

Using Film to Teach the Vietnam War

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I have been fascinated by war films all my life. Like many others my age, I grew up on a steady diet of televised World War II combat films with (in my teens) a smattering of Korean Conflict films. I was drawn to the action, the heroism, the power of conflict itself. Many of us who went to Vietnam went with visions of John Wayne, Audie Murphy, John Hodiak and even William Bendix dancing in our heads.

Those films taught us more about how to "act" like an American soldier than all the drill sergeants in boot camp. To us, being a soldier meant teaming up with an ethnically- and racially-diverse group of swell guys from farms in Kansas and the streets of New York. We would train hard, try to work out our emotional problems in time to face a ruthless enemy bent on world domination and protect helpless civilians by giving them Hershey bars. At the last second, we would pull it all together, heroically lead the charge up the hill and win the day. Unfortunately, Vietnam didn't work out that way.

This paper explores my particular focus in teaching Vietnam through feature films. Although taught under the auspices of the communication department, my approach, I believe, offers a unique insight for the student into the events and the emotional impact of the Vietnam experience. In essence, this

course offers a "history lesson" that may supplement those presently taught by historians. Film has played an important part in the teaching of Vietnam to history students. Many historians integrate documentaries, feature films and perhaps even personal film footage into their classes to give visual impact to content. In these efforts, however, film is seen as supplemental, not primary, to the study of the war. For those who teach Vietnam films, it is that body of work that becomes the focus of the course, not just as cinematic effort, but as symptomatic effect of a nation coming to grips with "losing a war."

As Lawrence Suid notes:

Vietnam left a continuing scar on the American psyche not because the military burned villages to save them, cut ears off enemy bodies, dropped more bombs than in World War II on a tiny peasant country, not even because the nation came to recognize the war lacked moral and political justification. Ultimately, Americans turned against the war because the United States was losing its first armed conflict and because "the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans."

Hollywood has reflected that feeling in the way it has approached the Vietnam War. . . . But even before people realized the United States was losing in Vietnam, Hollywood had little reason to make pro-war, wartime propaganda movies as it had done during World War II and Korea.¹

This lack of response, or more precisely, the ambivalent response of Hollywood toward Vietnam, particularly during the

war, offers the Vietnam curriculum a unique view into the national psyche that initially did not know how to respond to the war effort and those who fought, and eventually turned against policy and warriors.

When beginning any discussion of Vietnam, particularly in a discussion of the cinematic efforts concerning Vietnam, one is confronted with the problem of defining the timeframe within which to work. For some historians, adopting specific dates based on political decisions may adequately frame this event. Thus viewing Vietnam as "starting" with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and ending with the Paris Peace Accords (with due note before and after to French colonialism and North Vietnamese control) allows for clear demarcations.

For the popular culturist and many other historians, claiming we are still in the Vietnam era is not beyond the realm of acceptability (although with the recent events in the Persian Gulf, perhaps America has, as George Bush indirectly indicated, entered a post-Vietnam era).

With this in mind, my course attempts to cover those "movies" that have Vietnam as a central theme from Alan Ladd's *Saigon* (1947) to the small, but continuing trickle of films as recent as *Flight of the Intruder* (1991). For this course, "movies" (feature films made for popular consumption) are those whose primary goal is to provide escape and

entertainment. My belief is that such films also teach, at a very emotional level, about their subject matter. Most of what the average college student "knows" about Vietnam comes from *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty*. As author George MacDonald Fraser noted recently, "If we have any conception of what the past looks like, we owe it to Hollywood."²

Not only do movies about Vietnam provide a certain type of knowledge about the war, they also can be seen as a barometer of public opinion. How we as a nation feel about an issue will often be reflected by (but rarely led by) feature films. For example, perhaps the fact that only one American feature film about Vietnam had fully-developed Vietnamese characters (*Iron Triangle* [1986]), and these characters are Viet Cong, is more a function of the public's continued uneasiness with seeing the "victors" portrayed as anything more than faceless enemy than an absence of screenplaying with such portrayals.

In their book, *Movies as Movies as Mass Communication*, Jowett and Linton note:

It is more generally agreed that mass media are capable of "reflecting" society because they are forced by their commercial nature to provide a level of content which will guarantee the widest possible acceptance by the largest possible audience. Thus, there is a definite tendency to create a product which consists of familiar themes, clearly identifiable characters, and understandable conventions. If the film strays too widely from these conventions, the audience will

become confused and the result, especially for a movie made for entirely commercial purposes (as are most movies), will be a low return at the box office.

