for “refusing to go with the tide” (p.42) by bringing to audiences the realities of the War, he criticizes the second half of the film as being “metaphysical” or “unreal” (p. 43). As Coppola's wife admitted, as Willard goes deep into the jungle, Coppola was also going into a dark tunnel (Coppola, 2004). This difficulty can be explained by the fact that Coppola has completely separated Willard's mission from its context. From this point on, there is nothing but his own inner conversations: no militias or soldiers, no villagers, no sign of civilization. However, as Nguyen (1981) put it, “myths and beliefs act only within the framework” of the Indochinese fight against imperialist forces, Willard's inner conversations with Kurtz and himself about morality, duality between good and evil, right and wrong suddenly become isolated. It is thus of no surprise that Coppola had to struggle with the second part of the film. Without the context, moral judgments become simply vacant if not incomprehensible.

### Military and government involvement

Another similarity between *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* is the involvement of the military in the filmmaking process. Both filmmakers received promises from the two governments, but the difference lies in the realization of the promises. In reality, Coppola never received any help from either the Army or the Defense Department. Military officials repeatedly stated that Coppola's script was not factual, containing "simply a series of some of the worst things, real or imagined, that happened or could have happened during the Vietnam War" (Lawrence, 1977). They insisted that there would be no assistance if the script was not approved, and it was never approved. Therefore, Coppola carried on with the filmmaking with help from the Philippines government.

In contrary, the making of *Canh Dong Hoang* was greatly aided by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense. Sen Nguyen was provided with the necessary equipment, facilities, and resources *free of charge*. Sang Q. Nguyen, *Canh Dong Hoang*'s screenplay writer, first started the script with a large number of helicopters, apparently attempting to make a big war film as well. However, learning that there would not be enough flyable U.S. helicopters left after the War, he settled for two (Nguyen, 2005). *Canh Dong Hoang* is said to have been produced mostly by passion, sense of responsibility and patriotism, and commitment because the country was too poor and devastated to provide any kind of sophisticated equipment for special effects; the pay for all the parties involved was also meager. This is true with other Vietnamese war films produced during that era and those characteristics are also a significant factor that made



the film successful. Without the wholehearted support from the military at the time, *Canh Dong Hoang* wouldn't have achieved its success.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam's geographical condition is greatly diverse, so is folk music. In one small region, people may have a variety of folk music forms depending on whether they are live by freshwater or ocean, in mountainous areas or rice fields; whether it is for ordinary or for wealthy people, or for the royal families. Folk music also varies a great deal throughout the country, from the North, to the Center and to the South; from the West to the East. The country is made of 54 ethnicities, and each of them have its own languages, thus own music style.

<sup>2</sup> Flood is never forceful; water comes gradually, and most times it only goes up as high as chest level; it is actually crucial in bringing fertilizer to the Mekong Delta every year.

<sup>3</sup> It's a common proverb in Vietnam where people often peel a citrus (lemons, limes, or small grapefruits) by their fingernails.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, he changed his mind when watching *Apocalypse Now* in a hotel room in London 15 years after the film was released. "I came upon the very beginning of *Apocalypse Now* ... it turned out I watched the entire movie... Gee... this movie wasn't so strange and wasn't so surreal... God, I wonder what would happen if I went back to version... and put back all the stranger things... and make it longer" (Coppola, 2006). A few years after that, *Apocalypse Now Redux* was released.

<sup>5</sup> Naps during the day are very common in the Vietnamese culture. Perhaps the heat, and the early start of the day, weary people.

<sup>6</sup> At least it used to be that way during the War, before the United States sprayed massive amounts of defoliants and chemicals to destroy them.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In a semiotic comparative study, there are always many aspects of the two items to be examined. However, within the theoretical paradigm of this thesis that is based on post-colonial studies, and theories of hegemony and ideology, there are three major distinctions between *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*: the representation of the “enemy,” the depiction of nationalism and individualism, and the portrayal of women.

In each of these research questions, I address three different sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences (Rose, 2007, p. 13). In other words, I examine the context where the two films were made, the War, and the how the two directors, in considering the reception of the audience, might have made the films in certain ways. Throughout the three-site examination process, I compare the prominent scenes, images, conversations, characters, and plots of *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* and then relate them to wider systems of meaning to explore the precise articulation of ideology and hegemony.

#### ***The faceless enemy***

The signs and signifiers in *Apocalypse Now* I choose to analyze the portrayal of the “enemy” are the representation of Saigon from Willard’s hotel window, the

Vietnamese woman who sits by Willard's door, the scene of Willard's crew going on the river, the act of Kilgore's delivering cards, the white puppy, the school in the second village strike, and the boat massacre. In *Canh Dong Hoang*, I choose to analyze the signified meaning of the two conversations between Jean and Mitscher, Jean's conversation with his comrade in his room before the birthday party, and the last scene of the film, in which the picture of Jean's wife and son falls out of his pocket.

The signs and signifiers will be examined to determine what they signify in themselves and in relation with other signifiers. In the discussion following this examination, I will apply theories of ideology and hegemony, post-colonial studies, and neorealism to decode them in a broader social, political context. The signs and signifiers will not necessarily be decoded according to the order in which they have been listed.

I contend that *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now* portray "the enemy" differently. In the former, the representation of the Vietnamese and Americans is an attempt of Vietnam in a post-colonial world to redefine its identity but not by diminishing and othering the "enemy." Therefore, the portrayal of Americans in *Canh Dong Hoang*, regardless of its (in)accuracy, is more humane. In contrast, the latter reflects much of the imperialistic approach to and hegemonic notion of the Other or Orient in a superficial, stereotyped representation of the Vietnamese people who are faceless, voiceless, and mostly uncivilized.

"Thus, while the Vietnamese are here portrayed as soldiers, they are portrayed first and foremost as people. It is this humanity that is lacking in portrayals of the Vietnamese within canonized American films about the war." (Westrup, p. 48)

Coppola's inadequate depiction of "the faceless enemy" presents an example illustrating Cawley's conclusion (1990) that the Vietnamese people are generally underrepresented, or simply ignored in Vietnam War films in the United States. Although there are at least nine scenes in *Apocalypse Now* in which there are Vietnamese, it is impossible to obtain any details of the Vietnamese or learn anything at all about them.

In *Apocalypse Now's* first scene, Willard is pictured in a hotel room in Saigon. Viewers are introduced to Vietnam through Willard's window that is half shaded by the curtain. Via the view of Willard looking down from his hotel room, we have a glimpse of a crowded Saigon street far into the distance. The voices are indistinct, and it is hard to determine what matchbox-sized cars and dot-sized people are really doing on the street. Similar to many U.S. films about the Vietnam War, such as *The Green Berets*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon*, the Vietnamese are hardly presented. They do not have a story, a life, or a character. They do not have names or faces (Dittmar & Michaud, 1990). It is thus understandable why Coppola, having started to produce *Apocalypse Now* almost immediately after 1975, fell into this era's general trend of the portrayal of the Vietnamese.

However, Coppola's explanation that this sketchy presentation of the Saigon life because he could not get any images of Saigon except for *one* picture, which somehow he had already had in the Philippines during the making (Coppola, F., 2006) is not entirely plausible. He also added that his crew and he tried their best to make the representation as accurate as possible based on this single picture. One cannot help wondering why a well-known director who had enormous imagery/filmic/cinematic power at that time after the

success of the God Father II could not obtain any other details of the most important city of South Vietnam in this War, especially right after it ended. Perhaps it was that a presentation of Vietnam in general and Saigon in particular were of little importance to Coppola.

Coppola might disagree, saying the above assessment is unfair because there was actually a presentation of a Vietnamese woman in the very first sequence – an old woman projected in a medium-long shot. When the two U.S. Army officers arrive to escort Willard, they pass an elderly person in a corner. She, a Vietnamese one assumes, is sitting and folding white cloths. They must have asked her something because she points toward Willard's door. She must have said something because her lips are moving but her words are not heard.

The second scene that shows the Vietnamese is their river journey. The boat goes at a fast speed so that Lance can water-ski. A group of children and women, Vietnamese one assumes, washing and swimming near the riverbank are soaked and a boat with two men is turned upside-down by the wash caused by Lance's skis. All these Vietnamese are shown in long shots, appearing on the screen in about one second as the boat passes by. They look perplexed and passive because they are quiet and have no reactions, to the point where they may look stupid. Surprisingly, few Vietnamese appear in their long trip on the river. In an area larger than Oregon and smaller than California, there were about 40 million Vietnamese people (Nguyen, 2008). Yet Willard and his crew, evidently a minority, are dominating the surroundings as if it were a land deserted of people, as if it were *their* land.

The Vietnamese are portrayed namelessly in two U.S. assaults in later sequences. In the first one, they are shown from the overhead perspective of helicopters, running like ants being attacked. The clearest image of all is many black figures with white conical hats. In the second, in one long shot Coppola pictures a peaceful scene of a school with children and a small market nearby, prior to the air strike. The people appearing in those scenes do not seem to have a clear language, nor a face or a name. They are not actors or actresses, but Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines. Coppola recruited hundreds of them for this film (Coppola, E., 1995), yet they cannot act. Since Coppola, being able to pay Marlon Brando a million dollars a day for the three weeks of his role (Coppola, E., 2004), he must have been able to afford to pay authentic, professional Vietnamese actors/actresses and spare a minute in *Apocalypse Now* for them. Apparently, that was not what he wanted to do.

Whether it was Coppola's intention or not, the act of Kilgore delivering cards to dead Vietcong bodies after the strike signifies perfectly this inadequacy in the portrayal of the Vietnamese – they are cards, not humans; they do not have names or lives; they are instead numbers and letters and objects in a game of cards. Coppola might defend this by saying that it was exactly his intention to make the film that way, showing that all of the involved parties were simply cards in a big gambling game.

However, is it odd that in the same game the Americans have bigger cards on which we can see a face and read a story? This is a U.S. film for U.S. viewers; understandably, U.S. characters and stories deserve a bigger portion. However, it should not be to the point that the “others” were diminished like objects, especially when we

consider the fact that in this same game, *Canh Dong Hoang* (discussed later) gives a fairer share of cards to Americans. This is perhaps one of the most significant differences between *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*.

Even insignificant characters like Colby, – the deserting officer who was assigned the same task as Willard but turned to follow Kurtz in the end, who only appears for a few seconds at the very end of *Apocalypse Now* – are deemed worthy of a name and a life, in which there is a wife, children, a house, and a car. In this same game, we also know that Lance and his girlfriend, Sue, went to Disneyland and she skinned her knee; Chef's girlfriend, Eva, was not sure she could have a relationship with him; and Mr. Clean's mother told him his dad was "secretly" saving up money to buy him a car to celebrate his coming home. It is, however, impossible to identify any such Vietnamese individuals in *Apocalypse Now*.

We shouldn't forget the dog, the cause of the boat massacre in which all four Vietnamese people die. The white puppy that survives the massacre perhaps receives a better portrayal than that of any other Vietnamese in the film. "Mr. Puppy" is glued to Lance from that moment, is portrayed in a close-up shot at Do Lung bridge, and enjoys a trip with Lance in his chest pocket. When Mr. Clean is shot, while Chief is yelling at Lance to "check out Clean," Lance is instead panicking, "Where'd the dog go? Where is the dog? We gotta go back and get the dog!" No Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* are treated with that much care and detail; perhaps "Mr. Puppy" deserves better treatment because he is adopted by an American crewmember by accident?

The same problematic portrayal of the Vietnamese in the film continues throughout the remaining parts. In the longest appearance of Vietnamese people, three men and one woman are killed in a massacre caused by a panic attack by the youngest crewmember over a puppy. They are shown in long and medium-long shots. Their voices are indistinct because they are drowned out by Chief's commands and Chef's complaints. At Do Lung bridge, the entire picture of the Vietcong engaged in the fierce combat is a voice from the distance, speaking in both Vietnamese (to call for help from his comrades) and in English (to curse the GIs). However, this single voice does not survive very long after one of the soldiers shoots a grenade in the Vietcong's direction with a grenade gun.

