Framing 'the Other'. A critical review of Vietnam war movies and their representation of Asians and Vietnamese*

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We Were Soldiers (2002), depicting the first major clash between regular North-Vietnamese troops and U.S. troops at Ia Drang in Southern Vietnam over three days in November 1965, is the Vietnam War version of *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*. Director, writer and producer, Randall Wallace, shows the viewer both American family values and dying soldiers. The movie is based on the book *We were soldiers once ... and young* by the U.S. commander in the battle, retired Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore (a John Wayne-like performance by Mel Gibson).[1] In the film, the U.S. troops have little idea of what they face, are overrun and suffer heavy casualties. The American GIs are seen fighting for their comrades, not their fatherland. This narrow patriotism is accompanied by a new theme: the respect for the victims 'on the other side'. For the first time in the Hollywood tradition, we see fading shots of dying 'VC' and of their widows reading loved ones' diaries. This is not because the filmmaker was emphasizing 'love' or 'peace' instead of 'war', but more importantly, Wallace seems to say, that war is noble.

Ironically, the popular Vietnamese actor, Don Duong, who plays the communist commander Nguyen Huu An who led the Vietnamese People's Army to victory, has been criticized at home for tarnishing the image of Vietnamese soldiers. Don Duong has appeared in several foreign films and numerous Vietnamese-made movies about the War. He has also played a pedicab driver in the movie *Three Seasons* (2000) and a refugee camp translator in *Green Dragon* (2001), both directed by award-winning Vietnamese-American filmmaker Tony Bui. In these movies, he represents for the first time a genuine person, a belated portrayal by American filmmakers of Asians, or here Vietnamese, no longer as 'others'. His

[1] Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We were soldiers once …and young. Ia Drang, the battle that changed the war in Vietnam* (New York 1992).

countrymen, through the official Army newspaper, see it differently and call him 'a national traitor'.[2]

In many ways, visual media such as photographs, film and television have taken over from written texts the role of primary educator.[3] This article will try to offer some insights into the way Western film culture helps to construct identities and worldviews by setting up the differences between 'us' and 'them': in this case, between 'the West' and 'the rest' who became the subject of European imperial expansion. What conceptions of Asia, and Vietnam, did these films and cultural practices construct? Vietnam war movies are a popular topic for social scientists.[4] Except for some French and Vietnamese movies, I have chosen to discuss a number of 'orthodox' U.S.-made films, which have already received extensive critical attention. Put simply, the reason for this is that I have no direct access to the majority of the hundreds of B-movies made about the Vietnam war (which do not differ much in their racial representation of Asians),[5] but also because of the fact that the perspective I have chosen here is not so often taken. Most academic critics in the U.S. opted for the American side and seldom tried to see these films from an Asian, or in this case, Vietnamese, angle.

The best-known critical view on this discourse is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, whereby European and Western representations of Asians follow a set of stereotypes based on a Western-centred worldview, which is being 'capable of warping (distorting) the perspectives of reader and author equally.'[6] Based on Foucault's idea about the linguistic apparatus as a means to express power and Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony through

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[2] *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, (People's Army Daily; September 18, 2002), electronic source. Film making in Vietnam became a part of a state-sponsored project of memory of the 'just cause' of national liberation, rooted in a unilineal view on history.

[3] Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle* (Detroit 1983); Stuart Ewen, *All consuming images: the politics of style in contemporary culture* (New York 1988); Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading national geographic* (Chicago 1993).

[4] See Julian Smith, *Looking away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York 1975); Gilbert Adair, *Vietnam on film. From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (London 1981); Mark Baker, *Nam* (New York 1983); Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the war was remembered. Hollywood & Vietnam* (New York 1988); Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without walls. Movies and culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick 1991); Benjamin Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre. Algenrie-Vietnam en France et aux Etats-Unis* (Paris 1997).

[5] See, for instance, the extremely useful overview of 600 cinematographic productions from more than eight countries compiled by Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams ed., *Vietnam war films: over 600 feature, made-for-TV, pilot and short Movies, 1939-1992, from the United States, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Australia* (Jefferson N.C. 1994).

[6] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1978) 13.

which the elite maintain control over the masses, Said constructed a binary opposition between 'the West' or 'us' and 'the East' or 'the Other'. Although the term 'Orientalism' changed from a conservative and romantic approach in intellectual and political views on India to many different kinds of representations in cultural texts, Said's coinage in 1978 created a new paradigm in the study of non-Western societies and cultures. In the framework of Western domination of the non-Western world, 'Orientalism' became the 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short, Said sees Orientalism as the Western way of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.'[7]

Said essentially outlines how the West, and in particular England and France, 'represented' - in effect created - something called 'the Orient'. This was nothing but a construct, however. What the West called the Orient never in fact existed except in the minds of Westerners. It was simply a tool that made Western subjugation of the region easily digestible. Hence, Said's book on Orientalism stands as one of the seminal texts in post-colonialism.

Its methodology has been applied by many authors to other recently decolonized or subjugated areas of the world (even including, in some cases, parts of Europe) and from different perspectives.[8] In a second book, Said explores the relationship between culture and empire which he regards as a complicated 'struggle over geography', embodied in the novel as '*the* esthetic object' which is important for the formation of imperial attitudes, references and experiences.'[9]

More recently, Said's work has come under criticism. Critics like Bernard Lewis and Aijaz Ahmad argued against Said's accusation that the West simply invented 'the Orient', and pointed out Said's supposedly oversimplified dichotomy of 'East' and 'West'. Colonial reality was much more multifaceted than Said seems to suggest, these authors argue.[10] The British author John MacKenzie points out that Said's polarization of 'the

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[7] Said, *Orientalism*, 3, 222-224.
[8] See, for example, Lisa Lowe, *Critical terrains. French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca 1991); A.G. Frank, *Reorient: global economy in the Asian age.* (Berkeley and London 1998); Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar ed., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in film* (New Brunswick 1997).
[9] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York 1993) xii, 7; emphasis in original.
[10] Bernard Lewis, 'The question of orientalism', *New York Review of Books* (24 June 1982) 49-56 and Aijaz Ahmad, 'Orientalism and after: ambivalence and metropolitan location in the work of Edward Said' in: T*heory: classes, nations, literatures* (London en New York, 1992), 159-219.

Other' or 'alterity' against 'us' and 'the West' itself was colonial discourse, while his notion of Western dominance and imperial hegemony as an unchallenged entity is unwarranted. McKenzie also points out that Said does not make any distinction between 'high art' and popular culture in which he has, according to his own words, little interest.[11] Apparently, Said sees more convergence than divergence between elite and popular culture, in particular in late Victorian and Edwardian times. Said's restrictions, however, limit 'Orientalism' (the book and the concept) to 'high culture' or 'great traditions', while film and other mass media like popular music, television, video, pulp fiction, comics, advertising, fashion, home design, and mass-produced food are not included. These fields belong to the broad domain of popular culture, which is generally referred to as mass culture.

Nevertheless, high culture and low culture nowadays belong to a world economy that is no longer built on the assumption '[t]hat the original producers of a commodity necessarily control its consumption,' Arjun Appadurai argues. Locality is not taken for granted, but created, 'deterritorialized' and 'invented'. He cites the transnational movement of Asian martial arts, as mediated by the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries, as a rich case study that not only shows long-cherished traditions, but also creates new cultures of masculinity and violence.[12]

The Yellow Peril stereotype

The acceptance of Orientalism as a cultural tradition means, following Appadurai's argument, the acknowledgement of biological generalizations, cultural constructions, and racial and religious generalizations. Overt colonialist Orientalism has often used the racial stereotype of Asians in

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[11] John MacKenzie, *Orientalism. History, theory and the arts* (Manchester 1995); Michael Sprinker, *Edward Said: a critical reader* (Oxford 1992) 246.

