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Racism at the Movies: Vietnam War Films, 1968-2002

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RACISM AT THE MOVIES: VIETNAM WAR FILMS, 1968-2002

A Thesis Presented

by

Sara L. Pike

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in History**


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Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, specializing in History.

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Abstract

Films are a reflection of their time, and portrayals of the Vietnamese in film are reflective of the attitudes of American culture and society toward Vietnamese people. Films are particularly important because for many viewers, all they know about Vietnam and the Vietnamese is what they have seen on screen. This is why it is so important to examine the racist portrayals of the Vietnamese that have been presented, where they come from, and how and why they have changed.

The significance of this study is that it combines historical studies of issues such as immigration, race relations, and cultural history with literary narratives of these films to explore the reasons why the Vietnamese have been portrayed initially so negatively and why that portrayal is only recently beginning to become more positive.

I use six major Hollywood films and three recurring images to explore the ways that the portrayal of the Vietnamese has changed over time. Through a study of the images of the dehumanized enemy, the Vietnamese woman as prostitute, and Vietnamese civilians as backward peasants, the changing nature of racism in the films becomes evident. Blatant racism is found in the films of the 1960s and 1970s due to a long history of racism toward Asians and Asian Americans and the nature of the war itself. The films of the 1980s and beyond, coupled with the waves of refugees and opening of relations with Vietnam begin to show the Vietnamese as human beings. The most recent film of the twenty-first century honors the former enemy. There have been vast improvements, but other advancements remain to be made in race relations on screen and in real life.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my father, Leslie C. Pike, and to all the other veterans—on both sides, who, to paraphrase Randall Wallace, went off to a place others did not want to go to do things others did not want to do.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Ted Foster, Tom Shailor, Bob D'Angelo, Shane Lloyd, and Homer Wetherby for taking the time to answer some of my questions and for the time they gave so many years ago. Welcome home.

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I must thank Nicole Phelps for working with me and being my advisor. It has been a pleasure and a privilege; your help has been invaluable and much appreciated. Denise Youngblood was also instrumental in providing direction and words of wisdom.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	9
The Vietnamese Enemy Soldier	17
Vietnamese Women and Civilians.....	35
“All Asians Look Alike”	42
Women As Prostitutes.....	45
Backward Peasants.....	50
Conclusion	80
Bibliography	85
Films	85
Literature.....	85

Introduction

In the three decades since the end of the Vietnam War, much has been said and written about the conflict itself and the way the war has been represented and remembered in the press, on television, in literature, and in motion pictures. Hundreds of films have war-related connections, whether they are actual combat movies or have characters that are veterans of the war or members of the anti-war movement. Thousands of pages have been written about those films and what they say about the war, veterans, the anti-war movement, the government, the American people, the way the war has been remembered, and the legacy of the war. Very little has been written about the way the Vietnamese have been portrayed in these films and what those portrayals reflect about American history, however. Just as films are a reflection of their time, so too are the portrayals of the Vietnamese reflective of the attitudes of American culture and society toward Vietnamese people and Asians in general.

The “authenticity” or historical accuracy of these films is not necessarily what is most important. This is a point stressed by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud in their 1990 collection of essays *From Hanoi to Hollywood: the Vietnam War in American Film*. This book is one of the early volumes dedicated to studying Vietnam and film. In their introduction, the two authors argue that the significance of Vietnam War films “is not simply the believability of these films as records of the past, but what these films tell us as artifacts about ourselves, our culture, and our political choices in the years since the

war has ended.”¹ Though the milieu of the films is the war, we should not necessarily concern ourselves with what the movies say about the war itself, for as historian Robert Rosenstone notes, the contribution of films is not in “the specific details they present but, rather, in the overall sense of the past they convey.”² Here the sense of the past I intend to examine is what some of these films tell us about the place of Asians and Asian Americans in American race relations.