The Vietnamese are also pictured in an unreal manner in some scenes such as the Bunny Girls show and the second village air strike. In the former, hundreds of American soldiers dressed in their neat uniforms sit around a stage, whereas behind them many Vietnamese gather around the wire fence curiously watching the show. Many of the men and children are topless; although their figures are shady, it is easy to tell their bodies are skinny and dirty. Some of them carry their bowls of food, passing by with their eyes wide open, apparently glued on the performance. Some are climbing up, their noses pressed against the fence, their typical Vietnamese hats<sup>1</sup> thus bent backward. If one sees this scene, one will just have a strange and barbaric impression of these people. The representation of the second village air strike signifies the opposite.

Prior to the second air strike, *Apocalypse Now* shows students playing and singing in a school. Teachers are dressed in the white Vietnamese traditional costume;<sup>2</sup> students are wearing their uniforms. It is a happy, peaceful setting, clearly to be contrasted with



the devastation of the attack. However, the teachers and students are unrealistically clean and well dressed. Two million Vietnamese people died of starvation in 1945 and the country was constantly devastated by wars from 1945 to 1975. The school is located in a rural area controlled by the Vietcong (that is why Kilgore has to eliminate it to make way for Willard's crew), and the Vietcong's very first priority at that time was to provide enough food for the people and military resources for the soldiers (Truong, 2001). One couldn't help wondering how it was possible for teachers and students to dress in such clean, well-made uniforms, which to this day are still luxury items in many parts of Vietnam, especially in rural areas.

Another strange depiction of the Vietnamese is the boat massacre. Three men are topless, and a woman in a blue traditional costume appears in the middle of nowhere. How do we explain the existence of this formally dressed woman among the mundanely dressed men? This could be accurate if it were at a ferry stop where all kinds of people mingle. However, the boat is seized in the middle of the river. What is the relationship between the people? Are they family members (so that the men can be topless in front of a woman?) Why don't they seem to know each other? Why don't they seem to help each other when shot, rather than simply stand there to be killed? Or are they fishermen who give the woman a lift?

Coppola apparently did not seem to understand the reality of the Indochinese peoples or the lands of that era. Rather, it seems he learned about Vietnam and the Vietnamese from history books and ethnographic materials (Nguyen, 1981) and thus represented them by stereotypes. That was why teachers and students in a rural, poor area

of Vietnam that was threatened by war day and night could still afford to dress in clean and well-made uniforms. That was also why a woman is dressed in ao dai as if she was going to a wedding or a celebration with three poor-looking fishermen, among whom the relationship is impossible to determine.

All in all, Coppola's stereotypical, shallow representation of the faceless, voiceless Vietnamese people reflects Said's remark on Orientalism: "...she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her," thus, he tells "his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental" (1978, p. 6). Not only is the presentation of the Vietnamese unreal, some of it is not even accurate. That was probably why Coppola located Kurtz's Angkor temples in Eastern Cambodia<sup>3</sup> and presented Kurtz's recollection that children's arms were cut off because of vaccinations.<sup>4</sup>

One could see that the portrayal of the nameless, faceless, and stereotypical "other" reflects an imperialist approach toward a developing nation in a postcolonial world (to be discussed later). Nevertheless, one should not deny Coppola's attempt to picture the Vietnamese in every aspect possible: their washing, eating, playing, working, their costumes, and their habits. They are just ordinary people living their rural lives. This portrayal is perhaps better than many of the portrayals of the Vietnamese in Vietnam War films where "there should be scenes about the little circle of laundresses and whores and barbers and spies that American troops know, who were all of Vietnam most Americans ever knew" (Cawley, 1990, pp. 78-9).

However, the problem is that there is no depth in this portrayal. The Vietnamese do not have a distinguishable face or language; they are nameless; they have neither personality nor story. Nobody can tell who they are or why they are there. They simply “happen” to be there, to be the background of the film. As Coppola admitted, accuracy is not of concern because he is not making a film about Vietnam “so much as using the war as a backdrop” (Kranz, 1980, p.18). Yet, one should find this statement problematic if not “foolish,” because as Wilson argued, “how could a director make a movie about a subject as emotionally charged as Vietnam and avoid political significance?” (1982, p. 84).

Coppola’s approach is greatly different from that in which “the enemy” is portrayed in *Canh Dong Hoang*. In 90 minutes of *Canh Dong Hoang* (compared with 153 minutes of *Apocalypse Now*) the Americans are depicted in many sequences where Jean and his crews survey the field to try to capture Ba Do’s family, in two private conversations between Jean and Mitscher, and in one party to celebrate Jean’s son’s birthday. They are not only portrayed in long and medium shots but also close-ups and semi-close-ups.

Names are important in *Apocalypse Now* compared to how names are treated in *Canh Dong Hoang*. There are countless circumstances in *Apocalypse Now* in which Americans are introduced, including the very first scene...

U.S. officer: - *Captain Willard? 505<sup>th</sup> Battalion...*

Willard: - *Affirmative*

U.S. officer: - *173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne*

Willard: - *Yeah...*

U.S. officer: - *Assigned to SOG?*

... to the end.

Photojournalist: - *American civilian! I am an American civilian!...*

Willard: - *Who are you?*

Photojournalist: - *I am a photojournalist. I've been here since...*

In contrast, there are only three Vietnamese names in *Canh Dong Hoang*: Ba Do, his wife, Sau, their son, Vu, and four American names: Jean, Mitscher, Jean's wife, Linda, and their son, John. The Americans not only have their names but also a character and a story to tell, unlike the blurred image of the Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now*. In the very first scene of *Canh Dong Hoang*, Jean shows up in close-ups and his comrades in medium close-ups, close enough so that the viewers can read the name tags on their uniforms and their facial expressions.

The two conversations between Jean and Mitscher are carried out in a confined setting, Mitscher's office. Various shots from different distances and from different angles show their room in detail: A large desk on which they lay pictures of the rice field after each of Jean's hunts, documents, clipped files, an American badge hung on the wall together with a large combat map, and a U.S. flag. We can also see the name card, R. Mitscher, and know his rank in the Army by looking at his collar. The room looks comfortable, with a sofa, a couple of vodka bottles on the table on which there is a white daisy vase. Outside the room through the window, troops and helicopters are circling around while Jean and Mitscher drink spirits contemplating how to capture Ba Do.

In *Canh Dong Hoang* we learn about Jean's family. His family is first introduced in the conversations with Mitscher as he encourages Jean to try to accomplish the task in the rice field to make it a gift for his wife and the newly born baby. Before Jean goes on the last attempt to terminate Ba Do's family, one of his fellow soldiers comes into his room while he is shaving in the bathroom with a large towel around his shoulders and white foam covering his face. He is surprised by the fellow's sudden appearance.

Fellow soldier: - *Hey, a bar treat then I'll give you this thing.*

Jean: - *What is "this thing"?*

Fellow soldier: - *You promise?*

Jean: - *Yeah...*

Fellow soldier: - *Your son's birthday!*

The film then shows a close-up of a picture of a woman's face and a baby's. Below the picture is Linda's handwriting, "Dear Jean, John and I always waiting for your<sup>5</sup> when... Linda."

The bathroom is made to look like an American-style bathroom: a large mirror above the sink, towels on a rack next to the cabinet on which we see posters of females (maybe film stars or models) posing.

Right after this scene Jean throws a party in a bar for his son's birthday 13,000 miles away: Music, liquor, cigarettes, many men dressed in army uniforms and women in civilian clothes. Jean leaves the party to go on the last hunt for Ba Do. He kills Ba Do but is subsequently shot by Sau. The picture of Linda and John falling out of his pocket in a burning helicopter is the last description of Jean.

There is much to debate about the depiction of Americans in *Canh Dong Hoang*, which will be discussed later. However, there is certainly a close depiction of an American in this film. The audience witnesses Jean's personality in different sequential settings: the hunting missions, his gestures with subordinates and his boss Mitscher, his laughs and confusion, his happy presence at a party, and his daily habits. Although Jean's major depiction is concerned with hunting Ba Do's family in the field, the audience can have a glimpse of who this person is; he is simply a U.S. soldier dutifully carrying out his assigned mission. He also has a family that is waiting for him in the United States.

The last scene, in which the picture falls out of his pocket, started a controversy in the general population as well as among cinematic experts in Vietnam by the time it was finished and was about to be screened at Moscow's International Film Festival in 1981. It was said that this scene needed to be edited, or cut; that Sen Nguyen shouldn't have "forced" such a melodramatic ending. However, many others held that this ending was the most humanistic aspect of *Canh Dong Hoang*, which helped this film outlive many other war films of the time and receive the highest prize of the Festival (Phuong, 2008). The War had only ended four years prior to *Canh Dong Hoang*'s production, and this sequence thus showed the director's and screenwriter's forgiving attitude toward their "enemy." After all, Americans are also humans with emotions; they also have a life and loved ones. Their involvement in the War does not detract from that reality.

U.S. viewers might be troubled by the sinister, arrogant depiction of Mitscher or Jean's cold-bloodedness while hunting for Ba Do and Sau. However, I contend that it is less important in this comparison to assess whether the depiction is "accurate," than

whether there is any depiction at all. Through *Canh Dong Hoang*, the audience not only learns about the War, about Sau and Ba Do, but also the people and stories of “the other side.” Interestingly, the depiction of Jean’s family in *Canh Dong Hoang* does not differ from many other stories of Americans in *Apocalypse Now*.

Willard also has a wife; Chef’s girlfriend and Mr. Clean’s family are waiting for them; Lance’s girlfriend wants him to have a good time in Vietnam. Even Colby’s family deserves a snapshot. While Nguyen devoted a considerable amount of his 90-minute film to the portrayal of the Americans, Vietnamese people appear in quick shots in *Apocalypse Now*, as quick as a sudden and random flash of lightning. Thus, the biggest difference between these two films is their portrayal of “the enemy,” which Nguyen, S. granted a personality and Coppola did not. This reinforces Said’s (1978) remark on Orientalism, which states that the West often diminishes the Orient as uncivilized and inferior others

There is nevertheless a similarity in the portrayal of the other side. Both are both somewhat flawed, though in different ways. Coppola has been criticized for both the insufficiency of the description and ethnological details of the Vietnamese as discussed above. Nguyen’s American picture, though more humanistic, has its own ethnic drawbacks. All Americans in *Canh Dong Hoang* are played by non-American people (in terms of citizenship). In fact, all Americans, except for Mitscher are Vietnamese. Mitscher, mistaken by many film scholars as a Vietnamese, is actually a Russian who has participated in a great number of Vietnamese war films and always played the role of a high-ranking U.S. Army officer. His real name is Robert Hai, and he died a few years ago in Ho Chi Minh City.

Another ethnological flaw in *Canh Dong Hoang* is that all Americans speak Vietnamese with a fake accent. Not only is this detail not accurate (it is hard to imagine two American soldiers conversing in Vietnamese), this homogenized language renders a sense of falseness that may trouble the audience, especially an American one. In this respect, Coppola did a better job because there are dozens of real Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* who are boat people who fled the country after 1975 and landed in the Philippines (Coppola, E., 1995). They speak Vietnamese, and their language is authentic.

There is an explanation for Nguyen's flawed portrayal of Americans; it was simply impossible to hire any Americans at that particular time in Vietnam. Four years after the War had ended, the only possibility was to hire American prisoners of war, which could have only happened in fictional novels because there were no prisoners of war remaining in the country. It would also have been impossible for Nguyen to hire Western actors to play in *Canh Dong Hoang*, judging by how poor and devastated the country was. Plus, the film industry was state-funded, with few funds available for filmmaking. Without the technology and financial power, the audience had to settle for how Americans are pictured in *Canh Dong Hoang*.