[12] Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', in: M. Featherstone ed., *Global Culture* (London 1990), 295-310, there 305. Recently the British historian David Arnold has contributed to the discussion with an elegant parallel of Orientalism as a cultural and political construction of the West by a new concept called 'tropicality'. The tropics were imagined and represented by 'a landscape in which the power of nature dominated human existence and to no small degree determined its characteristics and quality.' The construction of tropicality is closely linked to visual arts and literature, but also to scientific disciplines and technical specialities (David Arnold, 'Illusory riches: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (special issue on constructing the tropics) 21-1 (March 2000) 5-18, there 7).

general, embedded in the expression 'the yellow peril' or 'the yellow hordes of coolies', to depict Japanese and Chinese migrants who came to the United States in the nineteenth century. Soon it collapsed into 'one yellow horde' for those who came from Asia and became 'a catchword signifying the 'yellow menace' to Western Christian civilization.'[13] American unions were major proponents of the 1882 *Chinese Exclusion Act*, the first racially exclusive U.S. immigration policy targeting people from a single country. This policy of exclusion and hostility continued well into the twentieth century, whose first years sprang the Boxer Rebellion, deemed by many a prime example of the 'yellow threat' that 'menaced' Western Civilisation.[14] While hostility to China declined somewhat during the Second World War as a result of its alliance in the war against Japan, the victory of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party marked the beginning of the Cold War. Another fear came in the place of the 'yellow peril', 'the red menace'. Americans, and to a certain extent Europeans, were taught to fear the hundreds of millions of Red Chinese who were considered a grave threat to U.S. security. During the Cold War, American attitudes toward China led to renewed racist portrayals of China and the Chinese as 'inscrutable', untrustworthy, and as a people of ruthless killers.

Nowadays, shifting representations of Asian Americans as both model minorities and perilous yellow hordes are seen in phrases such as 'copy capitalists' (a term which accuses the Japanese of simply copying Western inventions and, consequently, flooding the world market with cheap, and inferior, imitations). Japan bashing is an ongoing business, from time to time replaced by China bashing: the approval of the *Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) Act for China* (May 24, 2000) sparked coast to coast protests from the American labour movement, which mounted its largest legislative campaign in years.[15] What was meant to be a strong anti-corporate and international solidarity stance against the World Trade Organization ended up in Cold War political jargon and racially offensive messages. And while the U.S. Congress lashed out at Vietnam in recent years for its human rights record and suppression of religion, the same

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[13] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril'* (Berkeley 1993) 2. See also Harold Isaacs, *Images of Asia. American view of China and India* (New York 1958).

[14] See for a European reception of the term: Bernd Soesemann, 'Die sogenannte Hunnenrede Wilhelms II. Textkritische und interpretatorische Bemerkungen zur Ansprache des Kaisers vom 27. Juli 1900 in Bremerhaven', *Historische Zeitschrift* 222 (1976) 342-358.

[15] See e.g. Ken Wong and Elaine Bernard, 'Labour's Mistaken Anti-China Campaign', *New Labour Forum* (Fall/Winter 2000).

reaction could be observed during the trade relations-negotiations with that country.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the most common portrayal of the 'yellow peril' stereotype in films, comic books and cartoons was the Fu Manchu character who embodies everything that westerners feared: 'Asian Mastery of Western knowledge and technique (denoted by his degrees from three European universities in chemistry, medicine, and physics); his access to mysterious Oriental 'occult' powers (to hypnotize victims); and his ability to mobilize the yellow hordes.'[16] The sexual variant is depicted in E.M. Fosters' *A passage to India* (1924) and in other books of the period in which the 'white man's burden' turns into a passion to rule and to protect white females from the clutches of lusty Asians.[17] The fantasies of the Asian female who seduces the White male and the Asian male seducing the White female become an obsession for colonial governments which implemented policies to control the passions of Europeans overseas. Cinematic representations of this abound, like Cecil B. Demille's *The Cheat* (1915), starring the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, whose character tries to possess a white woman. A 1938 cinema version of Kipling's *Gunga Din* shows the title character as a subservient and unimposing anti-hero with openly racist undertones. But even long after decolonization, representations of the 'yellow peril' continue to flourish. In *Year of the Dragon* (1985), a police inspector sees it as his mission to 'clean up' the dark, gang-controlled underworld of New York's Chinatown and 'rescues' his love interest, an Asian female newscaster, from her own culture.[18] The Australian movie *Blood Oath* (1988) shows an Australian army officer at the end of the Second World War persecuting Japanese soldiers suspected of having committed war crimes. The suspects engage in collective violence, but thanks to the civilizing efforts of the white man, they can be 'de-orientalised'.[19] In most Vietnam war movies Vietnamese are

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[16] Jun Xing, *Asian America through the lens: history, representations, and identity* (Walnut Creek, CA 1999) 55. See also: Peter Nepstad, 'Western visions: Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril', *The Illuminated Lantern* (2000) www.illuminatedlantern.com/cinema/features/ fumanchu.html and www.mit.edu/21h.153j/www/aacinema/yellowperil.html.

[17] For instance, America's new Filipino subjects which were depicted in Kipling's famous poem as 'your new-caught, sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child.' Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', *McClure's Magazine* 12 (February 1899).

[18] Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril',* 213.

[19] David Birch, Tony Schirato and Sanjay Srivastava, *ASIA: cultural politics in the global age.* (Crows Nest NSW 2001) 9.

reduced to stereotypes used for the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese army, the Saigon regime and almost any Asian who plays a role, in contrast to the white protagonists of the movie.

The Vietnam War through Vietnamese eyes?

The Vietnam War will be remembered as one where the international press, and the American press in particular, was given unprecedented access to the battlefields. Except on very rare occasions, no Western journalists were allowed by the Hanoi regime to report on their military activities. This one-sided news coverage often gave the South Vietnamese a 'bad press', and even sceptical reporters like David Halberstamm, Neil Sheehan and Stanley Karnow frequently pointed out instances of weaknesses and incompetence of the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN).[20]

In Stanley Karnow's otherwise impressive *Vietnam: a television history* (1982) the newsreel footage contrasts the American fighting men, and ARVN-soldiers and Viet Cong or People's Army forces. In many parts of the series, ARVN troops are shown in a negative or problematic way: as plunderers of corpses of killed 'VC'-troops, as assassins (e.g. the controversial photograph of the point blank shooting of a VC-suspect by police general Nguyen Ngoc Loan on February 1, during the Tet offensive of 1968), or as auxiliary troops. This negative image of inept, poorly trained South Vietnamese soldiers and corrupt Vietnamese officials is the hallmark of nearly every Vietnam War movie. It started in the early 1950s and continued until the late 1970s. It even became a theme in the unsuccessful

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[20] A remarkable exception was the Australian war correspondent Neil Davis (1934-1985) whose experiences with the ARVN differed strongly from those of his American colleagues. See *Front-line*, a documentary by David Bradbury (Canberra: Ronin Films 1979) and the impressive biography by Tim Bowden, *One crowded hour. Neil Davis, combat cameraman 1934-1985* (Sydney 1987). Davis' alter ego is fictionalized in Christopher Koch, *Highways to a war* (Port Melbourne 1995). Another example is Pierre Schoendoerffer's *The Anderson Platoon* (French Broadcasting System, France 1966-1967). Director/Writer/Narrator Pierre Schoendoerffer depicts the day-to-day life of an army combat platoon in the Central Highlands/South Vietnamese combat zone. The men of the 1st Platoon Company 'B', 12th 'Chargers', 1st Cavalry Division, are commanded by a black lieutenant, Joseph Anderson. Filmmaker Pierre Schoendoerffer had been a war correspondent, working as a cameraman for an army film unit at Dien Bien Phu.

Go Tell The Spartans (1977), directed by Ted Post, who blamed the quagmire of the American involvement on the ill advised Vietnamese troops.[21]

Most historians now paint a more nuanced picture, pointing out that the South Vietnamese military structure, modelled along Western lines, was ill-fitted to fight a 'People's war' and placed too much reliance on American logistical support.[22] In retrospect, the important verdict on the ARVN was its proven ability to fight alone in difficult conditions. The image of an incompetent South Vietnamese army still haunts many Vietnamese migrants who seek to stress the many instances of heroism and determination shown by the ARVN in battle. The recent publication of McNamara's *In retrospect: the tragedy and losses of Vietnam* again sparked heated debate within this community, reopening a wound that is yet to heal.[23] Among the factors that might have hindered the performance of the ARVN, one aspect has been seldom mentioned, namely the specific conditions under which South Vietnamese troops had to fight compared to their North Vietnamese adversaries. The ARVN was seriously handicapped by a phenomenon called the 'family syndrome'.[24] After 1968's 'general mobilization', ARVN soldiers' wives and children, many of them housed in shantytowns near the military barracks or right within the army base, often accompanied South Vietnamese infantry soldiers. Recruitment often took place within the regions where the soldiers had their families or their homes. In military reports, the desertion problem was attributed to these 'dependants' and rated as the second highest on a list of nine contributing factors.[25] In general the ARVN was plagued with low salaries and uncertain food supplies, and, until the late 1960's, ill-armed and ill-trained. Not surprisingly, many South Vietnamese soldiers were divided in their loyalties between duty and family when they had to face a hardened North Vietnamese army far from their base camps,

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[21] Auster and Quart, *How the war was remembered*, 53-55.

