

Jennifer Freilach

15 March 2016

HIST 461: Final Draft

Hollywood's Vietnam:
How Critics and Audiences Responded to the Vietnam War Genre

Introduction

In 1975, Julian Smith, author of *Looking Away; Hollywood and Vietnam*, said, "Vietnam was like a movie that had gotten out of hand: gigantic cost overruns, shooting schedule run amuck...and the last [auteur] swearing it was finally in the can, but sneaking back to shoot some extra scenes."¹ Vietnam may have been like a Hollywood movie for Smith, but more importantly, Hollywood movies served as a tool to understand the war in Vietnam. Previous cultural historians already established a relationship between politics and the film; however, the majority of literature on the subject overemphasized the on-screen elements of a film, like dialogue, and overlook other aspects, like film reviews published in newspapers. The perception and reaction to a film is just as important, if not more so, than an auteur's intention.

Existing literature on Vietnam War film widely agreed that Hollywood looked away from it while the war was in progress. This idea traces back as early as 1975 in Smith's book, *Looking Away*.² Since its publication, numerous historians either directly referenced Smith or reflected a similar assessment of Hollywood. Without a doubt, Smith's evaluation of Hollywood film was correct at the time of publication; however, *Looking Away* was at a historical disadvantage.

¹ William J. Palmer, *The Films of the Seventies: A Social History* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987), 6.

² Julian Smith, *Looking Away; Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Scribner, 1975).

Within five years of publication, it was outdated because Smith researched her thesis while the war was still active and did not have the advantage of witnessing the surge of Vietnam War movies released in the late 1970s and 1980s. From 1962 to 1973, *The Green Berets* (1967), starring famous cowboy John Wayne, was the only movie made that dealt directly with the Vietnam War. This film was a clear piece of government-sponsored propaganda that supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam.³ This was a stark contrast to the countless films produced, with government assistance, in support of U.S. involvement in World War II. In *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*, James Combs affirmed that the exclusion of propaganda in film was just as important as the propaganda that was included in previous decades.⁴ This lack of material to analyze was still capable of telling a story, and perhaps, and even more important one.

The majority of books published on the Vietnam War were either filmographies or a compilation of essays. The most comprehensive filmography about the war was Jeremy M. Devine's *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War*. Devine's methodology was to include almost every film in the genre; however, he left little room to expand on, and fully explain, the historical context under which each film was produced and released under. This was not just a problem with Devine's work; a majority of filmographies lacked the same expansive analysis.⁵ James Combs' *American Political Movies: An Annotated Filmography of Feature Films* was another successful

³ Palmer, 24.

⁴ James Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 237.

⁵ Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frame: A Second A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.), 1-365.

filmography of political film across the history of Hollywood. He explained that Hollywood was a “symbol of power” as a form of mass communication.⁶ Combs’ analysis of the relationship between Hollywood films and their target audience was extremely important for comprehending political aspects of film. He said, “We can use movies to help us understand how that present saw the political culture that it has inherited.”⁷ In his two chapters on the 1960s and ‘70s, Combs explains that it was not until the fall of Saigon in 1975 that filmmakers attempted to “mediate the meaning” of the war; once filmmakers finally did, they treated Vietnam as a disaster of international and domestic proportions.

Like filmographies, compilation essay books fail to tell the whole picture about Hollywood’s relationship with Vietnam. Typically, books with this methodology devoted only a single chapter to each movie or each decade. This gave authors a limited amount of space to explain the film, as well as any controversy surrounding its release. Despite this shortcoming, there were many successful compilation essay books. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, edited by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, was one of the most comprehensive compilation of essays that analyzed Hollywood’s portrayal of the Vietnam War. Each author wrote from a different perspective on Hollywood’s Vietnam War films and concluded whether or not they were historically and emotionally accurate. Parts one and two of this compilation primarily explained the historical connections between film and politics. Parts three and four focused on the subtext and themes found within each film and how the war was

⁶ James Combs, *American Political Movies: An Annotated Filmography of Feature Films* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 2.

⁷ Combs, xiii.

portrayed in political documentaries.⁸ The authors in this compilation thoroughly analyzed the dialogue and themes present within each film; however, they failed to recognize the reception that these films received in published sources, like major newspapers.

Michael Anderegg's *Inventing Vietnam The War in Film and Television*, was another extremely diverse compilation of essays pertaining to Hollywood's portrayal of the Vietnam War. One of his most compelling remarks was that the majority of Hollywood's Vietnam War films had the advantage of hindsight that few World War II or Korean War films possess. Films released about earlier wars usually lacked complete understanding of the historical implications of the conflict because the events were still in progress. His compilation showed that all film portrayals of the Vietnam War were so diverse because it was impossible to explain the entire conflict in the length of the average film.⁹ Like authors in *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, authors in *Inventing Vietnam* spent the majority of their essays analyzing many of the on-screen elements of film and failed to properly recognize many of the off-screen elements surrounding the film, like newspaper reviews. This problem was widespread across the majority of literature pertaining to Hollywood's portrayal of the Vietnam War.

This four part essay takes a comprehensive look at articles published in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* to determine how and why critics reviewed essential films about the Vietnam War. It thereby highlights the trends that emerged in their reaction to them. The first section analyzes critics' response to *Coming Home* (1978). As the first major film with direct

⁸ Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 19-297.

⁹ Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 1-14.

reference to Vietnam, *Coming Home* posed a unique problem for film critics. Newspaper articles from the time reveal that critics were uncertain how to approach this film and often gave mixed, or non-existent, reviews compared to reviews for later Vietnam films, like *Platoon*. At this time in history, there was not enough distance between the war and film for filmmakers and critics to review the movie objectively. The second section analyzes the second major film about Vietnam, *The Deer Hunter* (1978). The majority of newspaper critics defended Cimino's epic against negative claims that the film was historically inaccurate. Since *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* qualified in the same Academy Award year, it is necessary to talk about their popular reception together, in a third, separate category. After the protests at the Academy Awards, newspapers finally printed some of the negative responses to these two films. The final section of this essay emphasizes the shift in critics' response to *Platoon* (1986). Released almost a decade after the war ended, its reception was much different from the reception *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* received because filmmakers and critics had enough historical distance to view the war in an objective manner. Instead of focusing on the inaccuracies presented in the film, newspaper critics largely praised it as the first real attempt at a Vietnam War film. A majority of critics acknowledged that Oliver Stone, the writer and director, was a veteran himself, which brought a sense of realism previously not seen in films on the subject. Since this essay is not a filmography, numerous films are not mentioned in detail; the three films discussed stand as representations for the types of reviews that films in the Vietnam War genre received.

Coming Home

Coming Home, directed by Hal Ashby, was one of the first movies made after the Vietnam War that dealt directly with the conflict. On the surface, this film was about a woman

named Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) who volunteered at a veteran's hospital when her husband Captain Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern) went to Vietnam. While volunteering, she reunited with an old high school classmate, Luke Martin (Jon Voight), and fell in love with him during his hospitalization. Despite what some critics claimed, there was much more to this film than a two-dimensional love story; the writing and production staff interjected their anti-war sentiments throughout the film. Luke, a recent paraplegic, emerged as an anti-war crusader. While speaking to Sally, he could not hide his irritation that the government

[Did not] have the decent courtesy to come back and ask how you're doing, you know?

They don't tell you anything. How to manage your finances. They don't tell you anything about going back into society. Half the people still can't go into society. What about your sex life? They don't tell you anything about that.