Much has been said about the way the Vietnamese have been represented, from the stereotypes of corrupted officials to inept and effeminate warriors in the South Vietnamese army, invisible and/or superhuman and/or barbaric warriors in the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong, prostitutes, and simple-minded, backwards peasants.³ What has not been studied in depth is how these stereotypes and racist portrayals stem from a long tradition of racist policies toward Asians and Asian Americans. The corrupt official and inept/effeminate warrior are most often applied to the South Vietnamese ally, as in *The Green Berets* (1968) and *Hearts and Minds* (1974). The various stereotypes of the enemy can be found in virtually every Vietnam War film, from the vicious Viet Cong in *The Green Berets* to the wraith-like jungle fighters in *Platoon* (1986). Only in 2002 with *We Were Soldiers* was a fair amount of screen time given to “the enemy.” The

¹Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, “Introduction: America’s Vietnam War Films: Marching toward Denial,” *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, Eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 10.

²Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2006), 8.

³Some sources that discuss these themes are David Desser, “‘Charlie Don’t Surf’: Race and Culture in the Vietnam War Films,” *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, Ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991): 81-102; Cynthia Fuchs, “‘Vietnam and Sexual Violence:’ The Movie” *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, Eds. Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 1990): 120-33; Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*, (New York: Praeger, 1988); and David S. Callaghan “Representing the Vietnamese: Race, Culture, and the Vietnam War in American Film and Drama,” (Dissertation, City University of New York, 1998).

North Vietnamese colonel in this movie is shown many times in close-up, and he has a speaking role. His part is just as honorable as that of his American counterpart.

The stereotype of Asian women as prostitutes stems from the days of Chinese immigration and the Page Act when women were barred out of the fear they were all prostitutes. Vietnam War films, if they have women at all, often show them in this role. *Hearts and Minds* and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) in particular utilize this stereotype. The absence of Asian women in America because of the Page Act reflects the association of the majority of American ideas or stereotypes of Asians with men, and accounts for the lack of women in these films.

Regarding the simple peasant, most films never show Vietnamese civilians up close or let the audience hear them or learn anything at all about their lives, other than the fact they work in rice paddies. *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) was the first real instance of a film showing the Vietnamese as humans, with jobs and families and dreams and desires and political motivations. Portrayals of the Vietnamese on screen reflect the changes and improvements in the position of Asians and Asian Americans in American society. They also reflect the limits of that improvement and show what changes still must be made. History has shaped the way that the Vietnamese have been portrayed in these films, and in turn, the films have had an impact on history.

Three of these images in particular demonstrate how American racist attitudes and imagery have declined since the end of the Vietnam War but have not been entirely eradicated. The portrayals of the Vietnamese soldiers have changed the most, and for the better. Portrayals of women have improved, though there are still some problems with

the stereotyping of prostitutes. The representations of ordinary peasants and civilians are where the most work needs to be done—in large part because of the legacy of the war in the American mind.

In addition, three themes continually crop up in relation to these images and help illustrate the changes in race relations over time. One is that of the “monolithic Asian.” This is the idea that all Asians form a sort of massed body. They all look alike, sound alike, and have the same characteristics. There is no identifiable individuality or qualities. This began in the nineteenth century with the immigration of the Chinese and the Japanese that followed. These groups were viewed as a “yellow peril,” and the hordes of them entering the United States posed a threat to “real” Americans. The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 as part of an official, legal attempt to keep “them” out. The mantra that “all Asians look alike” spread to the restriction and/or exclusion of all other people of Asian descent as well. This historical precedent evolved into the image of a faceless and nameless enemy—and sometimes an ally as well—on screen in the Vietnam War films. Virtually no Vietnamese characters were given speaking roles, and it was rare to really see their faces in close-up. There were no three-dimensional characters. Not until the 1980s did movies begin to develop Vietnamese characters and make them into truly unique individuals.