[22] See Eric M. Bergerud, *The dynamics of defeat. The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder 1991); Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet* (New York 1993). For an overview, see Jeffrey Clarke, 'Civil-military relations in South Vietnam and the American advisory effort' in: Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, *The Vietnam War. Vietnamese and American perspectives* (New York 1993) 165-198.

[23] Robert McNamara en Brian VanDeMark, *In retrospect: the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam* (New York 1995).

[24] The term is from A. Wiesner, *Displaced persons and other war victims in Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Westport, CT 1988). See also Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter *The palace file* (New York 1986) 211, and Spector, *After Tet,* 108.

[25] James Lawton Collins Jr, *The development and training of the South Vietnamese army, 1950-1972* (Washington D.C. 1975) 60.

knowing that their kin were threatened. No doubt the Northerners and their allies in the faced the same hardships, but at least they had the assurance, at least in theory, that the 'homefront' was well looked after.

While the South Vietnamese army was often portrayed in an unflattering light, the People's Army of (North) Vietnam (PAVN) and its southern branch, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), better known in the West as the Viet Cong or VC, were often depicted as invincible troops who could take on the mighty American war machine. A rare exception is *The Siege of Firebase Gloria* (1988), starring Wings Hauser, R. Lee Ermey and the Philippino actor Robert Arevalo. The PLAF and its commanding officers, represented by Philippino-Vietnamese actors who speak (southern) Vietnamese, attack - in a highly unprobable version of Dien Bien Phu - a remote American base during what is presented as their suicidal Tet offensive in 1968.[26] The film shows atrocities only by the Vietnamese.

It took some seventeen years after the war ended for a northern writer like Bao Ninh, himself a veteran of some of the bloodiest battles in South Vietnam, to write about the darker side of the war from the victor's viewpoint. Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of war* (1991) gives ample evidence about the many ills that infected the northern army in the long years of fighting in the south: fear, cowardice, drug usage, brutality, self-doubt and delusion.[27] Bao Ninh's book is one of the few articulated counter-memories in modern Vietnamese literature also found in revisionist Vietnamese film.[28]

Cinema of the Vietnam War: Vietnamese and Western perspectives.

This review of the cinema of the Vietnam War era is, however, mainly concerned with American or Hollywood films about the war, even before

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[26] The representation of the Vietnamese enemy is exceptional in that they speak in southern dialect and are shown as fierce, but weak, soldiers. The Philippino Army was instrumental in providing material and allowing filming in Camp Aguinaldo, Manila. Eleven years before, Coppola received similar support for *Apocalypse Now*.

[27] Bao Ninh, *Noi Buon Chien Tranh* (The sorrow of war; Hanoi 1991). English version by Frank Palmos, based on the translation from Vietnamese by Vo Bang Thanh and Phan Thanh Hao with Katherina Pierce (London 1993).

[28] See M.P. Bradley, 'Contests of memory: remembering and forgetting war in the contemporary Vietnamese cinema' in Hue-tam Ho Tai, *The country of memory. Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley 2001) 196-227.

the United States became directly involved. French movies about the First Indochina War have been extensively analysed by Stora,[29] but I will deal with a few ones which are in accordance with my main theme: the portrayal of Asians in general and Vietnamese in particular, in Western movies, concentrating primarily on the social, political and cultural meaning of these representations. Films produced in Vietnam before and after 1975 will be dealt with briefly, as long as they fit into the theme.

During the First and Second Indochina Wars, film production in both parts of Vietnam was limited because of material, organizational and budgetary constraints. Film production, then as well as now, is a high-risk business with no guaranteed income. French cinema had not established a Vietnamese branch, as the British had in India. Consequently, those films that were produced were typically directed at the popular, commercial market. They were shown by Vietnam's first cinema chains, which were established by two French firms, *Indochine Films et Cinema* and *Société des Cineastes de l'Indochine.* A few Sino-Viet entrepreneurs also invested in building small, independent cinemas.

The bulk of the full-length features distributed in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1975) came mostly from foreign countries like France, the United States and India. In the North, equipment from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China was used to produce feature films and documentaries. A movie partly shot at Dien Bien Phu deserves special mention here. *Quyet chien, Quyet thang Dien Bien Phu* (Resolve to fight, resolve to win: Dien Bien Phu), produced in 1954-1955, was the first Vietnamese version of the battle by a Vietnamese crew, directed by Nguyen Tien Loi, Nguyen Hong Nghi and Nguyen Phu Can. The Russian director Roman Karmen, who worked with Joris Ivens and Ernest Hemingway in the Spanish Civil War, shot a version of the battle for an international audience, entitled *Vietnam on the Road to Victory.* In 1965, a commemorative version with a clear reference to the war effort in the South was released under the name *Chien Thang Dien Bien Phu* (Victory at Dien Bien Phu), by a certain Tran Viet.

The 1954 Vietnamese version is a mixture of (pre) battle scenes, footage from French directors (among them Pierre Schoendorffer) and Vietnamese cameramen and re-enactments. Loi and Karmen worked closely

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[29] Benjamin Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre* and Idem, 'La guerre française d'Indochine: les rares images de fiction d'une guerre oubliée', paper presented at the Colloquium *Decolonisations, loyalities and nations. A history of diminishing choices*, Amsterdam, November 30 – December 1, 2001.

together and used each other's images for their productions. The re-enactments show defeated soldiers, weeks later after the battle, in front of Karmen's cameras. They display remarkable fitness as they walk into captivity. This version of the victory was in line with the view of the Vietnamese Communist Party (here still named the Workers' Party), but the narrative and commentary impresses the contemporary viewer for its sober style and accuracy. The originality of the film lies in the verisimilitude of the images dating from this period.

Between 1956 and 1959 forty-five documentary films were released, which number doubled after the decision to 'liberate the South' was taken. Another forty feature films were produced from then until 1975.[30] Exceptions to the usual propagandist genre promoted by the North and the South are several high quality films made at the end of the 1950s. In *Chung mot dong song* (On the same river, 1959), the North Vietnamese cinematographers Nguyen Hong Nghi and Pham Hieu Dan used a Vietnamese version of Romeo and Juliet to depict the political division of their country. While the scenario was in line with the Party's decision to unify the country by force (May 1959), this first feature film of the DRV-film industry was exceptional in the way it presented personal emotions. There were no such nuances a year later, when all literary output and other mass media were explicitly devoted to mass mobilisation and political propaganda. Individual revolutionary self-sacrifice in the 'War against the Americans', as the Vietnam War was coined in the North, was permitted in the official narrative of war. *Vo chuong A Phu* (Wife and husband A Phu) released in 1961, deals with the unhappy life of a couple belonging to the Meo minority. Cadres of the Vietnamese Communist Party, reinforcing the solidarity between the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups in the struggle to win the war bring happiness. The same message is contained in *Lua trung tuyen* (Fire on the Middle Line, 1961) and *Mot ngay dau thu* (An early autumn, 1962), both set during the war with France, but clearly serving patriotic purposes for the next stage of the war.

In the South independent film productions such as the films *Chung toi muon song* (We want to live) and *Long nhan dao* (Human compassion) were possible until around 1964. As the war intensified, government institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Information together with the

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[30] Figures taken from two 40th anniversary commemorative booklets, published by the Documentary and Scientific Film Studios (Hanoi) and Vietnam Feature Film (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). See also Bradley, 'Contests of Memory', 224, note 16.

ARVN became the most important suppliers of newsreels and films. Films became pivotal as part of the psychological warfare as was the case in the North.[31] Compared to the North, there were fewer feature films, probably because of the availability of foreign movies, high costs, and wartime conditions.