The last sequence of *Coming Home* was the strongest indication that it was explicitly anti-war; it cut between Luke, speaking to a group of students at an assembly, and Bob, clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), running naked into the ocean. Luke told the students, "I have killed for my country, or whatever, and I don't feel good about it."¹⁰ Even though this kind of anti-war sentiment was a popular at the time, *Coming Home* lacked the detachment that is required of historical films. Released just two years after the fall of Saigon, it was extremely difficult for filmmakers and critics to approach the war and depict it objectively; critics responded to the apparent struggle and repeatedly gave it contradicting reviews.

¹⁰ *Coming Home*, DVD, directed by Hal Ashby (Los Angeles: Jerome Hellman Productions, 1978).

Many critics took for granted that *Coming Home* made it to the production stage; it went through an extremely lengthy production process just to reach audiences. The *New York Times* article, “The Five-Year Struggle to Make ‘Coming Home,’” connects Fonda’s belief that “moving making is like fighting a war” to her latest movie *Coming Home*. As a recently “gray listed” member of the film industry, Fonda felt forced to establish her own film company in order to produce a movie about the effects of the Vietnam War.¹¹ Initially, Fonda was interested in Nancy Dowd’s semi-autobiographical storyline, based on Dowd’s experience as an anti-war activist and prior involvement with a disabled veteran. After much debate and frustration, the production company hired Waldo Salt and Robert C. Jones to rewrite the script because Dowd’s views on the war were too complex for easy categorization that was accessible for a general audience.¹² After fourteen months of additional research, and “hundreds of hours of interviews with wounded Vietnam veterans,” *Coming Home* was finally finished. Despite the care that went into making *Coming Home*, critics could not agree on the content’s quality and gave it mixed reviews; Kirk Honeycutt, author of “The Five-Year Struggle,” even drew attention to a another article written about the film in the same issue of the paper with a dissenting view from his own.¹³

While some critics gave strictly positive reviews and some gave strictly negative ones, most film critics were unable to give a straightforward review of *Coming Home*. Charles

¹¹ Kirk Honeycutt, “The Five-Year Struggle to Make ‘Coming Home,’” *New York Times*, February 19, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/123812375/930752AC71D64607PQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D13, 35.

¹² Janet Maslin, “Critic’s Notebook: There’s Many a Slip,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123729311/78F89588942B4F7APQ/20?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), C17.

¹³ Honeycutt, D13, 35.

Champlin's review for the *Los Angeles Times*, "'Coming Home': A Reminder of the Costs of War," was both positive and negative. He said, "It is hard to believe that any [film] will be more intimate and more moving as a study of the war's impact on individual's lives than *Coming Home*," but later noted that Ashby frequently opted for restraint over chance.¹⁴ Vincent Canby, writer for the *New York Times*, described it as "the most ambitious, pious attempt to date to deal with the Vietnam War in a commercial American fiction film"; however, the rest of his review took a harsh tone and claimed that it was not a movie "made within the system that cracks the system." Overall, Canby gave it a mere B-plus rating for effort because of the film's inconsistencies and the shortcomings of the plotline that he called "totally confused and its manner of smug self-importance barely tolerable after the first hour."¹⁵ These contradicting opinions were typical of the kinds of reviews published in the *Los Angeles* and *New York Times* about *Coming Home*. It may be that the movie itself was contradictory or that critics were unable to come to terms with their own feelings toward the Vietnam War. Regardless, it was clear that *Coming Home* received contradicting reviews in these two major newspapers.

The small number reviews for *Coming Home* that were strictly positive had a tendency to focus on the acting, not the storyline. Judith Crist of the *New York Post* claimed, "Fonda paints an unforgettable portrait. Voight dominates the film with his finest performance since 'Midnight Cowboy.'" Rona Barrett of KABC-TV ABC Network asserted, "The Oscar race for 1978 may

¹⁴ Charles Champlin, "'Coming Home': A Reminder of the Costs of War," *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158434653/FD638E5D606348AEPQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 30, 2016), P1, 54-57.

¹⁵ Vincent Canby, "Hollywood Focuses on Vietnam at Last," *New York Times*, February 19, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123818570/78F89588942B4F7APQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), D1, 13.

just begin, and end, with ‘Coming Home’...a movie that will be talked about for months,” but made no mention of what Oscars *Coming Home* had the pleasure of racing for. Even reviews that briefly commented on the plotline turned back to the acting; Stephen Farber of *New West Magazine* assessed that it was, “Emotionally gripping...shattering...spellbinding. Jane Fonda’s performance in ‘Coming Home’ and is her most stunning performance in a growing roster of extraordinary achievements.”¹⁶ Following the release of *Coming Home*, critics had to develop a new vocabulary on how to review the emerging Vietnam War genre. These remarks showed progress toward an acceptable vocabulary, but they still fell short of the quality previously seen in commentary following movies in the World War II genre. Even though these reviews did not focus on the content, they were necessary to get audiences to go to the theater to see it. The subject may have been taboo, but the acting did not have to be.

Coming Home pioneered the Vietnam War film genre and left newspaper film critics unable to determine how they should respond to its unique subject. The proximity of the film’s release to the end of the war made the subject equally difficult for filmmakers to approach and for critics and audiences, to receive. Initially, *Coming Home* lacked an in-depth analysis of the major themes present within it; however, newspapers slowly adapted and discovered new ways to critique the emerging Vietnam War genre. Despite the initial controversy and diverse reception, it was nominated for eight Academy Awards and six Golden Globes. Its most notable win is the Academy Award for Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen;

¹⁶*Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158445633/78F89588942B4F7APQ/27?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), G19.

conversely, its most notable loss was to *The Deer Hunter* for Best Picture.¹⁷ This film served as an important step for film critics to comprehend the appropriate way to analyze a film centered on one of America's greatest mistakes.

The Deer Hunter

Like *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, was one of the first movies released after the Vietnam War that dealt directly with the conflict. Newspaper film critics evolved from their experience reviewing *Coming Home* to reach a deeper level of analysis on it. Unlike most films in the Vietnam War genre, *The Deer Hunter* provided substantial character development both before the men go off to war, and after they return. The first part followed the personal lives of three young men, Michael (Robert De Niro), Steven (John Savage), and Nick (Christopher Walken) in their small, Russian town. These family and community oriented best friends prepare themselves for their toughest challenge yet: war. The second half of this film shifted to their experience fighting in Vietnam. Even though they navigated the jungle, captivity, and other hardships together, they each emerged from the war with a unique outlook on life; much like real veterans who returned from Vietnam. This film was an emotional case study that followed the lives of three individuals and their experiences both before and after the war. Michael returned in the most "normal" state out of his friends, though he was noticeably more detached from his loved ones. Steven returned in a wheelchair and avoided reuniting with the majority of his friends and family because he felt like he did not belong. Nick avoided coming back to the United States at all; he chose to stay in Vietnam and take part in an underground Russian roulette

¹⁷ "Coming Home Awards," *imdb.com*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077362/awards?ref=tt_awd (accessed February 14, 2016).

gambling syndicate. This film is much more complex than its predecessor, *Coming Home*, and does not attempt to make generalizations about how the war affected its veterans.¹⁸ Cimino made it clear that every veteran internalized the war in a different way, even if some shared similar experiences. Despite Cimino's intentions, many moviegoers could not grasp the accuracy of the film's central themes because it came out too soon after the war ended for the majority of Americans to comprehend the physical and mental toll that the war in Vietnam had on veterans. Instead of analyzing the film's central themes, audiences opted for an easier critique of the film's factual inaccuracies; fortunately, the majority of critics were able to grasp Cimino's intentions and explain the quality of the movie based on its central themes.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, what Cimino, explained that he never intended to make a documentary style film on the Vietnam war. In Leticia Kent's article, "Ready for Vietnam? A Talk With Michael Cimino," she explained his thoughts on the production process and recent perception of his upcoming film and how he preemptively tried to limit the criticism of his film rooted in claims of historical inaccuracy. He explained, "The film is not realistic—it's surrealistic" and to all who opposed the film, he said to them "if you attack the film on facts, then you're fighting a phantom, because the literal accuracy was never intended." He also understood that the "specific details of the war are unimportant. Because this is not a film of the intellect, it's a film of the heart—I hope."¹⁹ Even after the film won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, opponents of the film still demanded Cimino to defend his artistic liberties. Cimino called the Academy Awards the "proper place to remember that we're movie

¹⁸ *The Deer Hunter*, DVD, directed By Michael Cimino (London: EMI, 1978).