The second theme is that of dehumanization. War films tend to dehumanize the enemy, but first with World War II films about the Japanese and then the Vietnam War movies, there was a racial element that turned the Asian enemy into a particularly vicious and cruel foe. The Japanese and Vietnamese are not “white”—they do not look like

American soldiers, who are most often Caucasian or African-American, and rarely Asian-American. The most marked physical differences are their size, the color of their skin, and the shape of their eyes. These differences were used as an indication of inferiority—of “otherness.” Yellow skin, as much as black skin, was viewed as a sign that Asians were not as civilized as the white man. Acts of the enemy “proved” their barbaric nature: they killed innocent villagers, raped children, mutilated American bodies, and shot to wound, not kill, in films like *The Green Berets*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*. The first real change in this representation has only come about in the last decade with the production of *We Were Soldiers*, where the enemy is shown as honorable.

The final theme is that of the American focus of the films. Vietnam in the majority of the films is a war, not a country, not a culture, not a people. The movies focus on American involvement, what Americans did in Vietnam, and how what they did affected their lives back in the United States. Very little effort has been made to showcase the Vietnamese perspective. An early exception to this rule was *Hearts and Minds*, but even this documentary is about Americans and directed at the American public rather than truly intending to represent the Vietnamese. It is true that these are American films made for American audiences, but the fact remains that far more Vietnamese people were killed and affected by the war than Americans.⁴ Many films do not even acknowledge the extent of the trauma suffered by the people of Vietnam on both sides of the war.

⁴Estimates of Vietnamese casualties range between one and two million deaths. Approximately 58,000 Americans died and another 350,000 were wounded.

These images and themes have been addressed before, but not necessarily in a way that showcases their impact on history and how they were affected by historical issues. Most of the sources on Vietnam War films have been written by either film or literature specialists. Many of them attempt to understand how the media has filtered and transformed the experience of the war. Authors have examined gender roles, racial views, the power or powerlessness of individual soldiers, and how veterans readjust to “the world” and are treated. The ways in which different films portray these issues is studied as a barometer of contemporary attitudes, not only of the film-makers, but of the public audience and scholars as well.⁵ One of the earliest works examining a large number of films was Albert Auster and Leonard Quart’s *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*. As film specialists, their work is a political, social and aesthetic critique of the movies, but is not historical. Many of these secondary sources examine how the films are a reflection of contemporary culture, but they do not delve into the historical background. If the race issue is visited at all, most authors do not ask questions about the historical precedents for portraying the Vietnamese so negatively. They also do not examine the reasons behind the changes as those negative images became more positive.

Historians have not extensively examined racism in Vietnam War films as an extension or reflection of racism in American history and culture. For example, in his study *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, historian Mark Taylor uses an interdisciplinary approach, but he does so in order to examine key episodes of the war

⁵For examples, see Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam* and Dittmar and Michaud’s *From Hollywood to Hanoi*.

and the nature of the truths that historians, writers, and filmmakers have tried to tell about it.⁶ He does not focus on racist portrayals of Asians.

The closest study I have found that approaches these questions is David Callaghan's 1998 dissertation from the City University of New York entitled "Representing the Vietnamese: Race, Culture, and the Vietnam War in American Film and Drama." Callaghan observes in his introduction that, "in the reconstruction and deconstruction of our military presence in Vietnam on stage and film, the Vietnamese have been consistently absented, victimized, romanticized, demonized, and/or 'othered'."⁷ He goes on to provide examples from numerous films and plays that demonstrate his argument. He gives an equal focus to culture in his study, examining how different variations of the Vietnam War film reflected changes in American culture. He writes of the "disturbed veteran" motif in the 1970s⁸ and 1980s films such as the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series that "re-wrote" the war, claiming it was something worth fighting—a reflection of the revival of patriotism and faith in American strength in the Reagan era and the attempt to banish the "Vietnam syndrome."⁹

Overall, Callaghan's dissertation successfully describes the complex interconnection of politics, nationalism, imperialism, gender, race, and culture as shown

⁶Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 1.