It would be interesting to ask what Coppola could have done to portray the Vietnamese without the fortunate accident that the Vietnamese refugees had landed in the Philippine islands. Some critics might argue that it was one of the neorealism techniques of the era that Coppola employed. I disagree. All of U.S. main characters in *Apocalypse Now* are played by well-known, professional actors. Even Colby, a minor role that only appears for a few seconds, is played by Scott Glenn (the star in *The Silence of the*



*Lambs*). Thus, even if choosing non-professional actors/actresses is one of the traits of neorealist films, this does not necessarily explain why Coppola did not try to give the Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* better acting and more in-depth representation. Judging by how little interest he had in “doing a film about Vietnam,” by how he portrayed Saigon, one might as well think he could simply have used some Philippine people, who share many physiological characteristics of the Vietnamese. He would probably have had them speak in a kind of Vietnamese that is hard to comprehend as happened in *The Deer Hunter* or *Full Metal Jacket*.

One cannot help wondering why there is such a difference in the depiction of “the enemy” in the two films that were produced at about the same time. One explanation could be the psychological impact resulting from the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, the perpetrator and the victim. People in power have little to fear from other people; they mostly care about how to remain in power; and very often, they only care about themselves. As Vittorio Storaro, Coppola’s cinematographer, put it:

Francis always reminds me. He said, Vittorio, remember, this is not just a documentary about the Vietnam war, (it is) a main show in the sense that wherever America goes, they make big shows on everything; they make a big event...” (Coppola, E., 2004)

There are no compelling reasons for the oppressors to put themselves in the oppresseds’ shoes. That is why *Apocalypse Now*, similar to many other war films about the Vietnam War, mostly deals with the suffering of the Americans, and very little thought has been given to the Vietnamese on whom they had inflicted even greater agony and devastation. Understanding their victims’ misery would also further their uncomfortable feelings. The oppressed, on the other hand, always try to understand their

situation simply because they want to know why they are suffering, why other people are more powerful and why they cause them such pain. In this sense, it was easier for Nguyen to produce a more balanced portrayal of both sides.

On the other hand, Coppola's inadequate portrayal of the Vietnamese can be viewed a reflection of the hegemony and ideology of the postcolonial era. Although many of the Third World countries had gained independence from European aggressors by then, global hegemony simply shifted from Eurocentrism to new American imperialism (Shohat and Stam, 1994). As Said (1978, p. 4) argued, "... until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did." Although the American domination manifests itself differently from the European one does, the fundamental nature of the relationship remains intact: it is the relationship between the *self-acclaimed* superior and the *made-to-be* inferior.

Generally, the post-colonial world was (and still is) a Western-dominated world, and Coppola certainly made use of that worldview. He viewed the Vietnamese through the lens of a superior looking down on an inferior. Just like African people are portrayed as "barbaric, superstitious, corrupt, and underdeveloped" (Brookes, 1995, pp.488-489), the Vietnamese inferior natives, in Coppola's eyes, might have a stereotypical costume and figures; but they mostly look uncivilized, dirty, and passive as well. By portraying the developing world as "underdeveloped," the West justified its interventions as measures to "help" those indigenous people.

However, even if when the offer to help was genuine, the help was not always helpful. Fallaci (1972) offered an insightful observation in this respect by telling her story in Vietnam in 1968 when a large number of American troops were present in the country. Some American soldiers wanted to “teach” native children how to use soap to clean their bodies as they bathed on the riverbank. The soap was slippery, and its foam made the riverbank even more slippery, which meant that the children fell and hurt themselves. The U.S. soldier shook his head, concluding that it was impossible to teach those barbaric, stupid people something civilized.

This is, however, not uncommon in the American media’s representation about the Third World people in general and Vietnamese in particular, as we can see in other films as well, such as *Good morning, Vietnam!* (Williams, 1987). In this popular film, old and young Vietnamese appear to be stupid and childish when being taught to speak dirty English words and slang. They appear to be clumsy and strangely comical when trying to play baseball with the main American character (one might be curious to know how Americans would look like if they played native games with rocks and bamboo sticks).

In a postcolonial world of capitalism, media products are also commodities. Therefore, just as Africa has been commodified on U.S. network reality television (Steeves, 2008), the Vietnam War and Vietnam became a fashionable item on the shelf. Coppola, therefore, did not represent the War, nor the people, but appropriated their identity, image, and associations to sell to American and world audiences.

As argued above, their stereotypical depiction did not seem to be drawn from real life experiences, but from books and (perhaps outdated) ethnological materials.

Consequently, the depiction is superficial. Even if it challenged the Eurocentric and American-centric view of the Vietnamese by showing women in traditional costumes and students in (Western-looking) uniforms, it mainly reinforced the stereotypes of the people as uncivilized and passive, they are thus diminished and reduced to being faceless, nameless, and inferior. Coppola's representation of "the other" proved Hall's assertion of the relationship between the media and their "ideological effect," in the sense that Coppola selected the "*preferred codes*" which appear to "embody the 'natural' explanations which most members of the society would accept" (Hall, 1977, p. 343).

In conclusion, Nguyen's *Canh Dong Hoang* depicts the "enemy" in a more humane way. He made a good attempt to rewrite the history of a Third World country, yet does not diminish the "other." Nguyen, S. took into account the U.S. presence, in other words, Americans in *Canh Dong Hoang* have names, characters, and stories. *Apocalypse Now*, though released at the same time, employed an imperialist, Eurocentric approach toward "the other"; Coppola's depiction of the Vietnamese is superficial and stereotypical. As Klein put it, "Always, however, it is shown from the imperialist point of view, the perspective of the helicopter machinegunner letting loose at the natives" (1980, p.20).

The War is complicated to most people, including film directors. Coppola must have been pulled in various directions to try to please the audience and his own personal judgment, and be true to history (Coppola, 1995). That is why he contradicts himself. He said that he did not intend to make a film about Vietnam, so accuracy is not an issue; he simply used the War as a backdrop to venture into the complexity of morality, of the

duality between good and evil. However, he also stated that “it was my thought that if an American audience could look at what Vietnam was really like then they could put it behind them” (Klein, 1980, p. 20). How could an American audience could put it behind them if the Vietnam they look at was not what Vietnam was really like, but just a tiny piece of a larger picture?

### ***Nationalism and individualism***

The major signs and signifiers chosen to analyze nationalism and individualism *Canh Dong Hoang* are daily scenes of Ba Do’s family, their fight against and escapes from helicopter attacks, the conversation between Ba Do and the female guerrilla, the encounter between Ba Do and the battalion of Vietcong, and the meeting between guerrillas in the region and the Vietcong leader. Signs and signifiers for *Apocalypse Now* are the first scene of Willard in his hotel room, his passiveness in the War judging by the fact that he only opens fire once and expresses his emotions once toward the end of the film, different approaches toward the War by Willard, Lance, Mr. Clean, Chef, and Chief, and the battle at Do Lung Bridge.

First, I will examine the signs and signifiers, compare and contrast them with other signs and signifiers. After that, I will explore how those signifiers relate to one another, and apply the theories of ideology and hegemony to position them in a wider system of meaning. Because I will select the signs and signifiers based on how relevant they are to the assessment, they will not be used in the exact order above.

If *Apocalypse Now* lacks humanity in the portrayal of the Vietnamese and *Canh Dong Hoang* lacks an ethnological authenticity in the portrayal of the Americans, both

films individualize the War. Each of the individualizations produces a distinct aspect of nationalism. *Apocalypse Now* depicts the War through the trip of lonely Captain Willard, who is deliberately made into a completely passive observer.

As same as Willard, his crew is made of individual who loosely relate to each other by military order. Nationalism is not portrayed by collective comradeship or nationhood but by playing on individual suffering and sympathy. Although *Canh Dong Hoang* also highly individualizes the War through the life of a single Vietnamese family living on a abandoned field, nationalism is thoroughly and naturally depicted through their community life and the way they relate to one another in the army. The individuals' lives in *Canh Dong Hoang* are positioned in a context of their community and national independence struggle.

It is impossible to discuss *the national* without incorporating *the individual*. Although the nation-state is an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991), it holds a sovereignty in terms of both physical borders and a psychological state of belonging to an entity, which individuals protect and maintain. Anderson also stated that printed books, for the first time in human history, were able to promote on a large scale this sense of imagined community, in other words, to promote the notion of nation, by providing individuals living in a great area with a shared image of their nation-state, their culture, customs and other similar people. Films, among many other media after the invention of printed books, followed this trend of enhancing nationalism thanks to its vocal and visual effects (Anderson, 1991). *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*, having dealt with the

War that affected many individuals' lives and their nation sovereignty, are thus analyzed in this theoretical realm.

Individualism and nationalism are woven naturally in *Canh Dong Hoang*. Nguyen does not utilize big slogans and propagandized messages to advocate for the national cause. Instead, the entire film revolves around Ba Do and his family and their struggle to protect their house, their son, and their way of life. The helicopter attacks are portrayed as part of their life, to the extent that they stop expending much of their mental energy on them. In one of the scenes, Ba Do is pictured taking a nap; the sounds of the helicopters do not even have any effect on him until Sau takes him by the shoulders and shakes him. Even then, he simply turns and continues sleeping.

In another scene, their son is sleeping in the field at night while they are trying to harvest their rice. An airplane flies low over their heads, delivering call-for-surrender messages via loudspeakers and dropping parachutes that hold written documents. Vu is woken up, crying. Sau runs to him, holds him up and looks angrily at the sky, "Your generations! You interrupt my son's sleep!" as if the effects of those messages are nothing more than an uninvited, annoying sound or a mosquito bite. At least the messages deliver them a material fortune – the parachutes, which Sau makes into a shirt for her son and other household items.<sup>6</sup>

Sau and Ba Do never talk about the War; they never mention the *cause for independence*, which was the common goal of the country at the time. However, it is not difficult for the viewers to know which side they follow. The helicopters are of U.S. make. Ba Do and Sau dress in guerrilla costumes that were common for Southern militias

at that time; Vietnamese soldiers who sided with the U.S. and the Southern Vietnamese Government always wore well-made and American uniforms. There is a portrait of Ho Chi Minh on the wall of their underground bunker.

Although they do not express their political affiliation, their firm political beliefs are strongly expressed through their dutifully helping the Vietcong. The very first part of *Canh Dong Hoang* shows Ba Do's job. He comes to a designated place to meet a female guerilla apparently doing the same job. The girl is smelling of water lilies by the time Ba Do arrives. He attracts her attention by imitating the sound of a bird.

Ba Do: - *How many guests have arrived?*

The female: - 35

Their term "guests" was referring to the formal soldiers who are supposed to be led by Ba Do to cross the wild field filled with water, wild water plants, and bushes. The next scene shows a group of soldiers on boats. They disperse as the helicopters come, covering the boats with leaves and diving to hide themselves. This task is one of Ba Do and Sau's daily jobs. Not only does he cross water-logged fields Ba Do also leads the Vietcong across regular roads. He uses cloths to cover the crossing spot, waits until all the soldiers pass, and folds the cloths away. American soldiers thus cannot see the traces and detect the presence of the Vietcong in the region.

The country's resistance is depicted through Ba Do's family's resistance and patriotism. The film develops around the family's life and struggle against Jean's mission. There are only a few scenes without their presence (the conversations between Jean and Mitscher) or in which they are not primary subjects (the Vietcong's meeting).



The rest are battle scenes, where they either try to escape from the helicopters or assist other soldiers to remain undetected. Those scenes are often preceded and followed by scenes of their family life in the Mekong Delta.

The resistance of this single, ordinary family represents the resistance of many other Vietnamese families and revolutionary militants, which was the main theme of the country and the Indochinese peninsula at the time (Nguyen 1980). Their firm commitment and determination to fight the enemy symbolize the Vietnamese tradition of nationalism and patriotism of the general population, which the United States government at the time had underestimated, according to McNamara (CNN, 2009).

For the Vietnamese, war has been a continuing reality since the formation of the country.<sup>7</sup> For thousands of years, the country was at war with China,<sup>8</sup> Mongolia,<sup>9</sup> Cambodia,<sup>10</sup> Holland,<sup>11</sup> France,<sup>12</sup> and the United States,<sup>13</sup> None of those nations was able to establish ultimate domination over the country. Patriotism and nationalism played a key role in mobilizing the population to resist foreign invaders despite some of them (China, France, and the United States) being superpowers. This famous saying by Le Thanh Tong<sup>14</sup> in the 15<sup>th</sup> century summarizes the country's nationalist and patriotic tradition:

Even one foot of our mountains and rivers can never be given away. You must be determined to negotiate; do not allow them to eat onto our territory gradually. You and your entire extended family will be beheaded if you dare to give even one foot of our ancestors' land to the enemy.