¹⁹ Leticia Kent, "Ready for Vietnam? A Talk with Michael Cimino," *New York Times*, December 10, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123563695?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D15, 23.

makers” and that they are “not trying to recreate newsreels.”²⁰ This attitude was in great contrast to the claims that Fonda made about the accuracy and legitimacy of her recent Vietnam War film.

Just five days after Kent’s article, *New York Times* published “Screen: ‘The Deer Hunter,’” which praised the recent epic and acknowledged that Cimino shaped recent history to fit his needs for the film in order to capture the emotions surrounding it.²¹ He published a similar article, “How True to Fact Must Fiction Be?,” which expands on the recent criticism surrounding the historical inaccuracies of *The Deer Hunter*. He elaborates on Cimino’s claims that the film is not directly about American involvement in Vietnam and argued that this perspective “makes ‘The Deer Hunter’ more honestly rueful, sad, provocative and, finally, frightening than any other movie we’ve yet had about Vietnam, including certainly ‘Coming Home.’” Despite Canby’s reservations about the film, he believed, “No other American film in a very long time has so accurately caught the quality of our lives, the temper of our times and the contradictions built into our culture.”²² Canby’s newspaper reviews for *The Deer Hunter* were more consistent and comprehensive than his reviews for *Coming Home*; unlike most critics, he understood the larger implications of Cimino’s film and pushed past the factual inaccuracies in order to focus on its critical themes. The depth of Canby’s review was remarkable, especially considering the relatively short period between the release of *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*.

²⁰ Lee Grant, “Controversy, Glitter: War and Peace at the Awards,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158877279/C47ACFD777AF429FPQ/19?accountid=10362> (accessed January 29, 2016), G1, 11.

²¹ Vincent Canby, “Screen: ‘The Deer Hunter,’” *New York Times*, December 15, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123556561?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C5.

²² Vincent Canby, “How True to Fact Must Fiction Be?” *New York Times*, December 17, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123554578?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D1, 23.

The primary criticism of the historical inaccuracies of *The Deer Hunter* is rooted in the film's central metaphor: Russian roulette. Canby, Champlin, Peter Arnett, and numerous other critics acknowledge this metaphor was a major point of controversy with audiences. Canby did not take issue with the "made up" Russian roulette game because Cimino himself admitted that it was "based on no historical evidence whatsoever"; he saw it as a metaphor for the war's waste.²³ Like Canby, Champlin called Cimino's extended metaphorical film "brilliant." He viewed the Russian roulette metaphor as a representation for the "cruel and random chance by which war picks its victims."²⁴ Even though audiences found the historical inaccuracy of *The Deer Hunter* unacceptable, critics looked beyond the factual evidence to get at the heart of Cimino's larger implications of the war. This kind of in-depth analysis was a big step forward, in a very short period, from reviews on *Coming Home*.

The Deer Hunter was not the only Vietnam War film that deviated from history. Champlin's article, 'Apocalypse Now' A Towering Landmark in Film History: A Journey into Madness,' praised *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as a "timeless expression of a national anguish" that "towers over anything that has been attempted by an American film maker in a very long time, and I include 'The Deer Hunter.'" Even with an enormously positive review, Champlin felt that the "film was weakened by its debt to Conrad and has grown too consciously literary, ambiguous and pretentious."²⁵ Champlin's review, along with numerous others, failed to grasp the accuracy

²³ Vincent, Canby, "How True to Fact Must Fiction Be?," D1, 23 and Canby, "Screen: 'The Deer Hunter,'" C5.

²⁴ Charles Champlin, "'Deer Hunter-- A Palship Goes to War,'" *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1978, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158662523?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), P1, 47.

²⁵ Charles Champlin, "'Apocalypse Now' A towering Landmark in Film History: A Journey into Madness," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1979,

of the emotions portrayed in the film, and instead, focused on the factual errors. This type of criticism was short sighted and could be due, in part, to its proximity to the end of the war and the critics' lack of understanding of it.

In addition to the allegations of historical inaccuracies, critics frequently discussed the characters' apparent lack of interest in U.S. foreign policy. The characters in this film, and films of the like, did not question why America was involved in the first place; participation in the war was a given.²⁶ Even though some might have found this to be a fault in the film, this lack of discussion supported Cimino's claims that he never meant his film to be political.²⁷ It appeared that Canby recognized Cimino's intentions for this and believed that the film's "ultimate horror" at the heart of its realism rests with the fact that the characters did not understand, or question, why they were going.²⁸ Like Canby's assessment of Cimino's use of Russian roulette, clearly displayed a deeper analysis of *The Deer Hunter* than he did of *Coming Home*.

As a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter for his coverage of the Vietnam War, Peter Arnett's personal experience with the war gave him a unique set of criticisms about *The Deer Hunter* that many critics lacked. In his article, "'The Deer Hunter': Vietnam's Final Atrocity," he was most concerned with Cimino's portrayal of the Vietnamese. This kind of multi-dimensional critique represented a huge step toward objective criticism of Hollywood's portrayal of the war; this sophisticated concern for the Vietnamese was completely absent from critics following *Coming*

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158956642/BF559443D494641PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016), S1.

²⁶ Canby, "Screen: 'The Deer Hunter,'" C5.

²⁷ Grant, "Controversy, Glitter: War and Peace at the Awards," G1, 11.

²⁸ Canby, "How True to Fact Must Fiction Be?," D1, 23.

Home. Arnett was appalled at Cimino's "morally irresponsible" attempt to condense the twenty-year conflict into a single film that portrays "the Vietnamese people as inhuman monsters." He believed that Cimino tried say, "Yes, war is hell, but especially for young, white Americans." Arnett was not against all of Hollywood's depictions of the war; he explained, "In parts, [*Coming Home*] is one of the most achingly accurate representations of the Vietnam experience" and "unlike 'The Deer Hunter' the dialogue of 'Coming Home' rings true, as does the period detail of popular music throbbing with doubt about the war."²⁹ The *Los Angeles Times* published numerous write in letters in response to Arnett's article "Vietnam War's Final Atrocity."³⁰ George Mariscal, Katherine L. Waitman, Jeffrey M. Burbank, and Frank L. Burke respected Arnett's experience, but did not agree with his harsh criticisms of *The Deer Hunter*.³⁰ These write in letters offered insight from everyday moviegoers that frequently went undocumented. This was a unique case for the time because many moviegoers and protestors did not think that film critics were harsh enough in their reviews.

Newspapers in the United States were not the only ones to criticize the historical misrepresentation in *The Deer Hunter*. *Izvestia*, a Soviet Government newspaper, called Cimino's film "an attempt at arousing compassion for the invaders and at slandering the heroic

²⁹ Peter Arnett, "'The Deer Hunter': Vietnam's Final Atrocity," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158802146/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/4?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E1.