⁷Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese," 2.

⁸ Examples of the disturbed veteran motif can be found in *Heroes* (1977), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978), and *The Ninth Configuration* (1978). See Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese," 117 ff.

⁹The Vietnam Syndrome is a term used to describe the malaise that affected the United States domestically after the end of the war. Characteristics included a public opinion biased against war in general and a less-interventionist US foreign policy. George Bush famously announced that the country had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" at the successful conclusion of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. See Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese," 165 ff.

through film and drama.¹⁰ He provides a very comprehensive examination of the racist portrayals of the Vietnamese in a number of war films from the 1960s through the 1980s and how those changed over time. But Callaghan was pursuing his PhD in theater, and his study does not reach far back historically to the origins of these racial and cultural problems. While he does reference the way the Japanese were portrayed in World War II films and asserts that the tradition of “otherness” applied to most minorities within the United States, he does not say *why*. The historical background is lacking in two respects: first on why those racist portrayals existed in the first place, and secondly on why those changes were taking place in regards to cultural and diplomatic relations.

In order to build that historical background, it is necessary to turn to historical studies of race relations. Historian Lisa Lowe has noted that the immigration exclusion acts and naturalization laws of the United States are an intersection of legal and political terms with an Orientalist discourse of Asians as racially and culturally “other.”¹¹ In other words, the imagery of Asians as racially and culturally “other” both shaped and was shaped by immigration and naturalization laws and US foreign policy. The objective of this thesis is to attempt to put all of those elements together—language, imagery, legal treatment of Asians and Asian Americans, and foreign policy—through the use of film. The notion of Asians as racially “other” led to these initial exclusion acts, which then furthered the concept of racism within American culture. Films provide an excellent window into contemporary culture. The language and the images presented indicate how

¹⁰Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese,” 313.

¹¹Lisa Lowe, *On Asian American Cultural Politics: Immigrant Acts*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

contemporary society viewed a conflict like the Vietnam War and a people like the Vietnamese. By examining the portrayals of the Vietnamese within the films, it becomes evident that while the earlier films were filled with racism, over time, the images have softened with the elimination of exclusionary laws and the growing strength of the civil rights movement.

Methodology

Six films—*The Green Berets* (1968), *Hearts and Minds* (1974), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002) serve as the core of this study, though there are dozens of Vietnam War films.¹² These six, however, provide multiple representations of Vietnamese enemy soldiers, allies, and civilians. The span of more than three decades between the production of *The Green Berets* and *We Were Soldiers* allows for a study of changes in these representations over time. Most of the films are not intentionally racist. In many cases, the directors use racial portrayals to help serve the point of the films. The message of the movie in turn is indicative of how American society of the time viewed and treated Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, and to some extent Asians and Asian Americans as a whole. The use of racist depictions, however, can help to perpetuate stereotypes whether or not that is the intent.

¹²Of the films that I watched—*Apocalypse Now*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *A Bright Shining Lie*, *Casualties of War*, *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *The Fog of War*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, *The Green Berets*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Hearts and Minds*, *Platoon*, *Regret to Inform*, and *We Were Soldiers*—my criteria for selection were the films that had the most extensive portrayals of Vietnamese characters that also related to the issue of race relations.

The majority of these films, especially *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, were major Hollywood blockbusters¹³ and have been written about at length in the years since their production. I have chosen well-known films precisely because they are popular and widely viewed, however. This means that the racial portrayals they present of the Vietnamese have been seen by millions of people. The fact of the matter is, for the majority of the audiences of these films, all they know about the war in Vietnam and Vietnamese people is what they have seen on screen. As historian Reinhold Wagnleitner notes in his study *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War*, “seeing is believing, and English allows the very fitting play on words: *reel facts* become *real facts*.”¹⁴ That is why it is all the more important to study these racist portrayals, where they come from, why they exist, and how and why they have changed over time. Popular films reflect popular culture, and it is therefore necessary to examine the messages they send and receive from American culture.