Tran, Hung Dao (Trần, Hưng Đạo), the famous general whose military command helped defeat the Yuan Dynasty three times in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, also made a statement that reflects this tradition: “Behead me before you surrender!”

Therefore, Ba Do and Sau simply inherit this proud tradition of the country. Their depiction represents the struggle of thousands of guerillas in the country whose jobs were seemingly minor but as essential as a thread of floss that ties every part of a big picture together. They were part of a national struggle that cost millions of lives. They do not have a formal status, or official recognition. They fight, and they may die anonymously.

Do you know how many people have died in the last ten days, just in Saigon? Ten thousand. In those communal graves. “Unidentified bodies,” they call them. Because they have no names, they’re dead and that’s that. Their friends or relatives will never be able to trace them. They’re dead twice over. They’re dead a thousand times over. They’re the new Jesuses of the Earth... Every ten or twenty minutes trucks came in with the dead; the diggers haven’t got time to dig graves. The trucks drove up, parked with their trailers on the side of a trench, unbolted the tailgate, lifted the trailer into its sliding position and rolled down masses of bodies. (Fallaci, 1972, p. 115)

For those fighters, their happiness might be as simple as Ba Do’s catching a snake or Sau sniffing flowers in the field. However, they hold tight to their cause of fighting for the country’s peace and independence. The only time Ba Do expresses his warfare intellectually is when he comes to the help of a battalion of Vietcong and sees that their cooking fires are making too much smoke. He panics, hastily climbs up the trees and shake their tops to disperse it.

Ba Do: - *Smoke! Watch out for the smoke! You can’t have smoke here. This field is plain. They can detect us from a great distance.*

One soldier: - *Knock it off! Fires always cause smoke. That's just commonsense, don't you know that?*

Ba Do: - *I know smoke always goes with fires. But in order to overpower the American enemy, we need to know how to make fires without smoke.*

Ba Do's statement perhaps summarizes the entire War with the United States that lasts for more than 20 years, the War that demonstrates the impossible can happen; the weak can defeat the powerful by using various tactics.

Although *Canh Dong Hoang* portrays Ba Do and Sau as ordinary rural people who do not use complicated words, this film puts over the political messages by placing this family in a context where they fight with other community members, and army and political leaders. To show a political war between the two sides, the United States and Vietnam, Nguyen places back to back the conversation between Jean and Mitscher and the conversation between the Vietcong leader and the guerillas. While Mitscher encourages Jean to accomplish the tasks on the abandoned field in his office, in the field the Vietcong leader praises the guerrillas for their efforts.

The Committee trusts that you will all overcome every obstacle and difficulty. We are determined to follow Ho Chi Minh's guidelines: "Nothing is more important than independence and freedom. We'd rather sacrifice everything than lose our nation, than be enslaved."  
(Nguyen, 1979)

One might argue that this is nothing but a political propaganda session of the Vietcong. However, political leaders among the Vietnamese fighters are never only "political leaders" but also part of their villages and community. Soldiers, guerrillas, militias therefore relate to one another not only in terms of comradeship and military

ranking but also nationhood, the bonding that forms the *imagined community*. They fight side by side with each other not only because that is the rule of an army, but also because their comrades are somebody they grew up with or their families have been friends for generations.

This characteristic is well depicted in *Canh Dong Hoang*. For example, when Ba Do meets the female guerrilla in the first part (mentioned above) she hands him a bunch of bananas and groceries after they are finished with their warfare duties.

Female guerrilla: - *The villagers send you and your family a few things!*

Ba Do: - *Please tell them I say thanks. And please send them my best regards.*

Female guerrilla (starting to turn the boat away): - *Yes, I will.*

Ba Do: - *Do remember that! Don't forget, okay?*

Female guerrilla (turning her head): - *I will remember!*

In another scene, the female guerrilla offers to replace Ba Do's family at their outpost. She says, "I volunteer to be at their terminal. That post is tough and they have a son. I can take this responsibility instead of them." Ba Do turns down the offer, explaining that he and his wife were born "in water"; thus, they were used to this situation. This example shows their comradeship and genuine caring for one another, to the extent that they are willing to take on tasks that are more challenging in order to assist their comrades.

In another case, Vu falls into water trying to rescue his toy. Ba Do hurriedly jumps down from the roof of the house, searches underwater for a few seconds, and finally picks him up. Through panic and worry, he slaps Sau. Sau subsequently

leaves the house to see the political leader to “report” Ba Do’s domestic violence. The political leader is thus portrayed to be not only the army boss but also a family mentor and a friend.

Political leader (seeing Sau approach on her boat and cry): - *Are you all right, Sau?*

Sau (sobbing): - *He hit me!*

Political leader (exhaling and smiling): - *Oh, I thought it was something serious. Give the baby to me! Why did he do that?*

Sau (still sobbing): - *Vu fell into the water!*

Political leader: - *Hmm... this chap is that violent eh! Did he know you left home to come here?*

Sau: - *No!*

Westrup (2006) describes this well in one of her writings about Vietnamese war films.

Vietnamese films always stress the relationships between people (within families, villages, etc.) because these relationships are seen as the threads from which the country is woven. Without them there can be no understanding of Viet Nam as a country, whether at war or at peace. (p. 47)

In conclusion, nationalism in *Canh Dong Hoang* is portrayed tenderly and naturally. Nguyen, S. does not utilize big banners and political messages to advocate patriotism, but the political aspect of the War is well depicted. The director highly individualizes the War through the life of one nuclear family. However, those individuals are not isolated but live in a loving and caring community where they protect each other.

The War in *Canh Dong Hoang* is a war in context. The characters (or fighters) in the film do not just fight a vague enemy for a vague purpose. They fight the Americans to defend their land and way of life. They are not only soldiers but also members that belong to one imagined community, the nation-state.

*Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now* are similar in the sense that the main characters do not talk about the War, that is, why, whom they are fighting and for what. However, the difference is the viewers learn all this through the context, direct and subtle conversations, and images in *Canh Dong Hoang*, whereas in *Apocalypse Now*, there is hardly any way for the audience to know this.

Throughout the entire film, there is no explanation for what is happening and why it is happening. Willard's mission is completely out of context. The film starts with a mission for a U.S. soldier to kill another U.S. soldier but does not deal with the questions of how Kurtz has gone insane and his status in Vietnam, why Willard is so depressed, what are the sins he is admitting to, or who the Southern Vietnamese people and the Vietcong are.

The War is also out of context. Viewers are supposed to know on their own why the U.S. troops are present in another people's land; why Willard has to be taking a long route and escorted to the Cambodian border because it is dangerous; why Kilgore orders several air strikes to clear villages and why villagers are tied together as if they are being forced to go somewhere. After all, where is this place which U.S. soldiers are risking their lives for, and for what exactly? In *Apocalypse Now*, there is no 'before', no 'after' for the Vietnamese people, the country, and the War; they simply happen to be there!

Similar to *Canh Dong Hoang*, *Apocalypse Now* is also an individualized story. The whole film revolves around Willard's mission upstream to find Kurtz and the development of Willard's inner conversation with the colonel he is supposed to terminate. The War is presented through a journey of "the lonely hero in search of his own identity via the symbolic quest for a mysterious man" (Kranz, 1980, p.18). Willard is not only lonely. He has demonstrated quite severe psychological symptoms in the beginning of the film, where he performs his bizarre dance and expresses sentiments of great intensity.

However, there is no story that explains his troubled mental state. The very first and strong impression that viewers are left with about Willard is that he is clearly on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In the first scene, he is staring blankly at the ceiling fan, talking to himself, and waiting to have a mission, any mission at all.

Willard (voice over): - *Saigon, shit. I'm still only in Saigon. Every time I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after my first tour, it was worse. I'd wake up and there'd be nothing... I hardly said a word to my wife until I said yes to a divorce. When I was here I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I've been here a week now. Waiting for a mission, getting softer... Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service.*

Evidently, the depressed Captain Willard is disposed to accept whatever mission assigned to him without question. This way Coppola could avoid dealing with many political and ethical issues that a sober Willard would otherwise have had to.

Coppola also deliberately made Willard a passive spectator (Coppola, 2006). In the entire film, Willard uses his gun only once, and that is to shoot the half-dead Vietnamese woman in the boat. He does not care if Kilgore ignores him but pays special

attention to Lance. He participates in an assault but does not fight. He lets Chief decide to seize the boat and the massacre subsequently happens. The crew is ambushed but he never fights back; instead, he tries to tell them the arrows are just “toys.” Consequently, Chief is killed. Willard is very quiet, sometimes almost invisible whatever the circumstance. The only time he lets out a scream is when Chef’s head is thrown on his lap.

In *Apocalypse Now* the viewers can see the brutality and craziness of the situation. Yet, the passiveness of Captain Willard bolsters a kind of apathy, as if the audience is told, “Yes, it is awful, but it is okay!” Nevertheless, the audience might want to see Willard’s position in the situation, to see him act and take a side, which he never does. One the one hand, this can be seen as a message sent to U.S. viewers, “Look! This was brutal. It happened because you were sitting on the fence and indecisive the same as Willard.” On the other hand, by creating a passive Willard, Coppola was able to avoid the complicated question of the War as to why they were there and if what they did was right or wrong. Coppola (or Willard) didn’t take a side, which means he didn’t have to deal with all the emotional reactions from the audience, in other words, he wouldn’t offend one side or the other, and thus did not risk many of his potential customers such as cinema goers and distributors.

Although it might be true that Coppola did not lose his potential viewers, the viewers are troubled by being left suspended as to how the Americans came to be in this situation in the first place, and who are those people who appear in the background of his mission. The suspension continues as the plot unfolds, yet, no answer is ever given.



However, does it really matter? The general U.S. population had little idea of why they should be fighting in Vietnam except that there was some threat of communism and the idea of saving a country from evil forces. They only knew the War from the television screen. The viewers cared little if the portrayal was accurate, or if what they did in this film (or in the real Vietnam) was ethical (Kranz, 1980). The truer reality is they lost, which can cause strong reactions. Coppola was intelligent enough to make use of this sentiment. Kranz (1980) explains this well.

The films (*Apocalypse Now* and the *Deer Hunter*) draw on familiar associations – as well as forcefully acted dramatic moments – to engage our emotions, while preserving a style that encourages us to forget about “accuracy” and concentrate on the story. The story is a powerful set of emotions – hatred of war, anger toward the (Vietnamese) torturers, sympathy for the (American) soldiers – which in the context of the films is very difficult to question. (p. 19)

Kranz’s explanation is reasonable. Watching *Apocalypse Now*, the viewers are so emotionally wrapped up in the individualized stories of Willard and other characters that what is left is awe; yet, most feelings are for the Americans. The emotional appeal is so well used in *Apocalypse Now* to the point it is almost exploited, solely for the sake of political avoidance. “Nationalism,” “patriotism,” and the “just cause” are not something the viewers should be concerned about.

This film, as Kranz points out, is “so free of ideology, you almost never even see a flag.” While *Canh Dong Hoang* gives us a linear understanding of the War, shows us ordinary but patriotic people unanimously fighting to protect their country, *Apocalypse Now* makes us more confused. Who is the enemy? Who should be protected or terminated? The War for the Vietnamese is a war for peace and independence. Then what

is the War for the Americans? Admittedly, Coppola did a good job in showing the War is intense but nothing glorious to be proud of. Each participant in the War finds his/her own way to make it bearable and justifiable.

This War is a vacation for Lance. He has such a good time surfing on the river and the ocean, having BBQs, dancing, and drawing on his face. Even at the most frightening moment when the boat is ambushed, he still finds time to play with an arrow, making it look as if it is going through his skull. His Vietnamese puppy is more important than Mr. Clean's death. He performs a sophisticated (yet strange) ritual for Chief's funeral, though it is hard to determine where he has learned that ritual or whether he has invented it himself. He easily merges into Kurtz's tribal kingdom and actively appears in all of their ceremonies, dressing like them, dancing with them, and being the main figure in their last ritual to kill the bull when he pours blood on the bull's head. In the end, he is ready to worship Willard as a god replacement after Willard has killed Kurtz. For Lance, the Vietnam War is a tourist trip, as he replies to his American girlfriend, "This is better than Disneyland!"