³⁰ George Mariscal, Debbie Miller, Katherine L. Waitman, Jeffrey M. Burbank, and Frank L. Burke, "Letters to the Times: Vietnam War's 'Final Atrocity,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158794536/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/19?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C4.

people of Vietnam.”³¹ One British judge at the 29th Berlin Film Festival endorsed a Soviet walked out on the film because it “portrays the people of a small country that successfully fought a guerrilla war against a huge invading power as subhuman” and argued that it was not acceptable to “portray an entire nation as sadists...for dramatic effect.”³² This response was in great contrast to how Russian film critics reviewed *Apocalypse Now*. Iona Andronov, of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, responded well to its political message that the Vietnam War “was an immoral, criminal adventure of the militarists in Washington.” She accused the Pentagon of denying Coppola’s request to use army helicopters and motorboats as a way ‘to censor the movie’s ‘worst’ shots.’³³ This type of criticism was much more in depth than many of the criticism that American newspaper published. Perhaps the Soviet’s distance from America’s personal loss in Vietnam allowed for this kind of criticism to take place so soon after the war ended.

Not all reviews for *The Deer Hunter* were negative; in fact, a number of reviews offered nothing but high praise. Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* called it “a film of great emotional power.” Stephen Farber of *New West Magazine* said it was “an extraordinary new film—a shattering experience...Even now Cimino may not realize that he has made the greatest anti-war movie since ‘Grand Illusion.’” Charles Schreger of the *Daily Variety* described the film as, “intense,

³¹ “Izvestia Assails Oscar For ‘The Deer Hunter,’” *New York Times*, April 12, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120930298/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/6?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), A3.

³² “‘Deer Hunter’ Protested: ‘David’ Wins Film Award in Berlin,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158865637/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E7.

³³ Nikki Finke, “Russia Raves Over ‘Apocalypse,’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158965692/BF559443D494641PQ/13?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016), E25.

powerful and fascinating.” In addition to the content of the film, most reviews in this advertisement praised both Cimino and Robert De Niro for their directing and acting skills, respectively.³⁴ These one line, headliner type reviews were positive, but lacked an in-depth analysis of what made *The Deer Hunter* so extraordinary and are reminiscent of the quality of reviews following *Coming Home*.

Reviews for *The Deer Hunter* were more sophisticated than reviews for *Coming Home*. A number of film critics for the *Los Angeles* and *New York Times* saw past some of the film’s most problematic elements, like its factual errors, in order to produce a complex analysis of the film’s central themes. Even though some took issue with the historical inaccuracies of *The Deer Hunter*, it won five of its nine Academy Award nominations and one of its six Golden Globe nominations; most notably, it won Best Picture and Best Motion Picture- Drama, respectively.³⁵ As America distanced itself from its history in Vietnam, it was easier for filmmakers to and film critics to approach the war through an objective, historical lens. This was process was slow and steady, but there was a distinct shift in both the quality of the film and the quality of the reviews from *Coming Home* to *The Deer Hunter*.

1979 Academy Awards

The 51st Academy Awards showered the first two major Hollywood films about the Vietnam War with awards. Despite the positive reception from the Academy, a number of

³⁴ Stephen Farber, Jack Kroll, and Charles Schreger, *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 8, 1978, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/158714485?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016).

³⁵ “*The Deer Hunter* Awards,” *imdb.com*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077416/awards?ref =tt_awd (accessed February 15, 2016).

protestors gathered at the event to voice their negative judgments of *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*. Outside the ceremony, sheriff officers confronted the Vietnam Veterans Against the War who were protesting “the exploitation of the Southeast Asia conflict by the film industry.” The police arrested thirteen people and five others suffered minor injuries.³⁶ This protest showed a clear difference between the reception of these films by critics and moviegoers. Unlike film critics, protestors were not afraid to attack these films based on their racist depictions of the Vietnamese because they did not have to filter their critiques in order to get approval for publication.

In light of the recent protest, newspapers finally printed negative sentiments of the recent Vietnam related films. The *Los Angeles Times* article “Controversy, Glitter: War and Peace at the Awards” included pictures of protestors with signs that read, “The Deer Hunter: No Oscars for Racism,” “We Remember Vietnam: History Cannot be Rewritten,” and “Deer Hunter a Bloody Lie,” as well as interviews with members of the protest. Liu Quoi, a Ph.D. student at UCLA disliked *The Deer Hunter* because it depicted the Vietnamese as “barbarians and savages” and thus endangered American understanding of the Vietnamese people. Two members of the Hell No, We Won’t Go Committee took offense at the message that these two films convey. Jennifer Pirie claimed that *The Deer Hunter* “distorts history” and “doesn't show American atrocities.”³⁷ Linda Garrett, shared a similar opinion stated that “some level of responsibility to

³⁶ Tom Paegal, “Voight, Jane Fonda, ‘Hunter’ Win Oscars,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158810346/C47ACFD777AF429FPQ/2?accountid=10362> (accessed January 29, 2016), A3.

³⁷ Grant, “Controversy, Glitter: War and Peace at the Awards,” G1, 11.

the truth of history” should be present throughout Hollywood’s films.³⁸ These films, made from an American perspective, were guilty of ignoring the hardships that the Vietnamese faced during the war. This kind of protest was much more radical than what film critics in newspapers printed. It could be that major newspapers, or the critics themselves, were afraid to criticize some of the biggest names in Hollywood.

The *Los Angeles Times* published several, mostly negative, reader submissions that discussed the glorification of Vietnam in the recent Academy Award winning movies. Michael W. Kovacevich noted Fonda’s attempt at sensitivity, but still believed that her film fell short of doing the war justice. Paula M. Jung shared a similar sentiment and was disappointed with the strictly American portrayal of Vietnam.³⁹ These write-in letters are the epitome of the controversy surrounding not just *Coming Home*, but also a majority of Vietnam War films. The war was still a recent memory and open wound for the majority of American citizens. It was too soon after the war for filmmakers to portray the war in an objective manner that was accessible to a wide, American audience. Critics’ unwillingness to engage in the necessary criticisms pertaining to the overall themes presented by these two movies prolonged the production of historically objective films because it allowed filmmakers to get away with racist and inaccurate portrayals of the Vietnamese.

³⁸ Aljean Harmetz, “Oscar-Winning ‘Deer Hunter’ Is Under Attack as ‘Racist’ Film,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120921105/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C15.

³⁹ Felix Doherty, Michael Kovacevich, Paula M. Jung, Phil M. Joanou, and David R. Moss, “Letters: Viet Movies-- Who Won War?” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158849567/72B6810DFE3644FDPQ/21?accountid=10362> (accessed January 30, 2016), U56.

For weeks after the Academy Awards, newspapers continued to report on the protests and negative sentiments about these two highly controversial movies. Fonda may not have seen her film as part of the controversy, but she agreed with protestors that Cimino's film "does not help us learn the lessons of the Vietnam War." Headlines like "Oscar-Winning 'Deer Hunter' is Under Attack as 'Racist' Film" marked a shift in the newspaper legacy that *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* left behind.⁴⁰ Unlike film critics, protestors viewed the film's historical implications, not its cinematic ones. The majority of protestors and educators were more critical of these films than movie critics were; this established a trend that forced newspaper columnists to be more critical of the Vietnam War genre. The reviews published following the release of *Platoon* best exhibit this trend.

Platoon

Oliver Stone spent roughly eleven years trying to get a major movie studio to produce his screenplay for *Platoon*.⁴¹ Stone's screenplay followed a Chris (Charlie Sheen), a volunteered enlisted man, in Vietnam; day-to-day operations with his unit and perilous battlefield missions quickly chipped away at Chris' naiveté. He struggled to comprehend his experiences and was forced overcome his internal struggle to choose between his two commanding officers, liberal Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe) and conservative Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger). As Chris flew over the wreckage in Vietnam on his way out of the country, his interior monologue summarized not only

⁴⁰ Aljean Harnetz, "Oscar-Winning 'Deer Hunter' Is Under Attack as 'Racist' Film," C15.