Some academics may contend that war films, particularly those about Vietnam, do not provide adequate historical legitimacy to be worthwhile other than as "artsy" filler. They may contend that dramatization takes too many liberties with fact and that the student of history is robbed of the global perspectives necessary to understand any historical event. Robert A. Rosenstone quotes R. J. Raack in suggesting, far from being "anti-historical," film may actually make better history:

"Traditional written history," [Raack] argued, is too linear and too narrow in focus to render the fullness of the complex, multi-dimensional world in which humans live. Only film, with its ability to juxtapose images and sounds, with its "quick cuts to new sequences, dissolves, fades, speed-ups [and] slow motion," can ever hope to approximate real life, the daily experience of "ideas, words, images, preoccupations, distractions, sensory deceptions, conscious and unconscious motives and emotions." Only film can provide an adequate "empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives." Only film can "recover all the past's liveliness."⁴

This "recovery" process for Vietnam is made all the more real and "lively" because most recent Vietnam films have been written, directed and/or advised by Vietnam veterans.

Knowing "war" through film is not necessary contingent on knowing dates and places. What film offers, although at times

overdone, is the feel of war, that gut-wrenching fear that drives the ground-pounder, the fighter jock or the chopper pilot. Feature films offer students a cultural history concerning how Hollywood, as the popular artistic institution of our society, perceived the war and its aftermath as a reflection of national perception.

At this point, differentiation has to be made between "movies" and "cinema." Many cinema critics would contend that a significant body of film has been produced whose ultimate goal was to generate social change. With few exceptions, these films usually appear in "art houses," playing to highly sophisticated, highly selective audiences. The films in this course played to general audiences, and many of the 1960s and 1970s films were hits at the drive-ins. To this author, it was this type of film that formulated the general image of Vietnam. Although *Hearts and Minds* (1973) is shown, it is not because that film had major audiences around the country, but because of its flagrant persuasive structure.

The assumption that Hollywood portrays what we as a nation believe may seem tenuous, but Hollywood rarely produces a film it believes will not attract an audience--the "give them what they want" philosophy. And audiences want images that confirm (or perhaps only slightly question) their own impression of events. Movies may sometimes appear to challenge national

beliefs, but these challenges rarely stray significantly from the basic perception. Filmmakers, like the rest of us, try to make sense out of reality. They attempt to bring order to chaos so that audiences will respond. This process uses the same frame of reference as the audience.

My course combines films, rhetoric and history in a way that challenges the student to confront not only the historic context within which a particular film was made, but the persuasive mechanisms used in the film as well as the basic cinematic quality of the films. Although the greatest emphasis is on rhetoric, persuasion is always extremely context-dependent. Students explore in detail what was happening during the theatrical runs of these films. They are instructed to place themselves in the timeframe of the movies shown to better understand exigencies at work.

Films selections are limited to those which were first shown before, during and shortly after the war (1954-1975). There are exceptions, but for the most part, the films of the 1980s offer repetition rather than elucidation. To demonstrate how these films are worked into a hopefully cohesive history lesson, they are listed below, with an overview of the lessons the students should draw from each.

Quiet American (1958). When this film is available (it is not out on video), it makes an excellent starting point for

a course of Vietnam. Based on Graham Greene's book of the same name (which, in turn, is loosely based on Greene's own experiences in Vietnam as a correspondent in the early 1950s), the film is to Vietnam what *My Son, John* was to the McCarthy era. Although supposedly shot for non-political reasons, Joseph Mankiewicz, who directed and wrote the screenplay, changed a story of America's fatal misunderstanding of Vietnam into a clear attack on "communist dupes" who didn't understand the moral power of America. Not only does this film provide an excellent entree into a discussion of America's involvement in the French-Indochina War, but it provides two dynamic visual images that are startling in their prophetic nature. The first involves its location shots on the streets of Saigon at Tet (10 years before actual news footage showed American troops battling Viet Cong and NVA). The second is the tragic American hero--a man of good heart who dies at the hands of the Vietminh because he trusted too much. For his star, Mankiewicz chose Audie Murphy, America's most decorated World War II soldier. Those few who actually saw the film probably never realized what a bad omen this selection was.