For Mr. Clean, the 17-year-old boy, the War is not only fun but also full of excitement like a child's game. Viewers may find it hard to forget the expression on his face after he opens fire on the boat people while screaming out of control. All of them, three men and one woman – unarmed civilians, are murdered in an instant. When the whole scene settles down after the shooting, his eyes open wide, his jaw drops, he takes his hat off and slowly moves his head forward, seemingly to find out what is going on.

After a few seconds, his facial expression changes from total panic to complete naivety, as if he is about to say, "Oops, I am so sorry to have killed all of you!"

The War for Chef and Chief is a little more straightforward. Chef is portrayed as an older man but always frightened. For him, the War is a burden he has to bear, and he cannot wait for it to end.

Chef (talking to Willard): - *I'll do anything to get out of this joint. We could blow all the assholes away. They're all so spaced out they wouldn't even know it. I'm not afraid of those fucking skulls and altars and shit. I used to think if I died in an evil place then my soul wouldn't make it to heaven. Well, fuck. I don't care where it goes as long it ain't here.*

Although saying that he's not afraid, his mumbling, shaky voice reveals his terror. His saying "I don't care where it goes as long it ain't here" summarizes well the mentality of a number of Vietnam soldiers toward the War. Chief is the opposite. He does not show his feelings or express his opinions. He follows orders dutifully no matter how strange they sound, as he once explained to Willard, "I don't think. My orders are I'm not supposed to know where I'm taking this boat, so I don't. But one look at you and I know it's gonna be hot, wherever it is."

Different from all of them, the War is an obsession for Willard. Once he is in the city even with his wife, the only thing he wants to do is to go "back to the jungles." He's obsessed with the trees that are burned by bombs, the image and sound of helicopters.

Willard (voice over): - *Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush he gets stronger.*

He is desperate for a mission so that he can go back to the jungles.

Other characters in *Apocalypse Now* also show their own methods of overcoming the War, not fighting. Kilgore plays music on the helicopters on the way to an attack on a village; delivers cards to dead bodies; gives his own water to a wounded Vietnamese soldier; loves the smell of napalm – the “smell of victory” in his words. A grenade that explodes about 10 feet near him does not even bother him. Finally, Kurtz, the best soldier that the Army could ever produce, takes refuge in the jungle among indigenous tribes, setting up his own kingdom, being worshiped like a God, and yet waiting for somebody to come to take him away, in other words, kill him off. Nguyen (1981) summarizes well the troubled mentality of American soldiers in the War.

They were not politically awakened enough to protest in an organized, rational, efficient way against this policy and these mechanisms of war... but they had not yet been intoxicated enough not to feel more or less violent qualms of conscience while perpetrating destruction and massacre... They could not grasp the reason, the rationale for this monstrous killing and they were crushed, choked under the weight of the military mechanisms and the war technology. (Nguyen, V.)

Ironically, the American soldiers in *Canh Dong Hoang* are much more normal than in *Apocalypse Now* because all of Coppola's characters are to some degree insane according to conventional definitions of sanity and insanity. This emotional intensity comes to a climax in the night battle scene at Do Lung Bridge. Willard leaves the boat to find the commanding officer of the post for information. Loud music, flares, darkness, sounds of bombs and bullets, screams and hysterical laughs make it resemble “hell,” is it is often described in books and myths. He passes a group of mostly black soldiers, sitting quietly and staring at him blankly as he crawls by. He sees dead and injured bodies on the

way, tries to talk to a number of panicking troops but cannot find the C.O. Finally, he grabs a black soldier who is screaming, cursing, and laughing at the same time as he opens fires at his invisible enemy.

Willard: - *Who is the commanding officer here?*

The soldier (stopping shooting, turning to look at Willard with eyes wide open): -  
*Ain't you?*

That is the last straw. He gives up and returns to the boat. Some argue that Coppola does not seem to include some of the soldiers who were sufficiently rational and politically aware to be against the War. Perhaps Coppola deliberately made them that way. *Canh Dong Hoang* draws a clear picture and tells a comprehensible, simple story, whereas *Apocalypse Now* arouses feelings of chaos and horror. It is as though the only way the director can explain the U.S.' defeat is "to make Viet Nam itself incomprehensible" (Kranz, 1980, p. 19). It is as if he wants to say, "Who could possibly win the War if the situation drove all of our men insane?" Of course, he forgets to address the question as to who created this situation to begin with. Who would like to answer this question, and, would it draw in many viewers if it provided an answer?

A negatively incomprehensible representation of "the other" serves two purposes, as Steeves (2008) summarized, "they exploit ethnocentricity in times of discontent, supporting an ideology of superiority; and they justify the political economic actions of Western nations" (p. 420). In this sense, Coppola's depiction of a chaotic, crazily intense war to send out the message that "yes, we lost, but it was because our enemy was applying unethical tactics and drove all of our men to their nervous breakdowns. We lost

because we were ethically superior to them.” As Cawley (1990) put it, the U.S. military lost because it fights according to rules, while its opponents don’t (p. 70).

In this way, Coppola gives his audiences incentives and moral redemptions after watching a film about a war to which their country lost. In this way, the hegemonic and ideological order of the world remains intact because after all, superior Americans are still the ones whom the discontent viewers should be sympathizing with and supporting.

While *Canh Dong Hoang* shows a clear black and white picture, *Apocalypse Now* no longer presents a straightforward war convention for Americans, the villain and the hero, the good guy (us) and the bad guy (them), and the good guy eventually wins. This convention no longer works because in the Vietnam War, the bad guy might be “us” and worse, we lost, which can be unacceptable to many Americans (Kranz, 1980). It must have been difficult for directors to produce a politically good war film and at the same time have to find a way to get around this emotional trap.

A depiction of an incomprehensible, surreal war to avoid facing a political or ideological inquiry was perhaps the only channel available for him to make sense of what happened to both the Vietnamese and the Americans. According to Engelhardt (1998), “it was impossible to ‘see’ who had defeated the United States and hence why Americans had lost, it was impossible to grasp what had been lost” (p. 180). This kind of depiction, nevertheless, must have succeeded judging by the box office revenue,<sup>15</sup> was at least twice as much as the budget. There must be characteristics of *Apocalypse Now* that attracted many ordinary viewers and made this film a “classic” (Coppola, 2006). However, audiences who are more politically aware may find themselves tempted to wish for a

more comprehensive representation. Watching the film, they find themselves faced with chaos, which is never explained. Llácer and Enjuto (1998) summarized it thus:

*Apocalypse Now* was claimed to be the definitive film about Vietnam, regardless of its avoidance, once more, of any political analysis... The psychedelic imagery seems absurd: Wagner music during a helicopter attack, a firelight engaged to create a wave in which soldiers can practice surfing or a Play-Boy Bunnies show in the middle of the jungle. In some critics' opinion, this is a way to explain imperialist aggression, but it drastically sidesteps the ultimate category of analysis and all the references and hints seen in the film only leave us with a symbol, a representation – not an explanation – of evil. (p. 9)

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* proves one of the main comments by film critics on the Vietnam War films, which is shared by Dittmar and Michaud (1991), Wilson (1982), and Cawley (1990). All these scholars, among many others, agree that the failure of most films is to raise the question of what got us into Vietnam in the first place; that most films simply obscured the reality of the War: its origins, its reasons and its consequences.

Why is there a difference between *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* in the representation of the War? Because in reality, the Vietnamese fighters knew what they were fighting and dying for, "which must be horrible" (Fallaci, 1972, p. 57). U.S. soldiers went into the War thinking they were going to save the Vietnamese from some sort of vague evil forces – the evil of Communism. Instead, they found themselves being trapped and hated (Fallaci, 1972).

I don't give a damn about this war. I think like my brother, who's in the 137<sup>th</sup> Airborne and says: 'It's a stupid pointless war for us and for them; I still don't know why we're here.' We're kids, we ought to be at school, not here. And everyone hates us because we're here. The Charlies call us 'imperialists.' I don't even know what it means. What does 'imperialist' mean? Will you tell me? (p. 256)

They found that there was nothing glorious in the War, and they were killing the people they were supposed to protect. Just as Rich (1980) commented on the boat massacre in *Apocalypse Now*, which Coppola admitted was inspired by the My Lai (Mỹ Lai) massacre and which was among many massacres of unarmed Vietnamese civilians during the War<sup>16</sup> (Turse, 2009):

In this scene, *Apocalypse Now* comes closest to being the examination of the Vietnam War that Coppola has started out to make. There are no fancy special effects, no mega-death beauty, no nobility, no myths – just a dirty little killing in a dirty little boat. (Rich, B. R., 1980, p. 17)

While the media producers (films included) select the *preferred* codes to cast problematic events (such as the Vietnam War), consensually, “somewhere within the *repertoire* of the dominant ideologies,” room must be given to oppositional perspectives that somewhat challenge the status quo (Hall, 1977, p. 343). This particular scene of the boat massacre illustrates Hall’s assertion. Although Coppola intentionally avoided dealing with the political aspects of the War in *Apocalypse Now* (and thus reinforcing the hidden political agenda of the U.S. government as well as the myth about the cause of the War), he provoked questions of the “just cause” and the casualties the U.S. government brought about in the War.

This scene may compel viewers to look at the dirtiness of the War inflicted upon another country. Coppola should indeed be praised for his effort to produce a film that upset the U.S. government and military, who never approved his script. Therefore, compared with other films produced earlier, such as the *Green Berets*, *Rambo*, and *The Deer Hunter*, which harshly distorted the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now* is said to be



quite politically progressive. In a sense, his refusal to “go with the tide” shows a great deal of courage in challenging the authority and hegemony, as well as the dominant ideology.

Similarly, signs of ideological challenges can be found in *Canh Dong Hoang* around the portrayal of Jean’s family. The inclusion of the picture of Jean’s wife and son, together with the birthday party stirred up controversy in the country. Many critics argued that Sen Nguyen had betrayed the nation by giving the “enemy” a tender portrayal. They maintained that the sinister aggressors who invaded the country did not deserve that. Apparently, Nguyen had gone against the “mainstream” ideology of the time. Interestingly, the Vietnamese government, which funded and censored all media products, allowed this oppositional view to emerge. The film later even competed at the Moscow International Film Festival and won the first prize, and it was said that it was the humanistic approach of Nguyen toward the “enemy” that made it stand out among all others.

Probably the hardest thing for U.S. soldiers to deal with being in the Vietnam War is that they had no just cause to believe in. Therefore, there were hardly any justifications for their actions. However, no matter the reason they gave to justify their intervention, they devastated the country and killed millions of native people.

Abstract figures which so far have only met with indifference now take on concrete shape and come into life: 7.093 million tons of bombs dropped by planes, 7.016 million tons by ground weapon, 0.156 million tons by the navy, altogether 14.205 million tons of lethal devices, 72.354 million liters of defoliants... 577 kilograms<sup>17</sup> of ammunition per head of population. (Nguyen, 1980, p. 42)

*Canh Dong Hoang* is clear and simple in its choice of characters, plots, and language. *Apocalypse Now* is the opposite. The plot is surreal. The language is confusing because it presents the viewers with sophisticated messages such as the conversations between Willard and Kurtz, Kilgore's philosophy, the photojournalist's description of Kurtz, and Kurtz' bizarre poetry style itself. Therefore, *Apocalypse Now* leaves the viewers in a state of confusion. It is understandable because even Coppola got lost during the production process (Coppola, 2004). Toward the second half of the film, Coppola had to change the script many times, yet still could not find an ending to this film. Perhaps it was because there would have been no happy conclusion to this War; there would have been no ending that satisfied the Americans.