Between 1939 and 1975, Western (French, American, and British) movie companies, produced more than 150 'Vietnam' related feature films, of which more than half do not deal with the real Vietnam or Indochina, but only refer to the Vietnam experience, American counter-culture, or the return of its veterans.[32] As American involvement increased, Hollywood remained reluctant to explore the subject, unlike French filmmakers during the first Indochina War. Between 1946 and 1954, France produced five movies in which the colony, and the effects of the war played sometimes modest role, including *Thérèse Raquin* (1953) by Marcel Carné and *Le Rendez-vous des Quais* (1953-1955) by Paul Carpita. Carné's naturalist version of Emile Zola's novel follows the story of Thérèse (Simone Signoret) and her lover Laurant (Raf Valone), who kills her husband (Jacques Duby), and their final downfall. The most tragic part is played by a sailor (Roland Lesaffre) who had fought in Saigon in 1945-1946 and whose war experiences made his re-adaptation to French society impossible. The movie therefore contains a coded reference to France's problems in Indochina. Explicit about the country's defeat at Dien Bien Phu is *Le Rendez-vous des Quais* (1953-1955), the French version of *Indonesia Calling!* (by Joris Ivens, 1946). The film portrays strikes in the port of Marseilles where trade is paralysed by protests against France's involvement in Indochina. The director used a documentary approach to shoot real confrontations between riot police and strikers, actual scenes of wounded soldiers coming back from Indochina, and dockers refusing to load ships with weapons. Carpita reveals a common strategy by politicians, police and employers to protect their own interests.[33] The film was only shown once, in Paris, on October 2, 1955. It was seized by the police in Marseilles and banned. The movie disappeared for thirty-five years. In 1989 the negative and copies were found. The film was

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[31] Georges Sadoul, *Histoire du cinema mondial des origines à nos jours* (Paris 1963); S. Rouse, 'South Vietnam's film legacy', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 6-2 (1986) 212-223; John Carlot, 'Vietnamese cinema: first views' in: Wimal Dissanayake ed., *Colonialism and nationalism in Asian cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1994) 105-140.

[32] See Malo and Williams, *Vietnam War Films*, xxiii.

[33] Ibidem, 493.

restored and it received a general release on February 14, 1990, when it premiered on French television.[34]

While French moviemakers of the period did not take any interest in the Korean War, their interest in the Indochinese conflict was equally limited. Most productions date after the final departure of the French forces from Saigon in April 1956. In the same year as Camus' *Mort en Fraude* (1957), Claude Bernard-Aubert authorized a typical 'war movie' with a lot of violence and a simple story line (*Patrouille de Choc*). A remake with equally low box office takings appeared in 1980, *Charlie Bravo*, but by then European audiences were already inundated by an influx of American movies on the war. During the sixties, when the war in Algeria haunted French politics, productions like *Fort du Fou* (1962) and *Les Parias de la Gloire* (1964) tried to glorify soldiers' companionship and personal bravery which borders anarchy. Needless to say, the Vietnamese play the part of the eternal enemy, and are depicted as stereotypical sinister Orientals.[35] Pierre Schoendoerffer's *La 317ème Section* (1964) is undoubtedly the most realistic and straightforward movie of the period. Filmed in Laos, an auxiliary platoon of Cambodian enlisted men under the leadership of *sous-lieutenant* Torrens (Bruno Cremer) is trying to fight their way to Dien Bien Phu to reinforce the beleaguered troops, but will arrive too late. The defeat is communicated by field radio. The Vietnamese and Laotian highlands take a heavy toll on the soldiers, most of whom do not survive, except for the commanding NCO and his deputy, a German soldier who looked back upon hardened battle experience in the Soviet Union. Schoendoerffer made a documentary version of this story, *The Anderson Platoon* (1966), a

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[34]The showing of a six-part documentary series on Indochina directed by Henri de Turenne on French public television in 1984 clearly demonstrated that Indochina still represents somewhat of a trauma to the French public. The documentary was the French version of Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: a television history*. Turenne's re-working created such an uproar that after the third part, TV2, the television network, had to organize a live debate that turned out to be quite heated. In The Netherlands, where I was responsible for the adaptation of the original thirteen-hour version into a six-hour presentation, Vietnamese refugees threatened to protest in front of the broadcasting studio to show their assumed disapproval of what they termed 'Hanoi's vision on Vietnamese history'. After I had assured them that in the first part adaptations were made to show the broader coalition of nationalist forces during the colonial period, the protests were cancelled.

[35] The film poster of *Patrouille de Choc* shows a grimacing Vietnamese soldier with a helmet, which points to the fact that the conflict is between two standing armies instead of a struggle between a guerilla force and an organised military unit. The title and the end of the story had to be changed due to censorship.

committed but non-political portrait of a black marine officer, Joseph Anderson, who commands the 7th Marine Corps.[36] These and other attempts to portray the war pose a striking contrast to the way Hollywood made 'Nam' a locality devoid of dates and names with no real, definable beginning or end.

Approximately one hundred Hollywood movies about the war were made between 1965, when the Marines landed at Da Nang, and 1975, when the last American left. After the end of the war in 1975 production tripled, to about 300 U.S. feature movies.[37] Another source, taking the period between 1939 and 1992 into consideration, details over 600 Vietnam War feature films including TV, pilot and short movies from the United States, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, Great Britain and other countries.[38]

A few B-movies produced before US' direct involvement in the war in 1964 showed that Indochina or Vietnam was a subject worth exploring. Samuel Fuller, famous for his Korean War movies, directed *China Gate* (1957), which was shot in a cartoon-like setting of a dangerous mission undertaken by soldiers of the French Foreign Legion out to destroy a secret Vietminh munitions dump.[39] However, the opening documentary footage with a picture of Ho Chi Minh is the only reference to Vietnam. The rest is a peculiar mix of anti-Communist adventure and a covert appeal for racial tolerance. The opening song by Nat King Cole who also plays the close ally and friend of the chief protagonist, Johnny Brock/Gene Barry, refers to Fuller's attempt to combine a staunch anti-Communist movie with a plea for tolerance among the otherwise racially divided American public of the fifties. The main Asian characters are all played by white actors: Angie Dickinson who personifies the Eurasian saloon owner Lucky Legs, the 'dragon lady' in a slit (Chinese, not Vietnamese) dress who leads the

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[36] Anderson served after his Vietnam experience under President Jimmy Carter at the White House and became a CEO of General Motors. In 1989 Schoendorffers' theme was taken to produce another feature movie *84 Charlie Mopic*, the story of a cameraman of the Movies Picture Unit of the US Army, following a six-man patrol during a reconnaissance mission in Vietnam.

[37] Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud *From Hanoi to Hollywood: the Vietnam War in American film* (New Brunswick and London 1990).

[38] Malo and Williams, *Vietnam War Films* , passim.

[39] Other titles of this genre are: *Saigon* (1947), *A Yank in Indo-China* (1952) with actor Harold Fong, and *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964) with Vietnamese actors Kieu Chinh and Hoang Vinh Hoc, *Operation CIA* (Kieu Chinh again).

legionnaires to the hidden camp in return for having her son sent to the United States and the Viet Minh commander Major Cham (Lee Von Cleef) who is Lucky Legs' secret lover. The interracial romance is peculiar and ambiguous because both parts are played by Caucasians. But even European viewers, who - unlike many Americans at the time - were not driven by a racial divide, deemed not yet prepared for such a bond. In Marcel Camus' *Mort en Fraude* the Vietnamese heroine, who hides a Frenchman on the run in the village house of her father to protect him – in vain - from the white Saigon mafia, is the French-Vietnamese actress Anh Méchard.[40] 'Métissage' becomes a marker for the representation of the 'Other'.[41] The representation of Indochina or as one critic labelled it - the feminization of the Other - became the theme of movies like *Indochine*, *The Lover* and even *Dien Bien Phu*, all released in 1992.[42]

Caucasian actors representing Asians or for this matter Vietnamese, were common in the 1950s and 1960s. In one of the best-known film of the period, *The Quiet American* (1958), based on Graham Greene's famous book written three years earlier and directed by Joseph Manckiewicz, the actress Georgia Moll plays the part of Phuong, the Vietnamese girlfriend of the war-weary British foreign correspondent Fowler. On the surface, it is the story of a love triangle involving a naively destructive American secret agent, a cynical English journalist and a seemingly passive but quietly determined Vietnamese woman. The drama unfolds at various levels. In the book, the relationship between Fowler and the American CIA agent Pyle who came to Vietnam to create a 'third force', gets a personal undertone when Fowler finds his Vietnamese mistress the object of Pyle's affections. In the film, the ironic nature of the book is lost. The future American involvement in Vietnam against which Greene warns is replaced by a political plot driven by a shallow love triangle between the three protagonists and a clear message that the United States should be committed in Vietnam. The film's final dedication to 'the people of the Republic of Vietnam' and its president, Ngo Dinh Diem' makes the political

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[40] Frederic Delmeulle, 'Fiction cinematographqie et guerre d'Indochine', *Revue Histoire du Cinema* 483 (June 1992) 50-61.