Ugly American (1962). From the William Lederer novel of the same name, this film did not compromise the strong anti-involvement statement made by the author. The story involves the new American ambassador to Sarkhan, a thinly-veiled

version of Vietnam, whose "happy camper" attitude toward the people of the country is soon deflated by the imminent revolution fomented by communist provocateurs. This film had a bigger box office than *Quiet American*, primarily because of Marlon Brando, who played the uncompromising ambassador. Perhaps the most important scene in this film in the last. Brando, after realizing the revolution cannot be steered, addresses the American people via television news. He tries to explain the importance of understanding the complexities of third-world countries, and how America cannot rush in blindly with sloganeering. In mid-sentence a television viewer switches off the set--a strong statement about 1960s America's reluctance to face the truth.

Operation CIA (1965). A magnificently horrible film starring Burt Reynolds, only clips of this are shown (primarily because students wouldn't sit through the whole thing). The story is the typical spy story reminiscent of the television program, *I Spy*, with its wise-cracking, woman-chasing hero punching his way through a tale of intrigue. This film, along with *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964) were the only American feature films released between 1961 and 1968 that had anything to do with Vietnam. *Operation CIA*, filmed in Thailand without bothering to adjust either the language or customs to match Vietnam, demonstrates how little America knew

about Southeast Asia. One fascinating plot twist in this film has two occidentals, a French woman and an American man, working as agents of the Viet Cong.

Green Berets (1968). No film course on Vietnam would be complete without John Wayne's attempt to bring World War II standards of warfare to bear on Vietnam. Made with the complete support of the U.S. military at a time when violent anti-war protests were spilling into the streets, this film was a B-grade war film and C-grade propaganda. The fascinating thing about this film was that it became one of the all-time box office war film successes. Critics hated it, but audiences came out in droves. I use this film to emphasize America's desire to see Vietnam as the moral equivalent of World War II. Wayne, as an oldish combat officer, spouts the same lines he did on the sands of Iwo, but they seem hollow against the contradictory real-world news footage we saw every night. Two interesting observations about *Green Berets*: contrary to filmic combat tradition, the battle for Wayne's strike base is not won by personal bravery, but through American technology. When the VC (who, for all the world, look like the marauding Indians of Wayne's Westerns) overrun the base, Wayne calls in a Puff air strike to clean out the invaders with Vulcan gatlin guns--hardly the kind of "stand-up-and-fight-like-a-man" spirit one would

expect of the Duke. The second observation is the treatment of the journalist portrayed by David Jannsen, who comes off as a panty-waist, pinko-commie, whining liberal who comes to realize that Wayne (and America) have every right to be in Vietnam, even if it means using torture, prostitution, and wholesale slaughter to "win."

Getting Straight and **Strawberry Statement** (1970). After the lambasting it received for *Green Berets*, Hollywood was not about to produce another pro-war film. After a series of Vietnam vet/psycho/biker films in 1969, two films appeared in 1970 that attempted to cash in on the campus protest movement. *Getting Straight*, starring Elliott Gould and Candice Bergen, should have been called "M*A*S*H Goes to College." Using the same Altman-esque rhythm of dialogue and editing (without his flair for black comedy social statement), this is the story of a former campus radical/peace corps activist who avoids becoming embroiled in a campus revolt because he just wants to finish his master's degree in English and start teaching. In the end, his radical roots gain the upper hand and leaves the audience with the message, "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Strawberry Statement, based on the novel *Strawberry Statement, Notes from a College Revolutionary*, is much more ambivalent about the protest movement. Its protagonist, a

naive freshman whose only connection with reality seems to be the college rowing team, decides to check out a burgeoning campus revolt because "it's a great place to meet chicks." Through a series of confrontations with campus radicals and the cynical administration, the boy becomes a man and the man becomes a revolutionary. Both these films leave modern college students in a quandary best expressed by one of my students who, after viewing both films, commented that he was glad he had not lived through that period because he would have had to think too much.

Billy Jack (1971). The first "cult of personality" film to come out of Vietnam, *Billy Jack* combines Native American legend, anti-war protest and kung fu in a story about a half-breed, ex-Green Beret who takes it upon himself to defend a school for runaways from a bigoted town boss and his goons in a sleepy Arizona community. Between karate chops, there are endless monologues about peace, love and togetherness. Part narrative, part street theater, the film has a certain beauty to it that transcends its baser instincts. This film, along with *Walking Tall*, re-established the notion that one person could stand up against the forces of evil and win.