This is probably Coppola's clearest neorealist technique in *Apocalypse Now*. He came to the Philippines with a sketchy script, and during the three-year production, the final version did not look at all like the original one (Coppola, 2006). He developed the plot of the film as it went. As the end became increasingly difficult to write, just as the War was going to a dead end for the U.S. government and military, sometimes he stayed up all night to construct the next day's scenes and dialogues, which did not always succeed. Coppola appeared at the filming site with the scenario he wrote in the previous night but sometimes he got rid of the whole scene and acting and restarted all over (Coppola, 1995).

As Shiel (2006) points out, neorealist filmmakers choose a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and stress the authentic human interaction. Willard's emotional meltdown in his hotel room at the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* was also

produced by such technique. The liquor he drank was real, strong spirit. Coppola was in the room, triggering him by sentimental comments, encouraging him to think of painful experience. Willard was literally in a vulnerable place. By the time he punched the mirror, whose broken pieces cut his hands open, the frustration and emotions were real, not the result of an “act” (Coppola, 2006). The crew looked at Coppola as if wanting to ask him if they should stop because his hand was bleeding, Coppola decided not to, because it would interfere with the authentic manifestation of human emotions.

Undeniably, Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* should be praised for its bodacious questioning of moral values, which also falls into the category of neorealism that urges filmmakers and viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and look at the larger issues of human concerns and general worldview (Marcus, 1986, p. 13). Coppola made a great attempt in *Apocalypse Now* to compel viewers to embrace the reality of the “others” by showing the brutality of the War and the casualties inflicted upon the Vietnamese by U.S. interventions. For this, he deserves a great deal of encomium. However, his work would have been greatly more politically progressive if he had solved the suspense and confusion.

The confusion remains because Coppola never provides an answer, unlike Nguyen in *Canh Dong Hoang*. The answer is that there is invasion from the U.S. side and resistance from the Vietnamese side. In this respect, another Vietnam War film, *Good Morning, Vietnam!* produced in the late 1980s is better because at least it attempts to give an answer. When the main character Robin William cornered his teenager Vietnamese

friend and questioned him, “I thought we were friends, not enemies!” The boy screamed, “Who is the enemy? YOU are the enemy!” (Levinson, 1987)

Kranz (1980) also compared Ingmar Bergman’s *Shame* with *Apocalypse Now*, pointing out that Coppola took an imperialistic stand in his approach to Vietnam and the War. Through this imperial lens, he sees the Vietnamese as inferior (thus, they are faceless and nameless as discussed previously). Consequently, in the absence of any political explanation, the invasion can be seen to be acceptable

Ingmar Bergman’s SHAME is not even about a “real” war, although it can easily be viewed as a statement on Vietnam... Yet in many ways, Bergman’s film is more true to Vietnam than is Coppola’s. Coppola can show us Vietnam only as the invader sees it. Whether he looks down from a plane or across the river from a boat, the invader sees only gooks, monsters, victims or slaves – never humans... Thus he universalizes the invader’s confusion when he simply can’t understand why things aren’t working out. Bergman’s heroes, while equally confused about the war on a factual level, do understand the reason for it: there is confusion because someone has invaded their country. Even Kurtz can’t figure that one out. (Kranz, 1980, p.18)

In conclusion, both *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now* highly individualize the Vietnam War. The War in Nguyen’s *Canh Dong Hoang* is portrayed via a small family living on the Mekong Delta. In Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, it is the lonely journey by Captain Willard with his classified mission. However, Nguyen positions the family in the context of their community and national struggle. Nationalism in his film is woven naturally with individuals’ lives by a clear, linear, conventional war plot, a simple language, and mise-en-scène.

By contrast, Coppola colors his film with surrealism, confusing messages, and an unresolved suspension. Because there is no nationalism to rely on in this war film, he

resorts to personal sympathy and makes use of Americans' familiar associations with the War. The political and ideological message is subtle but transparent in *Canh Dong Hoang*, which informs the audiences of the cause of the War and makes it clear who is "us" and who is "them." Coppola, however, avoids the political and ideological inquiry, yet to some extent compels the viewers to question U.S. involvement. While Nguyen's *Canh Dong Hoang* wins the audience's heart, which makes the film one of the best Vietnamese war films of all time, *Apocalypse Now* is popular because it plays to the viewers' thirst for fantasies and surrealism.

### ***Portrayal of women***

The main signs and signifiers used in *Apocalypse Now* are the picture of Jean's wife, the tape of Mr. Clean's mother, and letters from Chief's and Lance's girlfriends, and the playboy girl show. Signs and signifiers regarding the portrayal of women in *Canh Dong Hoang* include the picture of Jean's wife, Linda, and son, John, the accident in which Vu falls into the water, the act of Sau holding up the light for Ba Do in the first scene, and the last battle scene. I will examine what those signs and signifiers signify in themselves and in relation to other signs. Then I will explore them in a wide system of meaning, especially in the articulation of ideology and hegemony.

I argue that women play a much more central role in *Canh Dong Hoang* than in *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola's women are almost invisible; they make up the background and are a source of support for males. If they are seen in the film, they are objects. In the scene in which in U.S. women appear for the longest, they are highly objectified and sexualized. In contrast, *Canh Dong Hoang* gives much more credit to (Vietnamese)

women through the depiction of Sau, who is not only a wife and a mother but also a fighter and a homemaker, in other words, a super-woman. Although the Vietnamese women are not sexualized, they are also diminished as subordinates. In addition, they are stereotyped to fit into the patriarchal society of Vietnam.

The similarity in terms of women's portrayals in the two films is that they show women of both countries. Although faceless and nameless as are many other Vietnamese, Vietnamese women do appear in the Coppola film. They are street vendors, schoolteachers, farmers, and fighters. They are shown in *Apocalypse Now* as distant figures; thus all the viewers know about them is their traditional costume and conical hats. They are either almost "mute," as is the old woman appearing at the beginning of the film, or speak only a few words.

For example, the audience can hear them yell and scream when the helicopters approach or hear the moaning of the woman on the boat after she is machine gunned. From the perspective of the helicopters showing the tops of their hats moving through the rice fields, the audience is informed that the Vietnamese women are also farmers, although it is unable to determine their farming practices or how those farmers live their lives.

The Vietnamese women are also fighters. In several scenes in *Apocalypse Now*, we can see women's figures shooting rifles or assisting males with the mortars. On the vehicle, which is blown up by Kilgore's crew while crossing the bridge, there are a few women. One knows this even if they are shown in long shots because in Vietnam mostly women wear the conical hats.

U.S. women in *Canh Dong Hoang* are depicted even more sketchily. Jean's wife, Linda, is the only close-up representation from which the audience learns what Jean's wife looks like, and this represents all U.S. women to the Vietnamese audience. They are also informed that Linda and son John are missing Jean and waiting for his homecoming. Again, this represents many other wives and children of U.S. soldiers in *Canh Dong Hoang*, just as U.S. viewers learn via *Apocalypse Now* that Vietnamese women dress in áo dài and wear conical hats. At Jean's party, there are no blue-eyed and blond-haired women like his wife. Either the Vietnamese viewers would have to assume the Asian-looking women in this film, who are drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes, are Americans, or there are no American women at all.

Nguyen could not do better than that, however. He was lucky enough to have Robert Hai as Mitscher, who looks somewhat "Western," but he could not find any Western-looking women who could act. Perhaps it was not important for Nguyen to have western women starring because there were not many American women in the War and the presence of a Western woman was extremely rare.

It is the representation of Coppola's and Nguyen own women's role in the War that differentiates *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang*. Coppola's women do not fight, whereas Nguyen do just like his men. Certainly if a war happened on U.S. soil, one would see U.S. women hold a gun. This is, however, not the point. It is the credit given to women that distinguishes the two films. In the Vietnam War, U.S. women might not encounter violence but they fought in their own way, such as being peace activists, or nurses. Their contribution is now acknowledged in *Apocalypse Now* because they are

somewhat invisible, objectified, and portrayed as insignificant. The first woman introduced is Willard's wife, interestingly, in a close-up picture similar to the picture of Jean's wife. There is no substantial information about her except that she must be upset with Willard because he is obsessed with the War; he never talked to her; and she finally asked for a divorce to which Willard said "yes." Therefore, even though she has a face in the film, she is almost invisible, and so are many other American women.

For example, the audience only hears briefly about Chef's girlfriend Eva and that he wants to maintain the relationship with her. Lance's girlfriend is Sue, who asked him if there would be anywhere better than Disneyland. This signifies that all she cares about is fun. Mr. Clean's mother sends him a tape with her own loving, caring voice, expressing her wish to see him soon. Women in *Apocalypse Now* do not have a role in combat, which is understandable because they are not in the battlefield. They therefore play the role of a caretaker or a lover, who wait for and support their men on the front.

The closest representation of American women in the War is the playboy girl show on the stage that is built on the water at the base where Willard and his crew stop for fuel. Hundreds of soldiers gather on a structure that holds many seats and looks like a stadium, excitedly waiting for the show. The helicopter comes, drops three girls dressed sexily as playgirls: short skirts, tiny tops, and cowboy hats. Their manner of dressing, as well as their sexy dance with short guns, is enough to excite the soldiers whose loved ones are often thousands of miles away.

It is no wonder that some of them jump on the stage and create chaos, which ends with the director of the show using yellow haze to evacuate the performers. The haze and



matches have already been put in his pocket prior to the show, which implies this kind of chaos is not something totally new or surprising to him; he must have encountered it before with other groups of soldiers and was well-prepared.

As Coppola admitted, he did not have much trouble producing this scene, as the soldiers hired were “real” American soldiers who were on duty at U.S. military bases in the Philippines at the time. They were all dressed in their regular uniforms and genuinely excited (Coppola, 2006). In this show, Coppola presents another angle of the American woman’s role in the War: as an object of entertainment. Although this is the longest scene in *Apocalypse Now* in which American women are represented, it does not provide much of the content of their characters because they are highly sexualized and objectified. Their role in the War, if not as a caretaker or a lover, is to entertain, not to fight. This is fundamentally different from the way Nguyen portrays his Vietnamese women in *Canh Dong Hoang*, which may have been reflected by the reality of the War for the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese women in the War have long been not only the caretakers, supporters, or lovers; they are also combatants. Women as military fighters has been the tradition in Vietnam since the founding of the country. Vietnam is perhaps one of the few countries, if not the only country in the world, to produce many female army generals who have led independence struggles (Tran, 1987). It is interesting to note that Vietnamese women led the first two armed insurrections against the Chinese one-thousand-year colonization.

The first dates back to the year 40-43 B.C. with the two generals called Trung Trac and Trung Nhi (Trung Trắc and Trung Nhi) who were sisters. They repulsed the Chinese rulers and set themselves up as monarchs in the year 40. They were famous not only for their bravery, but also for their military competence by riding elephants to fight the Chinese combatants who were mostly on horses. Their spontaneous resistance, however, only lasted for 4 years before they were repressed by the Chinese again. The Vietnamese call them “The two Trung women.”

More than 200 years after that, Trieu Au (Triệu Ẩu) organized her 1,000 soldiers to fight against the Chinese occupying forces. She always wore a gold outfit and also rode an elephant whenever she was in combat.

Her pledge, “I want to ride the tempest, tame the waves, kill the sharks in the Eastern Sea, and drive the enemy away and save our people. I will not resign myself to the usual lot of women who bow their heads, bend their knees and become concubines”<sup>18</sup> is still remembered by many Vietnamese, especially women (Tran, 1987, p. 82).

However, the resistance could only be sustained for half a year; she died at the age of 23. The Vietnamese called her Trieu woman (Tran, 1999). There are many such extraordinary women in Vietnamese history. They fought alongside men in anti-colonial movements against the French. They formed what was called the “long-haired army” during the War against the United States. They were called “the best fighters” by Elmo R. Zumwalt, U.S.N., retired chief of naval operations (Tran, 1987).