[41] See Srilata Ravi, 'Métis, métisse and métissage: representations and self-representations', in: Idem ed., *Europe in Asia, Asia in Europe,* 299-322.

[42] See Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French colonial ideology in architecture, film, and literature* (Duke 1996), 131-155. Norindr's critical reception of these movies is illuminating, but in the case of *Dien Bien Phu* he ignores Schoendorffer's earlier work and Mitterand's apologizing for the war ('un erreur') when he visited Vietnam in 1993.

message perfectly clear. The year is 1958, two years after the proposed free elections, pledged at the Geneva Conference, were buried forever. The first few years of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime did bring hope to those Vietnamese who were opposed to both Communism and colonialism south of the 17th parallel, particularly after the departure of the last French forces. Backed by American help to turn South Vietnam into a 'bastion of freedom' against Communism at the height of the Cold War, Diem embarked on a process of 'nation-building' by monopolizing political power, alienating many of his compatriots who would have liked a more liberal regime in opposition to the Communist alternative.

In the movie Audi Murphy, a hero of the Second World War who starred in many films about 'his' own war, plays Pyle. Devoid of any U.S. connection, Pyle becomes the active agent provocateur behind a plot to supply plastic bombs to a terrorist, 'third force' Vietnamese general. Besides the role of the Japanese actor Yoko Tani, who plays the general, Vietnamese only figure as shadows (the sneaky Viet Minh) or as childish persons (ARVN soldiers in a watch tower; Phuong who seems only to be interested in her milkshake). Because the film is shot primarily in static close-ups of two people talking, there is almost no sense of the social and physical life of Saigon or Vietnam in the early fifties.[43]

In contrast to French movies of the war, *China Gate* and *The Quiet American* are striking examples of Hollywood's attempts to fit Vietnam into the spectrum of the Cold War commitments undertaken by the United States. In 1963 George Englund produced *The Ugly American*, based on William J. Lederer's and Eugene Burdick's novel, a belligerent Cold War book written to take the wind out of the pacifist Greene version on U.S. intervention abroad. A thin disguised attempt to replace 'Vietnam' for the tiny kingdom of Sarkhan where an ex-OSS wartime officer and journalist-turned-ambassador MacWhite (Marlon Brando) tries to find a third way with a former guerilla leader, national hero, and personal friend Deong (played by the Japanese actor Eijo Okada, famous for his role as the Japanese lover in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959). In its genre, the film is a perfect illustration of the ambiguous Kennedy years of valiant idealism symbolized by the Peace Corps and a deeply rooted mistrust of

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[43] A second screen version of *The Quiet American* was released in September 2002, directed by Phillip Noyce and produced by Sydney Pollack. Fowler is played by Michael Caine, Pyle by Brendan Fraser, and Phuong for the first time by a Vietnamese actress, Hai Yen, a nineteen-year old ballerina from Hanoi.

movements which did not follow the American way of political life. Compared to its near-namesake, *The Quiet American*, Englund's *The Ugly American* at least tries to communicate something of an Asian country by showing some characters, who act beyond the usual clichés of 'Orientals with an inscrutable and cunning nature.'[44] Sarkhan's prime minister is Kwen Sai, a role played by Kukrit Pramoi, Thailand's Prime Minister in 1975-1976. His fine acting and sophistication makes McWhite's body language in more than one sense 'uglier' than the maker of the movie intended. In a review of the film, Auster and Quart state that *The Ugly American* 'tries to have it both ways in its depiction of the Third World's desire for self-determination in a world dominated by the two power blocs. (…) Therefore, (…) the film is clearly pessimistic about the viability of the neutralist position.'[45] The film ends with a depiction of a non-committed home audience that is not interested in wise words about growing problems in developing countries. Unintentionally, *The Ugly American*, seems to be a premonition of what would happen in Cambodia after 1970, when a neutral country became involved in proxy wars and fell victim to a policy of auto-ethnocide, long after the Americans had left.

John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) is probably the best example of this film genre at the other side of the Atlantic by its specific mode of address and correlation with specific audience segments. Wayne's earlier roles, e.g. in *The Alamo* brought him international fame. He took the unusual step of visiting Vietnam in 1967-68 and came to the conclusion that the U.S. combat units in Vietnam were the best the Americans had ever fielded. Wayne believed that the media and the anti-war movement hid this fact from the American people, thus the aim of the film was to redress this imbalance. A critic wrote:

> What is so repugnant about 'The Green Berets' is not its politics (nor even, politics apart, its total ineptitude purely as an adventure war movie) but the fact that, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, evidence that by the late 1960s had already filtered through to the US, its makers were still determined to reduce Vietnam to simple-

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44 The *Chinese Exclusion Act* is published in the transcripts of the *Forty-Seventh Congress. Session I. 1882, US Government*; the expression about 'Orientals' is part of a whole set of stereotypes. See e.g. Brian W. Dippie, *The vanishing American. White attitudes and U.S. Indian policy* (University Press of Kansas, 1982).

45 Auster and Quart, *How the war was remembered,* 21.

minded Manichean antitheses: good guys vs. bad guys, cowboys vs. Indians, white men vs. 'natives'.[46]

The story is about a team of U.S. Special Forces (the 'Green Berets'), led by Colonel Mike Kirby (played by Wayne). The film opens at the 'John F. Kennedy Centre for Special Warfare' at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where a press conference is under way. Sergeant Muldoon defends the U.S. presence in Vietnam to the journalists. The critical comments by a journalist, George Beckwirth (played by David Janssen), provoked Kirby into challenging him to come to Vietnam with him to see for himself what the United States is doing there.

The dovish journalist is forced to re-evaluate his views as he sees for himself the true nature of the Viet Cong enemy who sets bamboo booby traps, and murder a village headman. Five of them rape the headman's daughter (her rape is coyly referred to as 'abuse'), and later forty (sic!) rape his wife. The journalist abandons his anti-war stance and literally and figuratively takes up a rifle to defend himself. He is now eager to fight the barbaric enemy.

Stereotyping and worn-out clichés are so obvious in *The Green Berets*, that an enumeration would take several pages. It starts with the explicit link between the war in Vietnam and the war against Indians in Westerns: the name above the U.S. army camp is 'Dodge City'. The enemy is shown in black and white terms. Warfare, as conducted by the Viet Cong, is seen as 'cheating', because the guerrilla's avoided open battles and besieging camp, and preferred ruthless attacks in rough terrain and jungle fighting. Rape, torture, pillage and murder are the Viet Cong's privileged fighting means, while America's Asian allies prefer to drink champagne, eat caviar and drive in limousines. No mention is made of the American weapons and tactics, such as the use of napalm and defoliants, search-and-destroy missions, strategic hamlets, body counts, body bags, and free-fire zones. There is no attempt to make war conditions in Vietnam 'realistic'. Filmed on location at Fort Benning, Georgia with a large supply of military weaponry, there is no jungle, no humidity, the men do not sweat, and the trees are obviously pine trees.[47] The film ends with Kirby explaining to 'Hamchunk' (an exceptional

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[46] Adair, *Vietnam on film,* 35.
[47] Markus Dunk, a journalist of the mid-west newspaper *Express*, wrote on August 30, 2001: 'According to newly released military documents, the Pentagon has repeatedly involved itself in the making of big-budget Hollywood movies – like the 1985 Tom Cruise vehicle *Top gun* (...), but also suggesting amendments, making alterations and occasionally rewriting history in

combination of Vietnamese words), an orphan, why the American cause in Vietnam is just. We see John Wayne walking off into the sunset at the South China Sea - in the East -, a scene, which exemplifies the accurateness of the rest of the film.

Post-1975 Vietnam War Movies.

The war in Vietnam, like that of other drawn-out conflicts, has its share of controversy, myths and legends, often emanating from those who fought the war themselves. The mythology has often been taken over by others, among them politicians, who have tried to rewrite history from their perspective. For most Americans, the Vietnam conflict is basically an American drama in which the Vietnamese only play second fiddle to heroic American generals and GIs having to fight 'with one hand tied behind their backs' by the politicians in Washington. Since the end of the war, there has been a growing popular view that its cause was just, but that the strategies and tactics of waging war were at fault, resulting in the disaster that would haunt America for years.[48] Revisionist versions of the Vietnam War are manifold and the lessons derived from them are varied.[49] Generally, the reactions range from 'no more Vietnams' to President Bush's 'spontaneous burst of pride' after the Gulf War ended with the Allies victorious: 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.'[50]

With *The Green Berets*, the chapter of an unproblematic representation of the Vietnam War closed for many years. Hollywood turned its interests into safer treatments of a conflict that became more unpopular on the home front by the month. 'Vietnam' played a role as a signal in the background or as a pretext for something different. As Auster and Quart

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exchange for its military cooperation (...) The list of those films deemed by the Pentagon unworthy of military support is equally revealing (...). Vietnam films as *Platoon, Full Metal Jacket,* and *Apocalypse Now* were rejected - one assumes because of their vehement opposition to the conflict. This created difficulties for *Apocalypse Now*, as director Francis Ford Coppola was forced to use helicopters and pilots from the Philippine army, who flew off regularly during filming to attack real-life rebel insurgents. Even films, which seem to epitomize truth, justice and the American way have fallen foul of the military.'