The Green Berets, directed by John Wayne and produced by Batjac Productions was released in June 1968. The only film about the war to come out during the war, the movie was loosely based on Robin Moore’s novel of the same title from 1965 and was produced with government aid. The film follows Colonel Kirby (Wayne) and his Green Berets from their training camp in the United States to a Special Forces Outpost in

¹³*The Green Berets* earned an estimated \$9 million; *Apocalypse Now* took in \$78.7 million at the box office and garnered eight Oscar nominations. It won for sound and cinematography. *Platoon* grossed \$137.9 million and won Oscars for best director, best film editing, best picture, and best sound. Robin Williams was nominated for best actor for *Good Morning, Vietnam* and the film grossed \$123.9 million. *We Were Soldiers* earned approximately \$78.1 million. Information taken from The Internet Movie Database: www.imdb.com.

¹⁴Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold-War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in the Austria after the Second World War*, Trans. Diana M. Wolf, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 226.

Vietnam. The Green Berets work with their South Vietnamese allies to build up the camp, which is in the midst of enemy territory. The plot involves a battle for the camp against Viet Cong soldiers, a rescue operation of a Montagnard¹⁵ village, and the capture of a North Vietnamese general. The message of the film is that the South Vietnamese want and need American aid and technology to fight the enemy, who rape and kill innocent women and children and steal rice from the hard-working peasant villagers. A reporter named Beckworth, played by David Janssen, represents the skeptical American public, but he comes around and eventually decides to join the fight after seeing for himself “what it’s really like” over there. The film was recognized then, as now, as pro-war propaganda. The South Vietnamese allies are portrayed as helpful but subordinate, in great need of the bigger and stronger American troops. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese are in part portrayed as inept, furthering the message that the United States can and will defeat them. They are also dehumanized to an extent that justifies American involvement, for it is essential to defeat this barbaric enemy.¹⁶

On the opposite end of the political spectrum lies the documentary *Hearts and Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis and produced by BBS productions, the film was first shown in 1974. Columbia Pictures was under contract to finance BBS productions and even though the film won rave reviews at the Cannes Festival in 1974, Columbia refused

¹⁵The term Montagnards comes from the French for “people of the mountains.” Now known as the Degar, they are indigenous to the Central Highlands. Not really identifiable as Vietnamese, they were often treated as inferior by the Viet majority and were a major part of US military operations in the Central Highlands.

¹⁶For in-depth analysis of this film, see Taylor, *Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*; Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered*; John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

to acknowledge support or distribute the documentary for fear of political backlash. They withdrew their support completely in April of the same year. Davis and Burt Schneider, the executive producer from BBS, began showing the film to sympathetic reviewers themselves, and public pressure grew for the film's release. Finally, the private company Rainbow bought the documentary from Columbia and arranged to distribute it through Warner Brothers.¹⁷ The trouble was not yet past for the film, however. Walt Rostow, a national security advisor for presidents Kennedy and Johnson and one of the interviewees, got a court order to prevent its release. Rostow believed what was shown of his interview was "somewhat misleading" and "not representative."¹⁸ With the support of Rainbow and Warner Brothers, Davis and Schneider fought the injunction, which was finally reversed in January 1975. Superior Court Judge Campbell Lucas, who denied Rostow's request for a temporary restraining order, pointed out that *Hearts and Minds* had played at the Cannes, San Francisco, and Atlanta film festivals without objections.¹⁹

According to the *Washington Post*, Warner Bros. confirmed a commercial distribution date after January 1, 1975.²⁰ The documentary did open for a one-week showing in Los Angeles on December 20, 1974, however, in order to qualify for the Oscars.²¹ The film won the Academy Award for Best Documentary and was later shown

¹⁷James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers: 1982), 94.