Members of the all women “long-haired army” participated in military attacks, in mass political organizations, in all kinds and all forms of legal, semilegal, and illegal protests and activities, conducting “subversive” education within the ranks of Saigon Vietnamese soldiers. (Tran, D., 1987, p. 82)

A very old Vietnamese saying essentially sums up the role of women in Vietnam: “When the aggressor comes, women also fight” (Tran, D., 1987, p. 82). This tradition of women’s resistance and participation is well depicted in *Canh Dong Hoang*. In fact, it is one of the major aspects of the story. There are numerous female combatants in the film. The first guerrilla who meets Ba Do is a young woman with a round face, big eyes, and long hair. She has the look of a beautiful girl from the countryside. Both her voice and manner are so loving and tender that it is hard to imagine such a figure in combat. Indeed, it is not rare that those tender-looking figures are present in combat.

One of the most famous pictures of the War shows a tall U.S. soldier with his hands tied behind his back and head down walking in front of a female guerrilla who is about two-thirds of his height. She is holding a rifle pointing straight at him; her eyes look determined. This picture is shown in many exhibitions and books in Vietnam with a small but well-known poem written for it, “O du kích nhỏ dương cao súng. Thằng Mỹ lênh khênh bước cúi đầu,” which translates into English as, “Small guerrilla girl holds up the rifle. Big American soldier walks with bended head.”

Women are portrayed as playing an important role in *Canh Dong Hoang*. They appear in the soldier groups that need Ba Do’s help to cross the field; they are shown shot in one of those missions. In the meeting between the guerrillas and the Vietcong leader, many female guerrillas are present. In the village where she meets the Vietcong leader to report Ba Do’s mistreatment, most of the people there are female who seem to know Sau and Ba Do quite well, like friends.

Among those, Sau is the strongest representation of female guerrilla fighters. She always appears in the film with a rifle wherever she goes, whether to pick fruit and vegetables or to harvest rice. Many close-ups show her straightforward and determined look as she watches out for helicopters or expresses her anger. She is highly alert. She wakes up before Ba Do. She is the first to hear the helicopters coming. She is always portrayed to be fully aware of her surroundings so that she can either take cover or fight back. Compared with Ba Do, she has her share of struggles against the helicopter hunts and never appears to be a dependent, helpless woman who has to rely totally on a man to survive.

The last battle, in which Sau shoots down Jean's helicopter and kills him, is the most powerful symbolization of Vietnamese female contribution to the War. After she runs toward Ba Do and finds him dead, she does not spend a moment weeping but takes his rifle and walks in the helicopter's direction. The helicopter swoops around and comes for her. Fearlessly, she leans back, points the weapon into the sky and opens fire. The machine gunner is shot and falls out of the helicopter, and apparently, the bullet hits the engine or gas tank.

After Jean's helicopter is down, Sau comes back to Ba Do. Only then does she scream and cry. This, however, does not last long either because in the bunker, Vu, their son, is crying. She picks him up, takes a brief look at the helicopter wreck with Jean's corpse inside, and walks away with her son. The battle is over. The film ends with her approaching the viewers with a sad face but she looks straight at them, determinedly, as if wanting to say, "We can't be destroyed." This symbolizes the end of the War: many

people have died, including “us” and “them,” but the Vietnamese win. The people who survive are Sau and her son; the mother represents care and nurturing and the child represents a new life. After all, this ending scene symbolizes a continuing life and a coming future for the survivors of the War.

Although Coppola’s women do not fight and Nguyen’s do just as much as, and alongside their men, their women share one common characteristic – they are both portrayed as the caretakers. The very first scene of the film portraying Sau holding up a fire lamp for Ba Do to get the fish at dawn is a highly symbolic role. Vietnamese women are often the fire keeper of the household. It is a common practice in the society that the men take care of the main house and the women take care of the kitchen.<sup>19</sup>

During times of war in many cases when the man (or men<sup>20</sup>) in the household has to leave for battle at dawn, the mother or wife will carry a light and accompany him for a few hundred yards to the edge of the village. There, she stops with the light on as if she wishes it to shine the way for the man. This imagery is common in Vietnamese war films because it is based on real-life experience.

When one Vietcong soldier, who was angry at Ba Do’s smoke warning, was injured and brought to their hiding bunker, Sau is the one who bandages his wounded leg and comforts him. In the morning before Ba Do wakes up, she starts the fire, prepares his morning kit with tobacco and a lighter. In many scenes, she cooks, clothes the baby, and goes to find food. She spends the night cutting the parachute and makes it into a shirt for Vu. Sau symbolizes the role of the Vietnamese woman, maintaining the warmth of the family. As it is often said in Vietnam, “Men build houses, and women build homes.”

Like women everywhere, Vietnamese women receive unequal treatment in society such as domestic exploitation and discrimination; and “foreign invasion only aggravated their already miserable existence” (Tran, 1987, p. 82). This is clearly shown in *Canh Dong Hoang* where Sau not only has to take care of the household, her husband, and son but also bears the role of a combatant.

Nguyen however, lessens her burden a great deal by depicting Ba Do as a supportive, caring, and protective husband. Ba Do also cooks, hunts for food, plays with the son, and cares for Sau’s needs. This portrayal is exceptional and thus does not at all represent the overall picture of the plight of the Vietnamese women. Even to this day, quarterly, semi-annual, and annual reports from the Vietnamese Women’s Union, Association of Women and Children Protection, and other non-governmental organizations such as Save Children Sweden, indicate severe and continuing mistreatment of women in Vietnam in both the domestic and professional environment.

Vietnamese women fought alongside their men in the War, but as shown in *Canh Dong Hoang*, they are only subordinates. The War has ended, and as Tran (1987) argues, they have returned to their inferior, domestic status. The global economy and the Vietnamese government’s socialist orientation have recently provided them with the opportunity to have a profession and improve their economic situation. This, however, does not alter existing gender and class hierarchies, rather encourages women to “add new tasks to their domestic responsibilities, with no changes in gender roles” (Steeves, 2003, p. 236). One of the Vietnamese government’s popular slogans for women,

“Vietnamese women: excellent at societal duties, admirable at housework”<sup>21</sup> reflects the expectations for a kind of super-woman in the country.

As discussed in previous sections, films in particular and the media in general operate within the ideological and hegemonic order established by the dominant class in society. Media products (on the surface, especially in democratic societies) appear to be “neutral” and free (Hall, 1977). They, however, exercise their ideological effect in everyday life through their choice of events, aspects of events, and how the events are to be cast, which supports and reinforces the current hegemony and ideology.

Undeniably, Nguyen’s version of Vietnamese women reinforces the societal expectations put on women not only at home but also at work. Sau does housework, is the first to wake up in the morning, takes care of the baby and her husband, finds food for the household, works in the rice field, and fights as a soldier throughout the film. The incident where Vu falls into the water shows the expectation of women in the case of domestic violence. In this particular instance, Nguyen for a second allows his woman to stand up for herself against her man when she leaves home to report his mistreatment to his army commander.

However, the moment of resistance does not last long. The commander (a man) simply laughs it off, saying that he thought “it was something more serious!” In other words, being beaten by the husband is nothing to be worried about. This well reflects the general attitude toward women in Vietnam, which dictates that women should be accepting of the fact that men can be violent to them.

In the case of Sau, she is a cook, a farmer, a seamstress, a breadwinner, a caretaker, and a combatant; at the same time, she is expected not to stand up against her husband when he mistreats her. In fact, it is of question that his slapping her would even be considered “mistreatment.” Therefore, it is obvious that Nguyen’s women are truly super-heroines; they dutifully accomplish their domestic and professional tasks and do not challenge the patriarchy that has been one of the most fundamental ideological dogmas of the country since its formation.

The patriarchal ideology adopted from China more than 1,000 years ago has been transformed into Vietnam’s tradition. It has truly become “common sense,” which according to Hall (1977) enables ideology to remain unchallenged. The Vietnamese, therefore, do not think of male domination as part of the hegemonic patriarchy – a global phenomenon that needs changing, but as “traditional values” all Vietnamese are urged to preserve. This makes it particularly difficult for more liberated and strong Vietnamese women to fight for change because they are said to be going “against” the whole culture and traditional heritage. In most cases, this is often used very successfully as a convenient pretext to diminish Vietnamese women’s attempt to fight for their equality.

Unfortunately, the “tradition preservation” also presents the women themselves with a convenient excuse to succumb to societal expectations, thinking that, “it has to be this way because it has always been this way and there is no way things will change.” It is difficult for them to see that there must be somebody to take initiatives in order to change “common sense.” Like in Andersen’s *The Emperor's New Clothes*, if the child does not speak up the truth and challenge the King’s and the whole population’s



deception, they will keep hailing something they don't believe in but they do anyway because "everyone else is believing in and they don't want to lose their face."

Therefore, if the patriarchal hegemony in Vietnam is to change, it is indispensable that Vietnamese women stop thinking about their mistreatment and deprivation of rights as "part of the culture and tradition." Nguyen's version of Vietnamese women certainly does not help encourage this revolutionary resistance.

Similarly, Coppola's women in *Apocalypse Now* do not have an equal status. Coppola's women also play the role of caretakers and lovers. They are invisible. When they are the center of the stage, they are sexualized objects and entertainers. They do not fight and certainly do not speak their minds. The sketchy portrayal of women in *Apocalypse Now* signifies their insignificance; and through their sketchy portrayal, one can see that they are a scattered force that is too weak to have a cogent voice, which is not necessarily true. Many American women were political activists in the Vietnam War. They may be nameless, but their demonstrations contributed a great deal to changing U.S. policies toward Vietnam. They were certainly stronger and more mobilized than a scattered force. Those women are represented in *Apocalypse Now*. Perhaps Coppola, with his intention to avoid political questions of the War, excluded them. In any event, his exclusion and superficial depiction of American women in the film does not acknowledge the importance of women in American society and thus reinforces the male dominant status quo.

In conclusion, the women in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* are portrayed to be the caretakers of the soldiers and the households. They also play the role

of a lover and a source of comfort for their men. The difference is Coppola spends a considerable portion of his film on the girl-show, which highly commodifies the women, whereas Nguyen devotes much of his film footage to the portrayal of a resilient and brave female character who also fights in the War like men. The depiction of Coppola's women is shallow.

By contrast, Nguyen's women are not entertainers or highly objectified, but they take on tasks that are much more important. However, while one might find glory in the super-hero image of the Vietnamese women, one can't help wondering about the burden they are bearing, being a mother, a wife, a caretaker, and a combatant all at the same time, which is not overtly shown in the film because Sau does not for one second show her weariness. This burden has certainly been lessened to a great extent thanks to the tender portrayal of Ba Do, which judging by the social-cultural context of the country is atypical.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> A large, white hat made of a special type of straw, very light and durable, supposed to protect all of their face and most of their neck from the tropical sun of the country. This hat (*nón* in Vietnamese) is extremely common and has become a symbol (sometimes abusive stereotype) of the Vietnamese.

<sup>2</sup> *Áo dài* in Vietnamese, this object has been so over-utilized in many American films indicate the Vietnamese that it becomes problematic.

<sup>3</sup> It is in the North West of Cambodia.

<sup>4</sup> Mass vaccination always was the first preoccupation of Indochinese revolutionaries, even during the hardest stages of the war (Nguyen, V., 1981, p. 43). There is absolutely no evidence of this occurrence (Kranz, R., 1980).

<sup>5</sup> This is the exact copy from the film, which looks like a typo. Perhaps the reason is that not many of Nguyen's production team had adequate knowledge of the English language, thus making this mistake.

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<sup>6</sup> This was a common practice during that time. Parachutes were used to make clothes, curtains, pot holders, or to cover rooftops.

<sup>7</sup> Around 260-250 B.C. (Truong, et al., 2001).

<sup>8</sup> China attempted to colonize Vietnam since it was formed, and it has actually invaded the country a good number of times. The longest colonization lasted for about 1000 years until the year 905. Since then, they carried out invasions in almost every century. The last time the two countries were in a state of war was in 1980 after China encouraged Cambodia (under the Pol pot regime at the time) to attack various places on the southern border between Vietnam and Cambodia. In some cases, they killed the whole village, including the elderly and children (Truong, et al., 2001).

<sup>9</sup> This took place during the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Mongolians conquered China and other parts of Asia, and a large portion of Europe (including most of Russia, German, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, etc). However, they lost in all three invasions of Vietnam in 1258, 1285, and 1288. The general who played the major part in those victories is Tran Hung Dao (Trần, Hưng Đạo) who has been described as one of the 10 best military generals in world history (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, volume 11, 15th Edition).