Limbo (1973). Perhaps one of the least known of the Vietnam era films, this story, nonetheless, is significant because of its willingness to breach a very sensitive topic

while the war still raged. (Actually, the film premiered less than a month before the Paris Peace Accords took effect.) It is the story of the wives of three American P.O.W.s, and how they handled their separation and anxiety. Starring Kate Jackson and Kathleen Nolan, the film focuses on coping techniques that range from maintaining a fantasy of normalcy to adultery. Interspersed with news footage of P.O.W.s and bombings and the Paris Accord talks, the film, although soap opera-ish, offers an interesting statement about the wives of those who went to Vietnam.

Hearts and Minds (1973). Although documentaries have been avoided in this course, *Hearts and Minds* is so flagrantly propagandistic, it is worth exploring with the students. The use of dramatic jump cuts from warriors to politicians to civilians is so captivating that the viewer hardly has time to assess the meaning behind the message. The scenes of a Navy P.O.W. telling little school children that Vietnam "would be a beautiful place if it wasn't for the people there," Westmoreland explaining that "Asians" don't feel the same about death as we do over the wailing of a bereft South Vietnamese family, and the brutalizing of prisoners whose stoicism makes the attacks all the more evil demonstrate the power of the visual art to tear at the emotions.

Stuntman (1980). Richard Rush makes up for *Getting Straight* with a wonderfully confusing film that works at the fringe of the Vietnam genre. A maniacal film director hires a Vietnam vet who is running from the law as a stuntman on a World War I film meant to be "the" anti-war film. Along with several encounters between the two concerning war and its meaning, Rush layers story on top of story on top of story, tapping into the insanity that is at the heart of war, and at the soul of Vietnam.

First Blood (1982). The first of the Rambo films, this story of the sense of loss many veterans felt after the war is much better than most people give it credit. Critics saw it as a right-wing fantasy, but in truth, if analyzed from beginning to end, the film makes some interesting points about loss and survival. As a means of discussing veterans and their role in society, students in class compare John Rambo and Billy Jack with the hope that they will conclude that the former is the latter with PSDS.

Iron Triangle (1989). Because this recent combat film is the only major motion picture to incorporate Vietnamese as central characters, this film was added to the course to foment discussion of why Hollywood (and the country as a whole) have pushed the Vietnamese experience to the side when confronting the Vietnam era. This film is all the more

difficult for the students because, in the end, they find themselves rooting for a young Viet Cong fighter.

In Country (1989). This film brings the story of Vietnam into the next generation. Bobbie Ann Mason's story of a young girl searching for the spirit of her father who died in Vietnam offers a convincing performance by Bruce Willis as a vet not willing to give up the ghosts. The film fails to offer the novel's most stirring scene when the young girl not only finds her father as a name on the Vietnam War Memorial, but finds her own name--and herself--on the Wall.

Dear America-Letters Home from Vietnam (1989). This film usually concludes the course with what this author considers the best documentary of the personal story of Vietnam. Taken from actual letters collected from families of men and women who poured out their hearts and souls from the jungles of Vietnam, the words are paired with visuals selected from more than two million feet of news footage and home movies. There is no more poignant conclusion to a discussion of Vietnam than a mother's letter to her son that had been taped below his name on the Wall. In a voice that cries from the heart of all mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wives and children, the words at last give reverence to a sacrifice that seems so meaningless.

Film has always been, and will continue to be, an imperfect medium. Yet using film to understand Vietnam may be just the medium to explore an imperfect event. All the numbers and dates and names may be important to explain Vietnam's political place in history, but if the human side of this war is forgotten--what it did to us, to them and to generations to come--we are missing the meaning of Vietnam.

As Rosenstone notes in his conclusion:

Now it seems time for a "shift in perspective," one occasioned by the opportunity to represent the world in images and words rather than in words alone, to touch history. Doing so will open us to new notions of the past, make us ask once more the questions about what history can or cannot be. About what history is for. About why we want to know about the past and what we will do with that knowledge. About possible new modes of historical representation, both filmed and written--about history as self-reflexive inquiry, as self-conscious theater, as a mixed form of drama and analysis.⁵