¹⁸"Documentary on Vietnam Fails to Open," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1974, 58.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Jean M. White, "Of 'Hearts and Minds'," *Washington Post*, December 17, 1974, B9.

²¹"'Hearts, Minds' Opens to Qualify for Oscars," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1974, 22

on national television. By no means a box office hit, nonetheless the film garnered enough acclaim and controversy to be seen by many. That and its staying power—released on DVD by Criterion in 2002—warrant a discussion of its portrayal of the Vietnamese people.

Davis used interviews with veterans, government officials, and Vietnamese citizens, as well as clips of television footage and presidential press conferences to explore the questions of why the United States went to Vietnam, what it did there, and what the experience did to America as a nation. The suffering of Vietnamese is used to support the claim that the United States did not know what it was doing over there or why. Some other racial stereotypes such as the Vietnamese as prostitutes and corrupt officials are used to explain American attitudes toward the war and the people. The film also effectively helps to break down some other stereotypes, such as the one that the “Oriental” does not place as much value on life as does the Westerner.²²

Apocalypse Now has been written about extensively since its release in 1979. Most of the focus has been on the artistic nature of the film, its connection to Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, or its antiwar message.²³ Little has been written about the film’s racism and how that connects to American history. The movie follows Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) on his journey upriver to find Colonel Kurtz (Marlon

²²For in-depth analysis of this documentary, see Thomas J. Slater, “Teaching Vietnam: The Politics of Documentary,” *Inventing Vietnam*, Ed. Anderegg: 153-65; Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*; and David Grosser, “‘We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We are the Wrong Side:’ Peter Davis Targets (American) Hearts and Minds,” *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud: 269-82.

²³See Kim Worthy, “Hearts of Darkness: Making Art, Making History, Making Money, Making ‘Vietnam,’” *Cineaste* 19 nos. 2-3. (1993) and Frank P. Tomasulo, “The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar Film” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud: 145-58.

Brando) and “terminate” his command. Willard encounters myriad horrors as he travels farther and farther into the jungle—“the heart of darkness” —on a patrol boat. When at last he finds Kurtz, he discovers that the colonel has a personal army of tribal natives—his “children.” The natives are portrayed as both child-like and also savage and primitive.²⁴ Director Francis Ford Coppola reportedly said that he wanted to make a movie about war in general, not just Vietnam, because all war is hell.²⁵ The setting of Vietnam, however, provokes the question of whether or not Vietnam was particularly hellish. The film shows that war brings out the primitive, savage nature of man, and that bad things happen when this occurs.

A major blockbuster of the 1980s was Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, which was released in 1986. Stone, a veteran, claimed his movie was “what Vietnam was really like”—the ultimate combat film.²⁶ The role of Chris Taylor, played by Charlie Sheen, character is loosely based on Stone’s own experience. Taylor drops out of college and enlists in the army to find that the majority of his fellow grunts are poor and uneducated. His platoon is divided into two groups: the “juicers” —those that drink—and the “dopers,” who smoke marijuana. Each group is led by a sergeant. Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger), a hardened, scarred combat veteran is one of juicers, while Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe), a “water walker” on his third tour of duty, is a dooper. When Elias stops Barnes from taking the company to the brink of a massacre in a village and reports his killing of two civilians to the captain, the platoon is deeply divided. In a battle that follows, Barnes shoots Elias

²⁴See also Bruce Taylor, “The Vietnam War Movie” in *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*, Ed. D. Michael Shafer, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990):186-206, for analysis.

²⁵Marsha Kinder, “The Power of Adaptation in ‘Apocalypse Now’,” *Film Quarterly* 33 no.2. (1979-80): 13.

