Shaping the Public Memory about the Vietnam War through Dramatization

The Vietnam War waged on for nineteen long years in Southeast Asia before American troops were finally pulled out in 1975. Newborn babies were on the cusp of adulthood before this conflict came to its inevitable end. Due to the extended process of "Vietnamization" and the simmering down of riotous activity on the home front, when American troops had finally cleared out of Vietnam, the military defeat did not feel all that overwhelming. It was something that the American public had lived through for two decades, and while some were still undoubtedly shocked by the conclusion of the war, the majority of U.S. citizens saw it coming. By the time the war was over, the Tet Offensive had long passed and the raucous 1968 Democratic National Convention was a distant memory. The American consensus was desperately needed a reminder of its nation's most tumultuous time, so it turned to entertainment, where new life could be breathed into the past.

The most influential forms of entertainment that were used to reinvigorate the public's memory of the Vietnam War were films and memoirs. These two mediums allowed for in-depth looks at first-hand experiences of war, something to which not everyone would have ready access. Through dramatization, fictional films and authentic memoirs were able to shape the public memory about the war in Vietnam by accurately representing its meaninglessness, psychological impacts, and intra-platoon race relations.

Sources for Analysis

Several films and memoirs have been used to shape the public memory of Vietnam over the last four decades, but it is best to focus on a select few. Popularity and critical acclaim are key factors in deciding which films and memoirs to pursue. In this paper, focus will be on memoirs entitled *A Rumor of War*, *Dispatches*, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, and *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* as well as the following seven films: *Go Tell the Spartans*, *84 Charlie MoPic*, *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now*.

Meaninglessness

Opinions about the war grew and changed over time. It began as something simple, protecting democracy against the threatening spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Philip Caputo was not the only one under the impression that the conflict in Vietnam would be a "splendid little war," as he suggests in *A Rumor of War*. Him and his brigade believed that the whole thing would be over quickly. He was admittedly a slave to the myth of America's indomitable military might. Caputo, his brigade, and the whole of the U.S. military received a shocking wake-up call when the "Asian guerillas" began to get the better of them (Caputo 66). They were completely unprepared for what was to come.

Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans* provides somewhat of a visual aid to Caputo's *A Rumor of War* in that it represents this unanticipated state of war. In fact, in almost all of these films, the commanding officers are portrayed as shaky at best. None of the lieutenants seemed to know what they were doing, despite being skillfully trained in the art of war. The issue was that this war was unlike anything they had ever fought before. The terrain alone provided countless problems for U.S. forces. *Go Tell the Spartans* focuses on the time during the war when conflict was beginning to escalate for the worst. Like

Caputo's memoir, this film depicts both the boring and terrifying sides of war. There are an awful lot hours spent waiting and doing office-related activities, such as paperwork, but there are also a lot of gunfights, booby-trap detections, and raids on enemy bunkers (Caputo; Post).

The platoon depicted in *Go Tell the Spartans* was given a mission to hold an old, abandoned French fort. To everyone involved, the task seemed rather ridiculous. The fort was of no noteworthy value to the U.S. military, but they were to hold it anyway. Military intelligence suspected that there were no V.C. in the area. The mission was speculated to be relatively uneventful; by the end of the film, all but one have fallen and lie dead in the blood-soaked Vietnamese mud. The final image of Cpl. Courcey limping to salvation through a French graveyard as the text on the screen reads "1964" resonates with remarkable power (Post). It implies that all of the death that the viewers had just witnessed was only the beginning of an already doomed war. The Americans would end up just like the French, buried in the ground of a country in which they had no business being. Hundreds of thousands of bodies would be added to the pile by the time the U.S. figured out that this was not a war worth fighting. In the end, the sacrifices that Cpl. Courcey's friends made meant nothing when the U.S. lost the war and communism spread. Thus, in knowing the outcome of the war, post-war viewers could better grasp the weight of such a message.

Much like the insight provided at the end of *Go Tell the Spartans*, both John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* also had powerful closing scenes that adequately conveyed the meaninglessness of the war. *Platoon* ended with the central character, Chris Taylor, looking down at a crater full of dead bodies from a helicopter. As he gazed at the sea of limp, lifeless corpses and burst into an indescribable mix of sorrowful yet joyous tears, a voiceover captured his inner-thoughts (Stone). He noted that when all was said and done, they were not even fighting the Vietnamese. They were fighting each other. They were fighting themselves. The body count below Chris was colossal, yet he was still figuring out who the enemy was. From above, he waved goodbye to the friends he had made during his time in Vietnam, the same friends who would continue to fight this unclear enemy, and most likely turn into one of the countless bodies that lie at their feet.