[48] Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York 1978).
[49] See for e.g. William Turley, *The Second Indochina War. A short political and military history, 1954-1975* (Boulder 1986) 189-199.
[50] *Boston Globe*, March 2, 1991.

remarked 'film makers drew (...) toward black humour, irony, obliqueness, and ambiguity for a depiction of war - but not 'the war' (Vietnam) - that would have some appeal to all shades of opinion.'[51] Films like *Easy Rider* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Dirty Harry* with Clint Eastwood (1971), set the stage for alienated and paranoid Vietnam veterans. The dramatic end of the war in 1975 with the fall of Saigon and over 58,000 Americans killed, brought the veteran's pain and sorrow to the foreground and created a new theme for Hollywood. On the one hand, movies like *Coming Home* (1978) were warmly received by the anti-war movement, while a new tone was set by the release of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* in the same year, in which political amnesia, American ethnocentrism and racism predominated. In the pivotal scene, Michael (Robert de Niro) and his friends are coerced by the 'Viet Cong' into playing Russian roulette against one another. Seldom have Orientalism and different variations of 'the yellow peril' been so brutally combined.[52]

Michael Cimino's depiction of a war (which he allegedly never participated in) would set the tone for a whole series of films in which the Vietnam veteran became the hunter-hero of the period. The painful symbolic representation of the memory of a lost war and the tensions of remembering and forgetting gave rise to many questions about the reasons why the war was fought and lost. The answer of many filmmakers was in the framing of crude aesthetics and open racism: compared to films like *Uncommon valor* (1983), *First Blood, part II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988), or the *Missing in Action* series (1984 and 1985) *The Deer Hunter* appeared sophisticated when it came to the depiction of 'the Other'.[53] The cinematic humiliation of the Vietnamese Communists and the successful liberation of MIAs[54] remained for a while a leading theme. Important exceptions were *The Killing Fields* (1984), indirectly a film about the Vietnam War, and *Alamo Bay* (1985) on the plight of the Vietnamese boat people. Both films were

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[51] Auster and Quart, *How the war was remembered,* 38.

[52] Strong criticisms came from Gloria Emerson, John Pilger and other Vietnam War era reporters who denounced the Russian roulette scene as a lie. For an overview of reviews, some of which some were positive, see Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier-Hillstrom *The Vietnam experience. A concise encyclopedia of American literature, songs and films* (Westport CT and London 1998) 85-87.

[53] Paul Budra, 'Rambo in the garden: the POW film as pastoral', *Literature Film Quarterly* 18-3 (1990) 188-193.

[54] Soldiers who were Missing In Action.

directed by Europeans (Roland Joffe and Louis Malle) for American distributors.[55]

Although the 'Vietnam syndrome' played a leading role during the seventies and eighties in the imagination of filmmakers and screen play writers, there are some exceptions from the mainstream cinematographic remakes of the past. I will take four films as examples. These films tried to depict the war from the ordinary soldier's perspective and their makers showed a critical point of view towards the war effort. The Orientalist themes persisted, however. The best illustration of these themes can also be found in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which will be dealt with in a separate section.

Platoon, directed by Oliver Stone in 1986, tells a war episode from the perspective of the soldier ('grunt') and his unit or platoon. Filmed in Ilocos Norte in the Philippines (a real tropical jungle) by a British crew during the People's Revolution that ended the Marcos regime, the movie is based on Stone's own experiences of fifteen months in Vietnam.[56] His alter ego, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), twenty-one years old, arrives in Vietnam in September 1967, just a few months before the Tet offensive of January 1968. The story is told with voice-overs but we actually see Taylor's arrival in Vietnam and his 'tour of duty'. Marching through jungle and suffering from heat exhaustion, the platoon is ambushed by shadowy Viet Cong soldiers, which results in Taylor being injured. One of the suspenseful parts is the discovery of a North-Vietnamese bunker complex and the death of three soldiers. This provides the pretext to take revenge on villagers nearby. The images that follow are strongly reminiscent of Ron Haerberle's photographs of the My Lai atrocities published in *Life*. What follows are scenes of rampage, murder and rape soldiers of the platoon, which set the scene for a conflict between two competing sergeants who represent two hostile groups within the unit. In many reviews, the film is hailed as an anti-war movie, as a clever reflection on the divisions in the U.S. society about the war and as an antidote to revanchist patriotic caricatures like *Rambo*, but also as an answer to the metaphysically tainted *Apocalypse Now*. The 'realism' of the film is impressive in the way the foliage, climate, and hostility of the

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[55] Minor exceptions are *The boys in Company C* (1977), directed by Hong Kong director Raymond Chow and *Go tell the Spartans* (1978) by Ted Post. Both display a moderate, even decent (the term is Adair's) treatment of the war.

[56] *Platoon* is not his first 'Vietnam-movie': in 1967 he made a short movie entitled *Last year in Vietnam* while he was a film student of Martin Scorsese's (Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 124).

environment of the Vietnamese highlands becomes tangible. The camera is always inside the jungle to give an impression of the soldiers' view of being surrounded by a hostile environment.[57] A British historian commented that *Platoon* 'maintains straightforwardly that the U.S. was 'guilty' in Vietnam' (without properly explaining how), but adds that 'the grunts, with a few exceptions, were not themselves to blame.'[58] The central focus on American soldiers does not warrant the problem of the continuously disappearing Vietnamese. Even the ARVN troops who fought ostensibly for their freedom with U.S. support do not get attention. The enemy (Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)) remains hidden for most of the film and exists just off camera, hidden by jungle, as fleeting shadows, or corpses ('500 NVA KIA,[59] 22 wounded' as is dryly reported in the film). We see the face of a Vietnamese soldier only once as he bayonets a black soldier. In a voice-over we hear Charly Tylor/Charley Sheen saying, 'I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves - and the enemy was in us (...).'[60]

Auster and Quart regard *Platoon* as Hollywood's total acceptance of the Vietnam War as a fit subject for film.[61] In its wake followed *Hanoi Hilton* (1987), *Gardens of Stone* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Stone went back to 'Vietnam' with *Born on the 4th of July* (1990) and his 'pro-Vietnamese' *Heaven and Earth* (1993).

Stanley Kubrick, the director of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, was known for his depiction of violence. His film on the Vietnam War released in 1987, *Full Metal Jacket*, is based on the novel *The short timers* (1979) by Marine combatant correspondent Gustav Hasford, which was hailed in *Newsweek* as 'extremely ugly' but 'the best work of fiction about the Vietnam War.'[62] Michel Herr, author of the widely praised *Despatches*, contributed to the screenplay. Nearly half of the film is devoted

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[57] The use of veterans like Captain Dale Dye as technical advisor (and playing in the film) was necessary to show veterans how authentic the film was by including small things in the film that only they would know about. The video version announces that 'All elements are packaged and bound like a Vietnam Veteran's scrapbook of his tour of duty.' It includes photos of Stone in Vietnam together with photos of the actors and crew on location.

[58] Quoted from Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich ed., *Vietnam images: war and representation* (New York 1989), there 156-157.

[59] Soldiers who were Killed In Action.

[60] David Hart, 'Responses to war: an intellectual and cultural history' (1998) http://www.arts.adelaide.edu.au/personal/Dhart/ResponsesToWar/Art.

[61] Auster and Quart, *How the war was remembered,* 140.