<sup>10</sup> At war with Cambodia on and off. Sometimes the two countries sided with each other to fight against their common enemies, such as China or Mongolia.

<sup>11</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, this country attempted to invade Vietnam as part of the Western world's colonial quests.

<sup>12</sup> From 1858 to 1954.

<sup>13</sup> The U.S. government started its involvement in the Indochinese countries in the early 1950s by supporting France. After France was defeated in the 1954 Dien Bien Phu battle, the U.S. government set up a puppet government in South Vietnam to maintain its presence in the country. The U.S. military became directly involved in March 1965 when 3,500 U.S. marines landed near Da Nang (Đà Nẵng). From 1965 to 1974, almost 60,000 U.S. soldiers died in Vietnam, in which 3,731 died because friendly fire. During this time, the War cost the country \$32,000 per minute (*Nước Mỹ đổ bao nhiêu tiền để xâm lược Việt Nam?*).

<sup>14</sup> Le Thanh Tong (Lê Thánh Tông) is one of the Le Dynasty's Kings. He made this statement as part of his guidelines to his military generals and diplomatic representatives when they were on the verge of war with China. Here is the Vietnamese version: "Một thước núi, một tấc sông của ta, lẽ nào lại có thể vứt bỏ? Người phải kiên quyết tranh biện, chớ cho họ lấn dần. Nếu họ không nghe, còn có thể sai sứ sang phương Bắc trình bày rõ điều ngay lẽ gian. Nếu người dám đem một thước, một tấc đất của Thái tổ làm mối cho giặc, thì phải tội tru di."

<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to estimate the profit of *Apocalypse Now* because there was never an exact estimate of how much the production cost.

<sup>16</sup> Also according to Turse in an article published November 13, 2008, massacres like My Lai took place once a month in Vietnam (<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081201/turse/single>).

<sup>17</sup> 1,272 lbs.

<sup>18</sup> At first she commanded her own troops to help her brother in the resistance. Her brother's troops, however, turned to follow her and made her the commander-in-chief. This response of her was made when she had her own army, living in the jungle, and her brother advised her not to become a combatant. The Vietnamese version is, "Tôi muốn cưới con gió mạnh, đập đường sóng dữ, chém cá tròng kính ở Biển

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Đông, quét sạch bờ cõi để cứu dân ra khỏi nơi đẫm máu, chứ không thềm bắt chước người đời cúi đầu công lưng để làm tì thiếp người ta.” (Tran, K., 1999).

<sup>19</sup> In most cases in Vietnam, especially in rural areas, the kitchen does not belong to the house but is a separate unit a few yards away. There is often a small brick or concrete courtyard to separate the two.

<sup>20</sup> Many Vietnamese mothers saw more than one of their sons off to the battlefield. Some of them lost seven or eight sons, also their husband (Thu, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> The Vietnamese version reads, “Phụ nữ Việt Nam, giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà.”

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSION**

The Vietnam War for Americans (or the American War as it is called in Vietnam) ended more than 30 years ago, but its consequences are still felt. Because of more than 20 years of U.S. intervention, a lesser word for invasion, millions of war victims are still suffering, not only in Vietnam and the United States, but also in other countries such as Canada, Australia, and Korea, which were the United States' allies. Deformed children, the new war victims, are brought into being everyday because of landmines and chemical use. The financial compensation of \$3 billion that the U.S. government promised to pay the Vietnamese people has never been paid.

As Vietnam opens its economy and expands its political ties, the United States has now become a significant economic and political partner with the country; the two countries have also signed the Bilateral Trade Agreement as an important sign of reconciliation. Despite growing political and economic activities, conflicting issues such as foreign trade protectionism, human rights, the environment, and health problems caused by Agent Orange, remain, which also hinders the relationship between the two countries. Because Vietnam and the United States relate to one another in a complex situation constituted by historical, political, and economic factors, and many problems and causes of dispute have not been resolved, further studies are necessary if the two

nations are to increase their mutual understanding, reconcile their differences, and leave their pasts behind.

This comparative semiotic study examined and critically compared the portrayal of the Vietnam War in films produced by Vietnamese and U.S. filmmakers. Specifically, the paper compared the post-colonial film by the third world country, *Canh Dong Hoang* (The Wild Rice Field) and a neorealist style film, *Apocalypse Now*. It is undeniable that studies of the presentation of the Vietnam War in U.S. films deal mostly with the U.S. side. Perspectives of the other people are not taken into consideration; government and political involvement are not addressed; the history and culture of Vietnam is not presented. What little effort if made to present the other side is incomplete and sometimes flawed. This comparative semiotic study of *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now* contributes to filling in the missing pieces.

On the one hand, it reasserts the literature's overall assessment that political inquiry into the War in U.S. war films was evaded, and it provides an in-depth analysis of the flawed depiction of the Vietnamese people and the War. On the other hand, it brings to U.S. scholars' attention one of the popular cinematic works of the Vietnamese. While Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* received much applause from the Western block, Nguyen's *Canh Dong Hoang*, which was released in the same year (1979), was also praised for its historical, political, and cinematic values at the Moscow International Film Festival.

The two films have enjoyed popularity ever since, but like two parallel lines, they have never been brought together. *Apocalypse Now* presents the Vietnam War through the journey of Captain Willard to accomplish his mission to terminate Kurtz, a U.S.

Army colonel who had gone “insane,” according to the Army officials. Willard’s trip reveals the atrocity and “reality” of the War, and, according to Coppola, it actually presents the inner moral struggle in humans between good and evil, between glorious and dirty. *Canh Dong Hoang* is similar in the sense that it revolves around the life of a single family living in the far South of Vietnam whose job is to be the connecting point of the battlefield. The husband (Ba Do), the wife (Sau), and their child (Vu) constantly fight against the U.S. helicopter gunners, whose mission is to terminate them.

This study employs semiology to examine the two films in the framework of ideology and hegemony theories. In other words, the two films are studied closely to find the similarities and differences in their portrayal of “the enemy,” nationalism, and women to see how ideology and hegemonic order are reflected, reinforced, and challenged. Because what is signified does not necessarily only depend on what the signifier is but how it is interpreted, I am aware that my self-reflexivity plays a role in this paper. On the one hand, being a Vietnamese helps motivate me in my research and examination. On the other hand, it can also influence the way I interpret the texts.

Because there is no available subtitled version of *Canh Dong Hoang* in the United States, all the texts and materials in the paper related to the film are my own versions of translation. The questions this study are concerned with are some of the general similarities of the two films, the portrayal of “the other side,” the portrayal of nationalism through individualism, and the depiction of women.

*Apocalypse Now* and *Canh Dong Hoang* share several common aspects. They both use the “termination mission” as the main theme. In the former, it is the termination

mission within the U.S. Army. In the latter, it is between the “enemies.” Both Coppola and Nguyen. use helicopters extensively in their films, and their production process received much of military and government assistance, though Nguyen was aided by the Vietnamese government and Coppola was helped by the Philippines government. For surrealism, *Canh Dong Hoang* does not have as much of a surrealistic element in it as does *Apocalypse Now*.

The way the two films portray their “enemy” is significantly different. While the Americans in *Canh Dong Hoang* have their own story and personalities, the Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* are mostly faceless, nameless, and voiceless. They are portrayed in various circumstances and angles but never in a close-up. Nguyen’s approach to depicting the “enemy” is somewhat more balanced and compassionate. In his film, his “enemies” are also human beings who have a life and a family that loves them. This unusual portrayal of the Americans caused controversy in Vietnam at the time the film was released because it challenged the commonly held opinion that Americans were cruel and immoral, which the Vietnamese people used to explain what they did to the country.

While Nguyen’s *Canh Dong Hoang* was an assertive attempt to portray the country and the War in the way that makes sense to the Vietnamese people in the post-colonial era, Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* was produced under the umbrella of U.S. cultural imperialism. His version of Vietnam and the Vietnamese reinforces the hegemonic Western-centered ideology that suggests Western people are superior and “others” are barbaric and uncivilized. This version is constructed mostly based on stereotypes, not real-life experiences.



At the same time, it is undeniable that Coppola attempts to represent the War in a more inclusive manner than previous Vietnam War filmmakers do. In fact, *Apocalypse Now* provokes oppositional perspectives, creates sympathy toward the Vietnamese, and thus challenges the ideological banner the U.S. government raised as a pretext to invade the country. This in-depth analysis of the portrayal of the Vietnamese people in *Apocalypse Now*, comparing it with that in *Canh Dong Hoang*, contributes to U.S. film scholarship, which has not devoted much to the portrayal of the Vietnamese people.

At the same time, nationalism and individualism in *Apocalypse Now* reflect previous scholarly work that most U.S. films about the Vietnam War sustain U.S. nationalism by deviating from the historical and political inquiry of the War and highly individualizing it. From the U.S. perspective, because the United States (us) was the villain (the aggressor, murderer, and invader) and “we” lost in the War, it is as though the only way Coppola could portray the War without upsetting U.S. audiences further was to exploit personal sympathy toward the U.S. soldiers and at the same time make the “enemy” a lawless and uncivilized figure.

In addition, surrealistic *Apocalypse Now* provides Coppola with a convenient way to escape the political problem because it can be easily viewed as a fictional item. In contrast, although *Canh Dong Hoang* also highly individualizes the War, it portrays nationalism in a simple and straightforward manner. All of the characters are ordinary, rural Vietnamese people who fight side-by-side for independence. While *Canh Dong Hoang* is easy to understand, *Apocalypse Now* leaves the viewers with awe but unresolved suspense.

The depiction of women is quite different in the two films. Coppola's American women do not play an important part in the film (thus in the War in general). If portrayed at all, they are mostly lovers, caretakers, and sexualized entertainers. The image of the Vietnamese women in *Apocalypse Now* is constructed mainly based on stereotypes; there is no depth to their portrayal.

While Coppola's American do not fight, Nguyen's do, just like their men. Sau takes on multiple roles, not only a wife, a mother, a farmer, a caretaker, but also a combatant. However, she accomplishes all of her tasks dutifully without lassitude, and at the same time is expected to tolerate her husband's domestic violence. This problematic representation reinforces the patriarchal hegemony and ideology of the country. Therefore, even if the women are portrayed differently in the two films, they share one common aspect. They are diminished to being subordinates only.

Although much of U.S. scholarship has been devoted to the depiction of the Vietnam War in films, little (or none) has compared a U.S. film and a Vietnamese counterpart, which were produced in the same year and became popular in each country respectively. This study thus contributes to providing another perspective in approaching the topic of Vietnamese representation in U.S. films. Not only does it present an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of the Vietnamese in a U.S. film, it also brings forward the depiction of the War from "the other side," which is almost absent in U.S. scholarship.

It seems that U.S. people would really want to forget about Vietnam and the War in order to move on. The Vietnamese wish to do the same because they do not need to relive their painful past. However, neither party seems to succeed. The War legacy

continues to manifest itself in many ways in Vietnam; and in the United States, ordinary people are in a sense still haunted. The fact that there is no longer bombing and shooting in the country does not mean that the War is over. If people are still affected, and the impact is still felt and seen, it means the event has not been resolved.

As the United States and Vietnam become increasingly involved in multilateral and bilateral international political affairs, further studies will be necessary to enhance the mutual understanding between the two countries, not only in film studies but also in all forms of communication, such as news or books. Much U.S. scholarship has been devoted to the Vietnam War, its cause, consequences, and representations. However, most of the scholarship concerns the U.S. point of view, in other words, the U.S. version of truth. The same is also true in Vietnam. Therefore, in order for the War to be well understood from different angles, it is important to make more comparisons, such as news coverage, television representation, or public opinion. This also means a wider variety of methods should be used, not only qualitative methods such as textual analysis, but also quantitative ones such as questionnaires. In the process of addressing the missing pieces in the scholarship and the miscommunication between the two nations, it is particularly essential for the United States to attempt to understand Indochina because often superpowers grant themselves a superior status that allows them to have the luxury of unquestioning themselves.

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