In a slightly more subtle way, *Hamburger Hill* portrayed the same sense of impending doom as it came to a close. Not unlike *Go Tell the Spartans*, the troops were sent on an ill-fated mission to obtain control of a particular area. This time, the target was not an abandoned fort, but rather a massive, enemy-fortified hill. The men spent a total of ten days and suffered unbearable deaths before finally taking the hill. In the final scene, only three of the central characters manage to make it to the top. One of the soldiers takes a moment to gaze down at the towering mass that he triumphantly conquered, only to be disheartened by the myriad of bodies that lie lifeless in the mud. As he sheds a tear for the innumerable losses, troops continue their onward march behind him (Irvin). This image provides a sense that the entire war was made up of an endless cycle of meaningless battles. Today it's this hill; tomorrow it's that valley. There is no time to mourn the lost lives. It is simply time to move onto the next one, the next inevitable slaughter, and for what? What did these men die for? They did not die for democracy, or America; they died for a hill.

One of the main characters in Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, Luke Martin, a paralyzed Vietnam War veteran, said it best during a speech that he gave to an auditorium full of high school students:

> "I wanted to be a war hero, man, I wanted to go out and kill for my country. And now, I'm here to tell you that I have killed for my country, or whatever, and I don't feel good about it. Because there's not enough reason, man, to feel a person die in your hands or to see your best buddy get blown away. I'm here to tell you, it's a lousy thing, man. I don't see any reason for it" (Ashby).

He had already completed his tour and learned to live with his paralysis, but he still could not make sense of his involvement in the war. He spent endless hours contemplating what it all meant, the war, the death that accompanied it, but he ultimately came to the conclusion that there was no reason for any of it; it was meaningless.

Psychological Impacts

It is no coincidence that the term "posttraumatic stress" was coined during the Vietnam War. The amount of psychologically disturbed veterans who returned home from the ferocious jungles of 'Nam was staggering. The general consensus was that the war had changed them; it had messed with their minds. While that consensus is correct, as seen in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, select memoirs from *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, one film helped to expand this idea beyond soldiers of war to soldiers in training as well.

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* depicted the psychological brutality of a U.S. Marine boot camp and juxtaposed it with the Vietnam War itself. The Marines did everything they could to prepare their soldiers for war, including belittling them and tearing them down until all that remained were machines of war. They were no longer men. Their human intuition was replaced with tactical strategy. This process had the greatest effect on Private Leonard Lawrence, who was cruelly nicknamed "Gomer Pyle" by his commanding officer, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman. He was slow and overweight, he could not decipher his left from his right, and he remained remarkably incompetent through the majority of his training. Sergeant Hartman berated him like no other; he was there to crush Pyle at every turn. He stripped him of his manhood, taking every ounce of power away from him. That was until Pyle finally discovered something that he was good at, shooting a rifle (Kubrick). The moment that he felt even the tiniest glimmer of power, everything had changed. Private Leonard Lawrence was gone, only Pyle remained. He was told that his ability to shoot a rifle meant that he was a killer, so a killer he became. Before boot camp ended, two soldiers were dead. Pyle gunned down Sergeant Hartman and then turned the gun on himself (Kubrick). The rest of the soldiers, after witnessing this horrific turn of events, shipped out to Vietnam with an early taste of trauma.

The latter half of *Full Metal Jacket* lines up surprisingly well with *Dispatches*, both of which recount the experiences of combat correspondents. The main character in *Full Metal Jacket*, Joker, lived through similar traumas that Michael Herr depicts so brilliantly in his memoir. Herr recounts a number of graphically violent experiences, like when his helicopter was hit and he watched his friend's blood cover his boots "until they were dark like everything else he wore" and heard "the drops [of blood] hitting the metal strip on the chopper floor" (Herr 168). Through the intense imagery of this one scene alone, it is no surprise that Herr, and any other veteran for that matter, came back mentally scarred. At one point, Herr even noted that his memory of the war had been distorted; yet "every image, every sound comes back out of smoke and the smell of things burning" (Herr 108). Regardless of all he forgot about the war, it is the instances he remembered that took their

toll. The memory of the billowing smoke after explosions and the smell of burning Vietnamese villages will forever remain engraved in his mind; he will never be able to truly escape the horrors of this war.

Such terrors proved inescapable for an innumerable amount of Vietnam veterans. Some soldiers even opted to take their own lives in an attempt to rid themselves of their horrific memories, much like Bill Munson and Captain Bob Hyde in *Coming Home* (Ashby). Others chose to tell their stories like Herr, however in much less extensive detail. Some examples can be found within *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, most notably those of Porter Halyburton and Bob Gabriel.

Halyburton became a prisoner of war after the Vietnamese shot down his aircraft carrier. He went on to describe his experiences of torture and starvation during his time as a POW. The most notable section of his short account was when he explained his desire to give a confession to his captors:

> "Psychologically, I think this was more damaging than the physical torture because you felt like you had completely failed. You had given up. You had capitulated. You had violated the code of conduct. You'd let everybody down. It was very depressing. Eventually I found out that everybody else, including the people I respected the most […] had been through exactly the same thing and had reacted pretty much the same way I did" (Halyburton 225-226)[2].