[62] Walter Clemons, quoted in Hillstrom a.o., *The Vietnam experience*, 125.

to the harsh basic training experience of a platoon of Marine recruits. Two trainees with the names Joker (played by Mattew Modine) and Pyle (the very same name as Graham Greene's protagonist) play the central roles. The film is named after the type of bullet Pyle loads into his rifle to kill his cruel drilling instructor before he commits suicide.[63] *Full Metal Jacket* then follows Joker who moves to Vietnam as a Marine combat reporter to cover the Tet offensive in Hué: 'I wanted to meet people of an ancient and interesting culture and kill them', he tells people who ask him about his motives for joining the war effort.[64]

In the film, the strange architecture of what is meant to be the city of Hué stems from 1930's buildings owned by British Gas in London's East End (which was bombed out during the Second World War and further destroyed by Stanley Kubrick). The unit sweeps the city when a sniper hits one of the men, after which rescue attempts account for new casualties. The Marines finally infiltrate the hiding place of the Vietnamese attacker who turns out to be Vietnamese woman. Heavily wounded, she begs Joker to kill her. He ultimately does, but his motives are not clear: was it out of compassion or just a desire for retribution?

Critics of the film reacted in a mixed way: some judged the characters 'dehumanised, the audience desensitised and Vietnam depicted as a strange country'; others saw it as an attempt 'to attack male chauvinism of the gun-happy species'.[65] Apart from comments about Kubrick's attempt to grapple with the dilemmas of the Vietnam War and his penchant for the darker side of humanity, all critics focused upon the American characters in the film.

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[63] A 7.62 mm high-velocity copper-jacketed bullet.

[64] In many earlier war movies this cynicism was unheard of. In these films (e.g. John Wayne's *Iwo Jima*), it was exactly clear who the enemy was (Asians in uniform) and what 'victory' was (the taking of clearly defined territory, such as Pacific islands, held by the Japanese). The image of heroic U.S. soldiers created by John Wayne has been so powerful that they influenced the thinking of young U.S. troops in Vietnam, who had been brought up with Wayne movies on TV. Many imagined themselves to be Wayne-like heroes and the tragically inappropriate attempt by nineteen year old soldiers to mimic John Wayne no doubt led to many unnecessary deaths. In *Dispatches,* Michael Herr's most famous book about the Vietnam War, another myth is introduced: the fantasy-ritual of the gunfight, which was the leading theme of many Westerns (*High Noon*) in film and TV-series (*Gun smoke*). Herr has both themes introduced in *Full Metal Jacket* (see John Hellmann, 'The Vietnam film and American memory' in: Martin Evans and Ken Lunn ed., *War and memory in the twentieth century* (Oxford en New York 1997) 177-188.

[65] Respective quotations by Terrence Rafferty in *The Nation* (August 1, 1987) and Penelope Gilliat in *American Film* (September 1987); quoted from Hillstrom a.o. *The Vietnam experience*, 127.

The man who was shot first by the sniper is a black soldier nicknamed Eightball, who earlier had offered himself to a Vietnamese prostitute. The scene in which she figures is revealing, not only because she is refusing him in broken French ('too beaucoup'), but also because of the comments of his buddies who press him to show his penis to her. Minutes later he is shot in the groin by what turns out to be a female gunner. All the clichés concerning women, in this case South Vietnamese women, and Vietnamese combatants, are used: the prostitutes speak broken English and French; their military pimps behave like quasi funny Kung Fu or sinister Fu Manchu characters, and the Viet Cong soldier who dies at the end of the film is shrouded in a mysterious light and begs first in an unintelligible language. Viet Nam and the Vietnamese are seen as the antithesis of something called 'civilisation'. The Vietnamese are depicted as the 'Other', but Other in a specific way: as primitive in contrast to America's civilised technological, tall, clean-cut white boys. Within the realism of the primitive they are portrayed as the locus of sex, of death, and of sex-and-death.[66]

What *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* have in common is their uncompromising demonstration of the battlefield agonies of the common soldiers, whose images must be rescued from all those Vietnam films. While *Platoon* excels in realism, *Full Metal Jacket* betrays Kubrick's ambition to 'explode the narrative structure of movies', as he remarked in an interview: 'I want to do something earth-shaking.'[67]

Olivier Stone's passion for Vietnam continued with the making of *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). This movie shows stars such as Tom Cruise, Willem Dafoe, Tom Berenger and Lili Taylor in a powerful depiction of the plight of the Vietnam veterans. The screenplay is based on the eponymous 1979 novel by Ron Kovic, who was involved in the My Lai massacre. Kovic became a strong voice for the veterans in the U.S. the film's theme revolves around some of the hurdles Vietnam veterans endured after their homecoming. Like *Platoon*, the film won four Academy Awards. But again, Vietnam and the Vietnamese are just accessory subjects, as can be seen in the scene where a number of innocent villagers are slain in a sudden eruption of gunfire from the platoon Kovic is part of. They become a background against the drama that is unfolding: the accidental killing of a soldier by friendly fire. The film was shot in the Philippines and the

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[66] Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War, the American war: images and representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese exile narratives* (Amherst 1995).
[67] *Newsweek* (June 29, 1987); quoted in Auster and Quart, *How the war was remembered,* 142.

Vietnamese actors were recruited from the population of Ilocos Norte. None of them plays an important role. This is in striking contrast with Stone's last film on Vietnam, which was hailed in the press as the first time 'Vietnam' was no longer a war, but a country. *Heaven and Earth*[68] (1993) is the story of a Vietnamese woman, who follows her great love (an U.S. Army officer, played by Tommy Lee Jones) to America. The marriage breaks down, but the couple's two sons will have a bright future. Given Stone's reputation of mishandling female characters in his earlier films, this was a break with the past. The symbolic nature of the lead character (the Vietnamese-American actress Le Thi Hiep) and the narrative of the script made this movie more conventional than *Born on the Fourth of July*. At the same time we are treated to the unique visual beauty of the Vietnamese countryside, if in a conventionally romanticized way, even during the war period. American viewers received, probably for the first time, access to the minds of ordinary Vietnamese, albeit framed in a pro-Western, colonial context.

The best illustration of cinematic Orientalist treatment of the Vietnam War is Francis Ford Coppola's famous movie, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The film is based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of darkness* (1898-99), about the journey the Englishman Marlow makes to meet ivory hunter Kurtz at an upriver Congo company outpost. Against the pervading *mission civilisatrice* of the white man in the African darkness, the novel depicts the corruption of the white man by the alleged savagery of Africa, which increases as one travels upstream. The river becomes a metaphor for an 'implacable force' over which its traveller is pursuing a religious or mythological quest.[69] The title of the movie refers first and foremost to the last book of the *New Testament* (The Revelations of St John the Divine). One of the most important aspects of this revelation is of the 'last battle' (Armageddon Revelations 16.16) in which the forces of good and evil are set against each other prior to the final day of judgement. The suggestion seems to be that Vietnam was an apocalyptic moment for America: a struggle of good (democracy and capitalism) versus evil (communism) but the day of judgement however seems to have gone against the United

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[68] Not be confused with the movie with the same name by Haruki Kadokawa, a student of Akira Kurosawa. Stone's movie is based on Le Ly Hayslip (born Phung Thi Le Ly) with Jay Wurts, *When heaven and earth changed places: a Vietnamese woman's journey from war to peace* (New York 1989).

[69] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of darkness: an authorative text, backgrounds and sources, criticism*, Robert Kimbrough ed. (New York 1971).

States. The adding of the adverb 'Now' is a reference to the popular slogan 'Peace Now'. The film has two different endings. The TV version ends with an air strike on Kurtz's base; the 1979 cinematic version ends with Willard killing Kurtz with a machete, while Kurtz's followers ritually slaughter a water buffalo. The latest version released in 2000, entitled *Apocalypse Now Redux*, has an extra 53 minutes of previously unseen footage edited from the 1979 version and ends in the same way. The literature on this movie is exhaustive, which reflects its box office success.[70]

Kurtz (Marlon Brando) is a much decorated soldier and a rising star of the military establishment who becomes a 'dog soldier', fighting a private war with the assistance of Montagnard tribespeople against an unseen enemy (the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, the Khmer Rouge?).[71] The U.S. military sends a Special Forces assassin, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) to find Kurtz and kill him. Willard travels upriver in a gunboat with a four-man crew to find Kurtz. Along the way the hunter reads the dossier prepared by military intelligence on Kurtz and discovers what he has become. The journey upriver enables Coppola to reveal the nature of the Vietnam War in a series of spectacular episodes: the long journey upriver on what seems to be the Mekong (which does not reach any major temple complex in Cambodia or Laos), the helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village (erroneously built on stilts),[72] the Angkor-style temple where Kurtz has his jungle empire, with a clear reference to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which sees magic and religion as overlapping phenomena.[73] The

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[70] For an overview see Hillstrom a.o., *The Vietnam experience* and also Christopher, *The Viet Nam War.*

[71] The Kurtz figure is probably based upon Colonel David Hackworth, the most decorated living American soldier who denounced his misconduct during the war and went into exile in Australia. He now runs a website on which he comments on American military issues. See his book *About face* (Sydney 1990).