⁴¹ Aljean Harnetz, "'Room With A View' and 'Platoon' Lead Oscar List," *New York Times*, February 12, 1987,

<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110829006/878EDDC244C410EPQ/10?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C29.

what he learned from the war, but also what the U.S. learned. He contemplated, “Looking back we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there for the rest of my days.”⁴² This reflection encompassed Chris’ experience in Vietnam; he came, he saw, but he did not conquer. Stone depicted the war as he saw it when he was an infantryman and sought to understand the war’s larger implications. By the time he released *Platoon* in 1986, filmmakers, critics, and audience members could finally grasp the war without an extremely emotional defense. The enormously positive reviews from diverse groups, like the Vietnamese community and veteran’s associations, reflected the quality and success of *Platoon*.

As time put distance between the Vietnam War and the present, filmmakers finally portrayed it as a historically objective event; similarly, critics were finally able to detach themselves from the war and assess films as legitimate historical representations. The majority of *Platoon*’s reviews were positive; even Fonda, star of *Coming Home*, had only praise for *Platoon*. She said, “A movie like this helps to insure that it [another Vietnam] will never happen again” and admitted to weeping at the UA Coronet Theater in Westwood with unknown Vietnam veterans after seeing the film.⁴³ Almost a month after its initial release, it remained number one at the box office. After nine weeks, *Platoon* earned almost \$55 million.⁴⁴ Stone’s acceptance

⁴² *Platoon*, DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (London: Hemdale Film, 1986).

⁴³ Path Broeske, “After Seeing ‘Platoon,’ Fonda Wept,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816564269/492CD77D213C4FBBPQ/21?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K3.

⁴⁴ “‘Platoon’ Remains No. 1 In Box-Office Earnings,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110843178/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C32.

speech for Best Director at the Academy Awards was extremely moving. He publically announced that his “award means they [the Academy and audience] are acknowledging Vietnam veterans, what those veterans went through in the war ‘and saying it should never, ever in our lifetimes happen again.’” Arnold Kopelson, producer and winner of *Platoon*’s Best Picture Academy Award, said that it “has brought to this generation a new perspective of war--that war is not glamorous, that is maims and kills.”⁴⁵ As the quality of the Vietnam War genre increased, so did the quality of the reviews that newspapers published.

Film critics for the *Los Angeles* and *New York Times* had the historical advantage of comparing *Platoon* to previous movies produced about the Vietnam War. Jay Sharbutt finally characterized the differences between Vietnam War movies made in 1978, just after the war ended, and ones made roughly ten years later. He distinguished *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *84 Charlie MoPic* (1989), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987) from other major Vietnam War films because they were all written (or based on a novel by) a Vietnam veteran. Gustav Hasford, the author of the novel that inspired *Full Metal Jacket*, attributed this recent rise in Vietnam veteran stories “to the fact that Vietnam’s so far away now...you don’t have the knee-jerk reaction to it that hawks and doves did back then.”⁴⁶ As Hasford acknowledged, the only thing that could remedy the emotional attachment to the war was time. The father in time

⁴⁵ Jay Sharbutt, “‘Platoon’ Is Top Film; Newman Is Best Actor,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/814528467/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/4?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C1, 24.

⁴⁶ Jay Sharbutt, “Vietnam Vets Launch Film Assault,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1986, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/154587882/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/5?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E1, 10.

filmmakers, critics, and audiences were from the war, the easier it was reflect on the event without irrational, defensive sentiments.

A number of film critics hailed *Platoon* as the most successful Vietnam War film of all time. Benson's *Los Angeles Times* article, "'Platoon': It's War at Ground Zero," stressed that Stone's experience as an infantryman, with a Bronze Star for valor and a Purple Heart, brought a sense of realism that compelled the audience to feel what fighting in the war was truly like.⁴⁷ Film critics for the *New York Times* shared a similar view. Canby called *Platoon* "the best work of any kind about the Vietnam War since Michael Herr's vigorous and hallucinatory book 'Dispatches.'" Unlike most films about the Vietnam War, *Platoon* did not attempt to generalize the expansive twenty-year war; its sole focus was a single infantry platoon near Cambodia in 1967. He also praised Stone's control over the screenplay and the unique attributes that the actors brought to their characters.⁴⁸ Canby humbled himself by acknowledging that he never went to Vietnam and had "no idea how accurate" the film is in certain respects, yet he called it "the best fiction film yet made about the fighting in Vietnam."⁴⁹ One of the most touching reviews of *Platoon* came from Daran Halpann. He wrote,

⁴⁷ Sheila Benson, "'Platoon': It's War at Ground Zero," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1986, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/154925366/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/2?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), N1, 23.

⁴⁸ Vincent Canby, "Film: The Vietnam War in Stone's 'Platoon,'" *New York Times*, December 19, 1986, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/110998461/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C12.

⁴⁹ Vincent Canby, "Film View: 'Platoon' Finds New Life in the Old War Movie," *New York Times*, January 11, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110832840/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/17?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), H21.

I am 15 years old. I'm not old enough to remember Vietnam, and my history books never say much, if we ever get to the Vietnam war. 'Platoon,' with some history that my mother supplied, helped me to realize what Vietnam was. It really moved me, to put it mildly. I hope others who never knew Vietnam see 'Platoon,' because it was real life."⁵⁰

It appeared that audiences, both young and old, saw *Platoon*'s value in telling a history of the Vietnam War. David Thomson, of *California Magazine*, said it "maybe [sic] the best war movie an American has ever made" and Richard Corliss, of *Time Magazine*, hailed it "the most impressive movie to deal with the fighting in Vietnam."⁵¹ This widespread, positive feedback was previously unseen in earlier films in the Vietnam War genre.

Unlike newspapers following *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*, newspapers published reviews for *Platoon* from the American-Vietnamese community; this is one of the most drastic differences between reviews for *Platoon* than reviews for films about the war almost ten years earlier. In "Viet Refugees Give 'Platoon' Good Reviews," Herman Wong detailed exactly how the Vietnamese community in the United States felt about the depiction of the war in *Platoon*. Huy Nguyen, a computer sciences major at UC Irvine, "found that movie very real. It is not make-believe. It is not a lot of Stallone or Chuck Norris." Tony Lam, a business leader in Orange County's Little Saigon said, "This movie does not make this struggle simplistic. It tells us much about the American behavior." Even though it depicted American behavior in a more complex

⁵⁰ Daran Halpann, "The 'Platoon' War," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/898799733/878EDDC244C410EPQ/13?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), 99.

⁵¹ *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1986, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/154950231/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), N15.

manner, the movie is far from perfect; it portrayed Vietnamese characters with a “purely subordinate status” and frequently two-dimensional. Yen Do, editor of Orange County’s *Nguoi Viet Daily News*, thought a completely realistic “Hollywood account of the Vietnamese is still highly unlikely, but this is to be expected because all movies thus far “were made by Americans, for Americans.”⁵² This kind of criticism was extremely important in contextualizing the climate that Stone released *Platoon* under and was often lacking from reviews written from an American perspective.

Despite the backlash from the American Vietnamese community over the two dimensional portrayal of the Vietnamese people, there were many positive reactions. Nguyen said “more than the earlier movies, [*Platoon*] provides some measure of dramatic accuracy about the war,” which made it very different from Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris.⁵³ A majority of critics agreed with Nguyen’s assessment. Benson emphasized that *Platoon* was like no other war film. She claimed that Stone “put a stake through the heart of all the slick Rambo heroics ever to slide onto a screen.”⁵⁴ Like Benson, Canby discredited movies like Rambo and acknowledged that *Platoon* had little in common with its predecessors like *Apocalypse Now*.⁵⁵ It was much better than Rambo and “other cardboard heroes.”⁵⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* article, “Reunion: Men Of A Real Platoon,” detailed a reunion of five Vietnam veterans, including Stone. Not all

⁵² Herman Wong, “Viet Refugees Give ‘Platoon’ Good Reviews,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816563330/878EDDC244C410EPQ/11?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K5.