While he received some peace of mind with the knowledge that he was not alone in his act of confession, the depression had already taken its toll. In combination with the physical torture, Halyburton's eight years spent as a prisoner of war would leave a lasting psychological impact on his day-to-day life.

Bob Gabriel may not have been a POW like Porter Halyburton, but he witnessed his fair share of horror nevertheless. As a member of the 2nd Battalion of the 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, also described as the "lost battalion," Gabriel experienced the viciousness of American soldiers (Gabriel 298, 301). He made it clear that he was not overtly psychologically scarred by his time spent in Vietnam, but he knows "a lot of people who have problems now [because they] did stuff over there that was inappropriate," such as the rape and mutilation of the Vietnamese (Gabriel 301). The fact the he alone can recall several people who suffer indescribable trauma from their actions is a testament to the vast, negative psychological impacts of this war.

With that said, it is important to pay some attention to the most popular, critically acclaimed, fictional account of the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now*. With the help of Michael Herr, Francis Ford Coppola pulled off a remarkable adaption of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* set in the Vietnam War. As an exploration of pure, true-natured savagery, *Apocalypse Now* depicts Colonel Walter Kurtz' fall from grace into madness. As viewers follow the journey of Captain Benjamin Willard as he hunts down Kurtz in an attempt to assassinate him, it becomes clear that the very nature of this war could drive even the most brilliant of men to insanity. When Kurtz and Willard finally meet, Kurtz goes about justifying his heinous crimes committed on humanity with a single, simple sentence: "I've seen horrors." The things he has seen during his time in Vietnam have horrified him to the point of madness. He later notes that the horrors he has seen are the same horrors that Willard has seen on his way to find Kurtz, and the same horrors that the audience has witnessed while watching the film (Coppola). *Apocalypse Now* makes an incredibly powerful statement about the psychological impacts of the Vietnam War by having the

audience go through the same things that Willard goes through, which are in turn the same experiences that Kurtz went through before losing his mind entirely. By putting oneself in Willard and Kurtz' shoes, it is much easier to understand the trauma that many Vietnam veterans suffered.

Intra-platoon Race Relations

Every single film and memoir depicted platoons like families. It was more than a group of soldiers, but rather a brotherhood of men. The love they had for one another was undeniable, but like in all families, brothers tend to fight.

The most heartwarming sense of family can be seen in Patrick Sheane Duncan's *84 Charlie MoPic*. This group of seven men made up the entirety of a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP). Sent on a routine mission, the soldiers run into major trouble when the Vietcong ambushes them. While a new addition to the group, LT, is officially in charge, a macho African American man, OD, is the true leader of the LRRP. He is the kind of leader who would willingly take a bullet for any of his men, and ultimately does. The most intriguing scene throughout the film is when LT asks Cracker, a southern white man, about how he feels being commanded by a Negro. Cracker immediately jumps to the defense of OD, making it clear that they share a formidable bond and that he would lay down his life for a man that he considers his brother. While the sentiment is truly touching, when LT asks Cracker how it feels being led by a black man, he dodges the question entirely. He claims that it is a "Real World question" and that it should not be asked while they are in Vietnam, but rather back home in South Carolina (Duncan). Despite the familial love that Cracker has for OD, it is clear that things are different back in the "Real World" and that going home would hinder their sense of brotherhood.

This sentiment is further explored in *Hamburger Hill*, as many of the black soldiers note that their contribution to the war "doesn't mean a thing," and that when they return to the States, they will be treated like every other black man. One soldier even noted that he had to clean up his act before returning home (Irvin). The white men would be forgiven for their crude actions upon returning from war, but the black soldiers had to shape up if they wanted any respect.

However, according to the accounts made by black veterans in Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, respect was often hard to find during the war itself. Some African American soldiers were put in base jails for the smallest of violations while the FBI specifically hunted young black men back in the U.S. for attempting to dodge the draft. Most of the African American men who joined the war voluntarily did so because they had no other options post-high school. The short memoirs compiled within *Bloods* offer multiple depictions of intra-platoon race relations and when it came down to life or death situations, they were brothers. As Colonel Fred V. Cherry put it simply, "a soldier's a soldier" and the soldiers were always there for each other when it really counted, regardless of the color of their skin (Terry 283). However, when things were not particularly dire, the tension between races was undeniable. It did not help that these black soldiers had to exhaust their efforts fighting a war in Vietnam only to return home to civil war in their own backyards.

Overall, Americans may not have been shocked by the outcome of the war at the time of its conclusion. They had seen it coming, and all of the public memory had already

begun to fade. Through influential, popular mediums such as fictional films and memoirs, Americans were reminded of what an overwhelming defeat this war really was. Accurate depictions of the Vietnam War's meaninglessness, psychological impacts, and intra-platoon race relations helped to not only shape but also restore the American public's memory of such a devastating event in its history.

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