[72] Filmed on location in the Philippines during the communist insurgency of the late seventies; helicopters from the Philippines air force figured in search-and-destroy mission scenes. The documentary film *The making of Apocalypse Now: Heart of darkness*, in which Coppola and his wife, Eleanor, share their views on filming Apocalypse Now, informs us that these machines often disappeared from film 'shoots' to shoot for real in the jungle.

[73] The other book which Kurtz has as his bed-side reading is Jesse L.Weston's *From ritual to romance* (1920) which was the source of much of Eliot's *The wasteland* (1922) and its grail imagery. Among other things, Weston points out that British folk tradition is full of mock sacrifices; Coppola's film refers to the sacrifice of Kurtz by Willard. A *New York Times* critic calls these books examples of 'speculative anthropology' (A.O. Scott, 'Aching heart of darkness'*, The New York Times* (August 3, 2001) 3). See also an anthropologist's view on this

theme of the *Golden Bouch* prepares the viewer for the ritualised slaughter of a buffalo, which resembles closely the description by Georges Condominas between September 17-21, 1949 (reprinted in *Nous avons mangé le forêt de la Pierre-Génie Goo*).[74]

There are a few historical references, such as the American programme of assassinating suspected Communist military and political village leaders during *Operation Phoenix* after the Tet Offensive in 1968. The sampan massacre refers to Lieutenant Calley and the My Lai massacre of 1968. The massive air strikes refer to the illegal bombing of Cambodia during 1972. But there are also a number of historical fabrications which border on stereotypes of the 'yellow peril' genre: body painted and 'carnavalesque'[75] mountain people who attack the Willard party with spears, bows and arrows (a faint reference to booby traps with sharpened bamboo spikes), the 'Viet Cong' hacking off arms of inoculated children (compare *The Deer Hunter*'s references to POWs forced to play Russian roulette), and Mnong Gar montagnards in Cambodia (whose music is used) played by Ifugao hill tribes from Banaue in the Philippines. The fuzzy geography which combines Nha Trang, Vung Tau and the estuary of the Trans Bassac (called Nung River) in one place, dotted by jungle instead of rice paddies, does not help much to uncover the historic reality of the war.[76] But that is what Coppola apparently wanted: the lack of a precise geographical area gives rise to a phantasmagorical landscape, an underworld.

The movie attracted much criticism for depicting Vietnam as a madhouse where 'the war was one bloody huge circus, with clowns, acrobats, fire-eaters and a big brass band'[77] or a cartoon which 'reduces the profound complexities of heart and mind to caricature, and in the end the

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matter by J. Verrips, 'Golden Bough and Apocalypse Now: another fantasy', *Postcolonial studies* 4-3 (2001) 335-348.

[74] The use of Mnong Gar music in the movie, originally recorded on disk by George Condominas for the UNESCO-label, is a testimony of Coppola's intellectual debt to anthropology and to Condominas' famous book *Nous avons mangé le fôret de la Pierre-Génie Gôo* (Paris 1957), an anthropological landmark about a hill tribe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

[75] The term is from Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre,* 216.

[76] In reality the film was shot in the southern Philippines.

[77] Robert Hatch in *The Nation* of August 25, 1979, quoted in Hillstrom a.o., *The Vietnam experience,* 14.

audience can brush it all off with the explanation that it couldn't have been like that. And the audience is right, it couldn't and wasn't.'[78]

According to Coppola, the recently released *Apocalypse Now Redux* is a film that is 'more worrying, sometimes more amusing, more romantic too and whose historic perspective has become even stronger.'[79] A large monologue by a 'forgotten' French plantation owner who defends his threatened area against intruders is added to underline Coppola's bombastic view on history. If the film claims to represent, in its director's phrase, 'the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war', its current prolongation misses the point. Nevertheless, *Apocalypse Now* still poses as a seminal Vietnam movie despite its Orientalism.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness* is cited at length on the first page of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. Conrad reveals the destruction of the Congo by Western powers as an embodiment of Western inhumanity.[80] But where Said seems to be disappointed by Conrad's lack of premonition of decolonisation, Coppola does not even seem to bother to whom or what his hyperbolic Orientalist style is addressed. He is partly Willard and partly Kurtz in his kingdom: Hollywood's attempt to comprehend the war and finally to integrate it into the American imagination and psyche. The scene in which the Montagnard warriors bombard Willard's boat with little blunt arrows - a scene directly taken from Conrad's story - ends with the killing of the black captain. It suggests some link of primitiveness between two non-Western or non-American peoples. Or in the words of film critic Gilbert Adair:

> Vietnam (the war rather than the country) is no more than the heart of the darkness, and endless psychodrama, half Theatre of Cruelty, half Theatre of the Absurd, in which impulses normally lurking just below or intermittently bursting through the crust of civilization are given free rein. (...) And Kurtz's Cambodian enclave was doubtless intended to symbolize the very heart of the heart, the inner sanctum of America's collective unconscious.[81]

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[78] Former war correspondent and writer Ward Just quoted in Hilstrom a.o., *The Vietnam experience,* 14. The same volume also has more positive reviews. Reviews of the film can also be found on the Internet, for example, http://tierranet.com/films/a.now.

[79] *Associated Press*, 17 February 2001. On-line version at
http://brando.crosscity.com/HTMLVer/Articles/arti8.asp

[80] MacKenzie *Orientalism,* 14.

[81] Adair, *Vietnam on film,* 155.

The temptation is great to study Vietnamese movies in search of its mirror images: 'Occidentalism',[82] a concept which at first posed a positive Arab response to Edward Said's critique of Western Orientalism but which represents an objectivation of the Occident in a similar way. Occidentalism is equally inflexible and relativist as its enemy. Or in the words of MacKenzie, Said's 'identification of a monolithic and predominantly male-originated discourse, which equally subjects the West to 'Occidentalism'.'[83] Indeed, some movies made by Vietnamese filmmakers after 1975 clearly show signs of 'Occidentalism' portraying Westerners in a similar way, especially their depiction of the enemy in the form of officers and enlisted men of the ARVN forces, as decadent 'puppets of the US regime'. The lack of Western actors especially in the North between 1954 and 1975 and in Vietnam after 1975 is the simplest explanation for this, while the socialist realist style and the Cold War are equally responsible for the reframing.

Conclusions

By considering a variety of films, in chronological sequence, I have tried to underscore the representations of Asians, and especially Vietnamese, by Western, mostly American filmmakers. While the themes changed from general war movies, through the depiction of bloodthirsty veterans and patriots towards the view of the victimized American service men, the representation of the Vietnamese did not change dramatically. Vietnamese soldiers and civilians are portrayed as cunning, cruel, even sadistic, ambivalent, and irresponsible. The landscape is mostly tropical, but also in terms of a paradox combining natural abundance and great fertility with poverty and disease.[84]

These articulations of latent and overt Orientalism in American movies about the Vietnam War are clear manifestations of a discourse

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[82] According to Tønnesson, the term was coined by Hasan Hanafi, leader of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Cairo and former researcher at the U.N. University of Tokyo (Stein Tønnesson, 'Orientalism and universalism', *NIA Snytt-Asia Insights* 2 (1994) 4-10, there 8).

[83] For a recent post 9/11 analysis, see Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma, 'Occidentalism', *New York Review of Books* (January 17, 2003) 49.

[84] Arnold, 'Illusory riches', 5-18, there 7.

which has had broader consequences for the way Asians and Vietnamese have been depicted. Whereas earlier movies showed a worldview in which the Asian participants are reduced to simple pawns in a chess game between the superpowers, the post-1975 'Vietnam syndrome' genre betrayed a stereotype, which reified the Vietnamese as devious and unchanging. Even those films considered to depict the war in more realistic terms, did not frame the Vietnamese in a new context. What changed was a manifest Orientalism, symbolised by the yellow peril, but the latent Orientalism of the so-called anti-war movies remained.

Current American and French cinematic production on Vietnam shy away from attempting to aid viewers in coming to terms with their nation's past. The re-issued *Apocalypse Now Redux* is part of a 'cultural memorial' to remember the war in contradictory terms. *We Were Soldiers* is not about the Vietnamese and 'their' war, but about 'us' and 'our war', in spite of the lip service paid to the 'enemy'. The Other remains an unknown Oriental.