⁵³ Herman Wong, “Viet Refugees Give ‘Platoon’ Good Reviews,” K5.

⁵⁴ Sheila Benson, “‘Platoon’: It’s War at Ground Zero,” N1, 23.

⁵⁵ Vincent Canby, “Film: The Vietnam War in Stone’s ‘Platoon,’” C12.

⁵⁶ Michael Norman, “‘Platoon’ Grapples With Vietnam,” December 21, 1986, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/110886402/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), H17, 18.

veterans supported *Platoon*, but all were certain that heroics of John Rambo were laughable.⁵⁷ This indicated not only a move away from cardboard heroics, but also a move away from the conservative political ideology that fostered the extremely pro-American sentiments under Ronald Reagan's Administration.

By the mid-late 1980s, both American film critics and newspaper readers were tired of the extremely masculine and heroic Vietnam stock figures. In response to Chuck Norris' recent comments on *Platoon*, the *Los Angeles Times* published nine write in letters that criticize his claim that the film provided fuel to the fire for the communist agenda. All nine readers found his comment absurd and "obtuse." As the Reagan era of extreme patriotism ended, people began to see through the falsified heroics of the 1980s and sought the "real" heroics of *Platoon*; Timothy Baker supported this theory and believed that the only reason movies like Rambo only succeeded because "some people choose to forget." Jodi McLaughlin shared a similar sentiment and asserted, "Films like 'Platoon' do not diminish our patriotism as Norris suggests...They simply present another layer of a complex and often painful story."⁵⁸ Filmmakers, critics, and audiences were greatly affected by political climate; by the time *Platoon* was released, it was apparent that the majority were ready to approach Vietnam through a historic lens.

⁵⁷ Jay Sharbutt, "Reunion: Men Of A Real Platoon," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1987, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-02-07/entertainment/ca-1640_1_vietnam-memories (accessed February 5, 2016).

⁵⁸ Timothy Baker, Andrea Battiste, Jodi McLaughlin, Richard L. Riley, et, al., *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816497790/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/5?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K16.

Platoon evoked a profound emotion in Vietnam veterans that earlier movies, like *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*, were unable to conjure. The Veterans Administration and the Vietnam Veterans of America agreed that *Platoon* was the root cause for a roughly 25% increase in request for counseling services from January to May. The film was so realistic to some that it appeared to cause a “reawakening of stress symptoms and memories of war.”⁵⁹ For one Vietnam veteran, *Platoon* brought back a number of unexpected memories. Despite the dredged up feelings, George Masters called it “the best movie [he’s] seen about the war. *Platoon* showed Vietnam as hot, loud, terrifying and lonely.”⁶⁰ Richard L. Riley claimed his “own experiences were about 99% accurately portrayed in ‘Platoon.’”⁶¹ Even though Jim Thomas did not think that *Platoon* represented his experiences, he did concede that these events did happen for some—just not all.⁶² Acknowledging that *Platoon* was representative of the U.S. experience in Vietnam meant admitting that Americans were guilty of war crimes, like the senseless raping and killing of unarmed citizens. This was a huge step forward for veterans to admit, and for newspapers to publish.

Numerous film critics argued that unlike *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* was actually about Vietnam. David Halberstam, a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter in 1964 as a correspondent in Vietnam, praised Stone’s depiction of the war.

⁵⁹ Janet Gardner, “‘Platoon’ Raising Veterans’ Anxieties,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110773919/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/15?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), NJ1.

⁶⁰ George Eyre Masters, “‘Platoon’ Looses [sic] Torrent of Tortured Memories for Vietnam Veteran,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816581670/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/14?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), SD_A2.

⁶¹ Timothy Baker, Andrea Battiste, Jodi McLaughlin, Richard L. Riley, et, al., K16.

⁶² Sharbutt, “Reunion: Men Of A Real Platoon.”

Not only is the movie well made, but it also captured the “loneliness of these man, how isolated they are and how on this terrain they are always foreigners.” He called any dissent from *Platoon* “petty.”⁶³ Bernard E. Trainor, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general, gave a similar review. He claimed that the film was “less a war movie than a movie of men at war.” While Stone may have lacked the ability to portray exactly what troops were fighting for, he authentically portrayed what it was like to be an infantryman.⁶⁴ Not all readers agreed with Halberstam and Trainor’s assessment. In a letter to the editor, Richard A. Sorgen did not think that *Platoon* did service to honor those who died in Vietnam. He recognized that *Platoon* was “closer to the historical reality of Vietnam” than Rambo, but it emphasized that troops were “sadistic murderer[s].”⁶⁵ These contradictory reviews showed that while Stone’s screenplay may have been the best in the Vietnam War genre to date, there was room for progress for future movies about the war.

Unlike *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon* received relatively few critiques on its historical representation of Vietnam; however, one criticism of *Platoon*, and subsequently most Hollywood films, was that it lacked proportional diversity. Gregg Barrios, author of “A ‘Platoon’ Without Latinos” recognized that in response to his criticism, Stone would likely say that he was representing his own experiences, not everyone else’s; however, this could not be true. Mexican-

⁶³ David Halberstam, “Two Who Were There View ‘Platoon’: The correspondent [sic],” *New York Times*, March 8, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/movies/two-who-were-there-view-platoon-the-correspondent.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed February 5, 2016).

⁶⁴ Bernard E. Trainor, “Two Who Were There View ‘Platoon’; The Marine Officer,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/movies/two-who-were-there-view-platoon-the-marine-officer.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed February 5, 2016).

⁶⁵ Richard A. Sorgen, “The Morality of ‘Platoon,’” *New York Times*, April 12, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110797197/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/9?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), H13.

Americans made up 10% of the Southwest at the time, but accounted for 19.4% of the casualties of the Southwest. In 1965, 23.5% of Army enlisted men killed in action were black, but they only composed of 10% of the armed forces in Southeast Asia.⁶⁶ This whitewashed version of history is not unique to *Platoon*; this critique is applicable for a majority of major Hollywood movies. This indicated that the film industry still had a long way to go in terms of complete historical accuracy, but *Platoon* was still the best representation thus far.

Platoon was not a perfect representation of the Vietnam War, but film critics suggested that it was the best film to date. Ashley Boone, president of marketing and distribution at Lorimar, reiterated that if *Platoon* was released a decade ago people would have said, “Don’t remind us of our mistake.” Tom Sherak, president of distribution at 20th Century-Fox, determined that people were finally “ready for it.”⁶⁷ Clearly, critics were finally ready and it won four of its eight Academy Award nominations and three of its four Golden Globe nominations; most notably, it won Best Picture and Best Motion Picture- Drama, respectively.⁶⁸ In addition to reviews from critics, newspapers also published articles from the Vietnamese community and various veterans associations; these two communities, among others, were almost entirely absent from newspapers following the release of earlier films in the Vietnam War genre. Distance from

⁶⁶ Gregg Barrios, “A ‘Platoon’ Without Latinos: Mexican-Americans Are Being Denied Their Place in History,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1972, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/898792488/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), L2.

⁶⁷ Aljean Harmetz, “Unwanted ‘Platoon’ Finds Success As U.S. Examines the Vietnam War,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1987, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110833775/878EDDC244C410EPQ/12?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C13.

⁶⁸ “*Platoon* Awards,” *imdb.com*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091763/awards?ref=tt_awd (accessed February 15, 2016).

the war allowed Americans to detach themselves from the event and view it with a more objective historical lens. The changing political climate away from ultra-conservatism in the mid-late 1980s fostered the revival a more anti-war view of the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

The way critics reviewed these three films at the time of their release significantly influenced the way that audiences remembered them over time. A number of films, like *Coming Home*, did not withstand the test of time and quickly faded from the public's collective memory. Even though audiences did not remember this film for its quality, it pioneered the Vietnam War genre and was a necessary first step for filmmakers, critics, and audiences to take before they could expose the war for what it really was and understand its historical implications. In contrast, the American Film Institute (AFI) ranked *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* as the 79th and 83rd greatest films of all time, respectively, in its 1998 release of the "Top 100 Greatest Films of All Time" list.⁶⁹ The sheer number of positive articles published about these two movies in comparison to the quantity and quality published about *Coming Home* in the *Los Angeles* and *New York Times* alone, could help explain why they withstood the test of time.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Vietnam's government was justifiably unwelcoming to Hollywood filmmakers. It was not until 1989 that the Vietnamese government welcomed American filmmakers into the country. Vietnamese representatives at the Hawaiian International Film Festival still disapproved of the unrealistic American portrayals of the war, but they agreed to suspend their disapproval in order to bring film crews in who were willing to

⁶⁹ "AFI's Greatest American Movies of All Time," *American Film Institute*, <http://www.afi.com/100Years/movies.aspx> (accessed March 13, 2016).

share their knowledge of the production process so they could improve the quality of the Vietnamese film industry.⁷⁰ At the time, it was unclear whether the U.S. would be as receptive to Vietnamese film crews on its domestic territory with such open arms, but this signified a huge step in creating a relationship that could improve the quality of American made films about the Vietnam War.

What the Vietnamese film industry lacked in production quality, it made up for in screenplay quality. Hollywood has yet to produce a film in the Vietnam War genre that competes with the most successful films produced in Vietnam. Dang Nhat Minh, secretary general of the filmmakers' union of Vietnam, was the leading filmmaker responsible for producing high quality Vietnam War genre films. He said, "My sense is that they [American films] describe a false aspect of the war. Vietnamese are seen as animals....I try to make films through the eyes of an individual." He completely invalidated earlier American movies, like *Rambo*, but acknowledged that some later films, like *Platoon*, had several redeeming qualities.⁷¹ He may never have had the opportunity to "collaborate with Americans on a war film, using Vietnamese actors in Vietnam," but Tony Bui, a Vietnamese American, did. Bui's *Three Seasons* (1999) was the first U.S. film shot entirely in Vietnam with all Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans actors, with

⁷⁰ Ethel Greenfield Booth, "The Vietnam War: De-Rambo-ized by the Vietnamese," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1989, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/1148868016/3E9054D40578494EPQ/17?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), N65.

⁷¹ Charles P. Wallace, "A Filmmaker's Struggle to Capture the 'Real' Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1990, OCF4 <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/1460801557/6F37BD0BCA374034PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016).

only one notable exception.⁷² Even though this was a huge step for filmmakers, this movie remains relatively unknown and failed to have the influence that Hollywood produced films do.

What Hollywood lacks in quality Vietnam War genre film, it made up for in Vietnam War documentaries. Tiana Alexandra, a Vietnamese American woman, wrote and directed *From Hollywood to Hanoi*, a documentary that follows her return to Vietnam in a journey of self-discovery.⁷³ Hollywood must bridge the gap between the quality of its Vietnam War documentaries and its historical films instead of sacrificing historical accuracy for box office profits. Even with a contemporary, desensitized view of the war, filmmakers have yet to produce a flawless representation for why Americans fought in Vietnam, what happened while they were there, and how their experiences affected them after the war.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Hollywood no longer looked away from the war in Vietnam; however, it took roughly three years for a movie about the Vietnam War to achieve box office success. Hollywood broke its silence in the late-1970s in an attempted to reflect on and understand the horrific and unparalleled quagmire that the U.S. wasted countless lives. In Canby's article, "Hollywood Focuses on Vietnam at Last," he explained that films about the war were not yet close to the quality and quantity of American literature. As early as 1978, he acknowledged filmmakers' tendency to mold "the Vietnam experience to fit their needs, being either incapable or afraid of meeting it on its own terms. Most of the time, Vietnam is simply a

⁷² Craig R. Whitney, "Going Home, American Shoots Film in Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 2, 1997, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/109681761/95D7448503D64EF3PQ/15?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), E1-2.

⁷³ Vincent Canby, "Going Back Home, Again and Again, To Find Vietnam and to Find Herself," *New York Times*, July 21, 1993, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/109042987/6F37BD0BCA374034PQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), C13-14.

convenient excuse, something to be trotted out to explain someone's bizarre behavior." This theme was present in many films of the time, perhaps most notably, Paul Schrader's screenplay for *Taxi Driver* (1976).⁷⁴ Even though no movie that has yet to fully capture the essence of the Vietnam War, the mere number of attempts after the war at getting it right, in comparison to the number of attempts throughout the duration of the war, showed a positive step forward in understanding it.

⁷⁴ Canby, "Hollywood Focuses on Vietnam at Last," D1, 13.

Works Cited

- “AFI’s Greatest American Movies of All Time.” *American Film Institute*.
<http://www.afi.com/100Years/movies.aspx> (accessed March 13, 2016).
- Anderegg, Michael. *Inventing Vietnam The War in Film and Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
- Arnett, Peter. “‘The Deer Hunter’: Vietnam’s Finals Atrocity.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 8, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158802146/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/4?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E1.
- Baker, Timothy and Andrea Battiste, Jodi McLaughlin, Richard L. Riley, et, al. *Los Angeles Times*. February 1, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816497790/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/5?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K16.
- Barrios, Gregg. “A ‘Platoon’ Without Latinos: Mexican-Americans Are Being Denied Their Place in History.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 19, 1972.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/898792488/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), L2.
- Benson, Shelia. “‘Platoon’: It’s War at Ground Zero.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 19, 1986.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/154925366/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/2?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), N1, 23.
- Ethel Greenfield Booth, “The Vietnam War: De-Rambo-ized by the Vietnamese,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1989
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/1148868016/3E9054D40578494EPQ/17?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), N65.
- Broske, Path. “After Seeing ‘Platoon,’ Fonda Wept.” *Los Angeles Times*. January 25, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816564269/492CD77D213C4FBBPQ/21?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K3.
- Canby, Vincent. “Film: The Vietnam War in Stone’s ‘Platoon.’” *New York Times*. December 19, 1986.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/110998461/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C12.
- _____. “Film View: ‘Platoon’ Finds New Life in the Old War Movie.” *New York Times*, January 11, 1987.

- <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110832840/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/17?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), H21.
- _____. "Going Back Home, Again and Again, To Find Vietnam and to Find Herself." *New York Times*. July 21, 1993.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/109042987/6F37BD0BCA374034PQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), C13-14
- _____. "Hollywood Focuses on Vietnam at Last." *New York Times*. February 19, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/123818570/78F89588942B4F7APQ/8?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), D1, 13.
- _____. "How True to Fact Must Fiction Be?" *New York Times*. December 17, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/123554578?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D1, 23.
- _____. "Screen: 'The Deer Hunter.'" *New York Times*. December 15, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/123556561?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C5.
- Champlin, Charles. "'Apocalypse Now' A towering Landmark in Film History: A Journey into Madness." *Los Angeles Times*. August 12, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158956642/BF559443D494641PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016), S1.
- _____. "'Coming Home': A Reminder of the Costs of War." *Los Angeles Times*. February 12, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158434653/FD638E5D606348AEPQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 30, 2016), P1, 54-57.
- _____. "'Deer Hunter-- A Palship Goes to War.'" *Los Angeles Times*. December 3, 1978. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158662523?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), P1, 47.
- Combs. *American Political Movies An Annotated Filmography of Feature Films* New York: Garland Publishing, 1990.
- _____. *Movies and Politics The Dynamic Relationship*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.
- Coming Home*. DVD. Directed by Hal Ashby. Los Angeles: Jerome Hellman Productions, 1978.

“Coming Home Awards.” *imdb.com*. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077362/awards?ref_=tt_awd (accessed February 14, 2016).

“‘Deer Hunter’ Protested: ‘David’ Wins Film Award in Berlin.” *Los Angeles Times*. March 6, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158865637/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E7.

Devine, Jeremy M. *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud. *From Hanoi to Hollywood The Vietnam War in American Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

Doherty, Felix, Michael Kovacevich, Paula M. Jung, Phil M. Joanou, and David R. Moss.
“Letters: Viet Movies-- Who Won War?” *Los Angeles Times*. April 22, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158849567/72B6810DFE3644FDPQ/21?accountid=10362> (accessed January 30, 2016), U56.

Coppola, Eleanor. “Diary Of a Director’s Wife.” *New York Times*. August 5, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/120780091/BF559443D494641PQ/20?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016), SM8, 34, 38.

Farber, Stephen, Jack Kroll, and Charles Schreger. *Los Angeles Times*. Dec 8, 1978.
<http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/158714485?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016).

Finke, Nikki. “Russia Raves Over ‘Apocalypse.’” *Los Angeles Times*. August 23, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158965692/BF559443D494641PQ/13?accountid=10362> (accessed February 15, 2016), E25.

Gardner, Janet. “‘Platoon’ Raising Veterans’ Anxieties.” *New York Times*. June 7, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110773919/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/15?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), NJ1.

Grant, Lee. “Controversy, Glitter: War and Peace at the Awards.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 11, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158877279/C47ACFD777A429FPQ/19?accountid=10362> (accessed January 29, 2016), G1, 11.

_____. “Marketing ‘The Deer Hunter.’” *Los Angeles Times*. December 25, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158693245?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D24.

Halberstam, David. "Two Who Were There View 'Platoon': The correspondent [sic]." *New York Times*. March 8, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/movies/two-who-were-there-view-platoon-the-correspondent.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed February 5, 2016).

Halpann, Daran. "The 'Platoon' War." *Los Angeles Times*. January 18, 1987. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/898799733/878EDDC244C410EPQ/13?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), 99.

Harmetz, Aljean. "Oscar-Winning 'Deer Hunter' Is Under Attack as 'Racist' Film." *New York Times*. April 26, 1979. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120921105/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C15.

_____. "'Room With A View' and 'Platoon' Lead Oscar List." *New York Times*. February 12, 1987. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110829006/878EDDC244C410EPQ/10?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C29.

_____. "Unwanted 'Platoon' Finds Success As U.S. Examines the Vietnam War." *New York Times*. February 9, 1987. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110833775/878EDDC244C410EPQ/12?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C13.

Honeycutt, Kirk. "The Five-Year Struggle to Make 'Coming Home.'" *New York Times*. February 19, 1978. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123812375/45D70CB670F64C30PQ/1?accountid=10362> (accessed January 13, 2016), D13, 35.

"Izvestia Assails Oscar For 'The Deer Hunter.'" *New York Times*. April 12, 1979. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120930298/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/6?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), A3.

Leticia Kent, Leticia. "Ready for Vietnam? A Talk with Michael Cimino." *New York Times*. December 10, 1978. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123563695?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), D15, 23.

Los Angeles Times. February 17, 1978. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/158445633/78F89588942B4F7APQ/27?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), G19.

Los Angeles Times. December 19, 1986. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/154950231/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), N15.

- Mariscal, George, Debbie Miller, Katherine L. Waitman, Jeffrey M. Burbank, and Frank L. Burke. "Letters to the Times: Vietnam War's 'Final Atrocity.'" *Los Angeles Times*. April 14, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/158794536/3E50CB5E74A946E9PQ/19?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), C4.
- Maslin, Janet. "Critic's Notebook: There's Many a Slip." *Los Angeles Times*. May 4, 1978.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/123729311/78F89588942B4F7APQ/20?accountid=10362> (accessed January 22, 2016), C17.
- Masters, George Eyre. "'Platoon' Looses [sic] Torrent of Tortured Memories for Vietnam Veteran." *Los Angeles Times*. June 21, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816581670/C5DB821C83BC40D1PQ/14?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), SD_A2.
- Norman, Michael. "'Platoon' Grapples With Vietnam." December 21, 1986.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/110886402/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/3?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), H17, 18.
- Paegal, Tom. "Voight, Jane Fonda, 'Hunter' Win Oscars." *Los Angeles Times*. April 10, 1979.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/158810346/C47ACFD777AF429FPQ/2?accountid=10362> (accessed January 29, 2016), A3.
- Palmer, William J. *The Films of the Seventies: A Social History*. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987.
- Platoon*. DVD. Directed by Oliver Stone. London: Hemdale Film, 1986.
- "*Platoon* Awards." *imdb.com*. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091763/awards?ref=tt_awd (accessed February 15, 2016).
- "'Platoon' Remains No. 1 In Box-Office Earnings." *New York Times*. February 19, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110843178/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C32.
- Sharbutt, Jay. "'Platoon' Is Top Film; Newman Is Best Actor." *Los Angeles Times*. March 31, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/814528467/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/4?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), C1, 24.

- _____. "Reunion: Men Of A Real Platoon." *Los Angeles Times*. February 7, 1987.
http://articles.latimes.com/1987-02-07/entertainment/ca-1640_1_vietnam-memories
 (accessed February 5, 2016).
- Smith, Julian. *Looking Away; Hollywood and Vietnam*. New York: Scribner, 1975.
- Sharbutt, Jay. "Vietnam Vets Launch Film Assault." *Los Angeles Times*. May 26, 1986.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/154587882/F9500FE9B7AA4649PQ/5?accountid=10362> (accessed January 31, 2016), E1, 10.
- Sorgen, Richard A. "The Morality of 'Platoon.'" *New York Times*. April 12, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/110797197/87DF3E3EF0F74718PQ/9?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), H13.
- The Deer Hunter*. DVD. Directed By Michael Cimino. London: EMI, 1978.
- "*The Deer Hunter Awards*." *imdb.com*.
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077416/awards?ref_=tt_awd (accessed February 15, 2016).
- Trainor, Bernard E. "Two Who Were There View 'Platoon'; The Marine Officer." *New York Times*. March 8, 1987.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/movies/two-who-were-there-view-platoon-the-marine-officer.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed February 5, 2016).
- Wallace, Charles, P. "A Filmmaker's Struggle to Capture the 'Real' Vietnam." *Los Angeles Times*. March 30, 1990. OCF4
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/1460801557/6F37BD0BCA374034PQ/7?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016).
- Whitney, Craig R. "Going Home, American Shoots Film in Vietnam." *New York Times*. December 2, 1997.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/109681761/95D7448503D64EF3PQ/15?accountid=10362> (accessed March 13, 2016), E1-2.
- Wong, Herman. "Viet Refugees Give 'Platoon' Good Reviews." *Los Angeles Times*. January 25, 1987.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/816563330/878EDDC244C410EPQ/11?accountid=10362> (accessed February 5, 2016), K5.