²⁶Sheila Benson, “‘Platoon’: It’s War at Ground Zero,” movie review, *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1986: 1, 23.

and leaves him for dead. Taylor, by now a hardened warrior himself, takes his revenge and kills Barnes in the final battle scene. Here again in this film we find the faceless, nameless enemy and also the message that the war was not even really about Vietnam at all—but rather within and between the American troops.²⁷

One year later, Barry Levinson's comedy *Good Morning, Vietnam* was released by Touchstone Pictures. Set in Saigon in 1965, the film is loosely based on the career of real-life Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) jockey Adrian Cronauer, played by Robin Williams. Cronauer turns AFRS upside down with his humor and his rock and roll music. He makes fun of everyone and everything, and the main purpose of his jokes is to make the audience laugh. In addition, with hindsight we can see the follies of the war and laugh about some of them. There are a number of poignant moments as well. Cronauer takes up teaching an English class in his attempt to pursue a young Vietnamese girl, Tranh (Chintara Sukapatana). Though the relationship does not work out, he befriends her brother, Tuan (Tung Thanh Tran). Because Tuan turns out to be a member of the Viet Cong, Cronauer loses his job and must leave the country. This film is one of the first instances where Vietnamese characters are given extensive speaking roles and where they are portrayed as *individuals*. It marks a significant shift in portrayals of the Vietnamese, especially given the fact that two of the main characters represent both the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.²⁸

²⁷For in-depth analysis of this film, see Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud: 19-40; Don Ringnald, "Unlearning to Remember Vietnam" *America Rediscovered*, Eds. Gilman and Smith: 64-74; and William J. Palmer, "Symbolic Nihilism in *Platoon*," *America Rediscovered*, Eds. Gilman and Smith: 256-74.

²⁸For in-depth analysis, see Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese" and Fuchs, "Vietnam and Sexual Violence" *America Rediscovered*, Eds. Gilman and Smith.

The final film I will examine is *We Were Soldiers* (2002). Produced by Icon Entertainment International and directed by Randall Wallace, the film is another combat epic. The movie is a representation of the true story of Colonel Hal Moore's company at the battle of Ia Drang in 1965. It is a celebration of their bravery and honor. The film introduces Moore (Mel Gibson) and his company at home in the United States, training with their new "cavalry"—helicopters—and follows them into battle in the Ia Drang Valley. Badly outnumbered and facing a whole regiment of North Vietnamese troops, Moore's company manages to claim a victory, though Moore knows it is a hollow one. Too many of his men had been lost, and even as they withdrew, the North Vietnamese were already moving back in. In this film, the North Vietnamese enemy is given a human face, for the North Vietnamese Lt. Colonel An (Don Duong) is shown as the battle rages almost as much as Moore is seen. Some ordinary North Vietnamese soldiers are shown as well, and they, too, have families who feel the loss of their loved ones just as much as the wives of the American troops do. The film is even dedicated to *all* of the men who died there—not just the Americans. This is a rare instance in the history of Vietnam War films where the enemy is *not* dehumanized but rather respected, and it reflects further advancements in race relations.²⁹

There have been vast improvements from the days of John Wayne's *Green Berets* in 1968 to Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers* in 2002. There is still a long way to go, however, for no American film thus far has truly shown the war from a Vietnamese

²⁹For in-depth analysis of this film, see Gordon Arnold, *The Afterlife of America's War in Vietnam: Changing Visions in Politics and On Screen*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006); Wayne Karlin, *War Movies—Journeys to Vietnam: Scenes and Out-takes*, (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2005) and Armando José Prats, "Last Stand at the Ia Drang Valley: Memory, Mission, and the Shape of Victory in *We Were Soldiers*," *Arizona Quarterly* 62 no.2 (2006): 99-144.

perspective. What Philip K. Jason says in his introduction to his study of Vietnam War literature, *Fourteen Landing Zones*, could just as easily apply to film:

For all the activity in Vietnam War studies, more work needs to be done to discover and assess literature that provides both perspectives on the Vietnamese and Vietnamese perspectives. Literary representations of the Vietnamese range from racist slurs to outright admiration of these people as a skilled and valiant enemy to total disrespect for a seemingly inept ally. These valuations tend to be collective: generic. Few Vietnamese are seen up close.... And, of course, we have yet to pay much attention to Vietnamese accounts of the war.³⁰

The persistence of stereotypes has prevented Americans from seeing the Vietnamese people up close. They are not viewed as individual human beings equal to Americans and equally involved in and victimized by the war. Instead the Vietnamese are still seen as part of the mass of the monolithic Asian or the dehumanized enemy. In order to understand the staying power of these stereotypes, it is necessary to study the reasons why such a gap in understanding exists at all.

The Vietnamese Enemy Soldier

The predominant role filled by the Vietnamese in Vietnam War films is that of the enemy soldier. Typical characteristics of these enemy soldiers have their roots in traditional stereotypes of the “enemy” as well as in World War II films about the Japanese. Over time, however, the Vietnamese enemy has become more than a stereotype; there are more nuances to their characters, more individuality, and a higher level of respect given to these roles.

³⁰Philip K. Jason, “Introduction,” in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, Ed. Philip K. Jason, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), xvii.

In general in war movies, there is a generic “stock” type of the enemy. He or she has no name or specific character traits. The enemy is never three-dimensional. The typical character traits that can be found are also stock—officers who are cruel and arrogant and brutal soldiers with wicked grins.³¹ Wars always involve some process of stereotyping and dehumanizing the enemy. Historian Michael Shafer writes, “Thus ‘we’ are individuals, normal, natural, and superior; and ‘they’ are collective, grotesque, bizarre, and inferior.”³² “We” would not be able to fight and kill another and stay in the moral right if this were not so. But films about war in Asia go beyond a mere dehumanization of the enemy because of the additional element of racism. Racism is spurred by fear and thrives upon hatred. If there is pre-existing racist sentiment against a certain group of people, when that group becomes the enemy, the hatred foments a particularly brutal dehumanization. For white villains, behavior alone sets them apart, but for Asians, physical appearance does most of the initial work in setting them apart as “other” and “inhuman” —providing a base upon which other dehumanizing characteristics are built. This is especially evident in World War II films. There were two sides to the Second World War—one half of the war was fought in Europe against the Germans; the other was fought in the Pacific against the Japanese. The Germans were white, the Japanese were not. The “typical” Hollywood formula for the war film genre applies to the portrayal of a white enemy, not one of a different race. William O’Neill writes that “in films about the Pacific War, racial themes often figure.... Opinion polls revealed that most Americans hated Imperial Japan far more than Nazi Germany

³¹Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese,” 26.

³²D. Michael Shafer, “The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy,” *The Legacy*, Ed. Shafer, 85.

until fairly late in the war. Being part of the public, Hollywood exhibited rather less sensitivity in depicting the Pacific War than it did the war in Europe.”³³ The Asian enemy was therefore brutalized to a much greater extent than the European enemy.

In his study of the race war in the Pacific in World War II, John Dower writes of the language and images used to portray the Japanese. There was a consistent emphasis on the subhuman nature of the Japanese, and common images used to illustrate this were apes and vermin. Dower writes, “They [The Western Allies] portrayed the Japanese as inherently inferior men and women who had to be understood in terms of primitivism, childishness, and collective mental and emotional deficiency.”³⁴ Cartoonists commonly represented the Japanese as monkeys or other simian creatures, or even lice or other rodents, to capture the “yellow peril” effect. The rhetoric of the subhuman, animal-like enemy carried over into the films. There were hordes of faceless, vicious, and evil Japanese soldiers falling before the guns and fists of the brave Americans, though not before doing some damage with their evil ways before ultimately succumbing. Jeanine Basinger analyzed hundreds of films for her study of the World War II combat film genre. On the Japanese of the film *Bataan* (1943), she writes that they “are an almost invincible force ... seemingly zillions of them (they keep coming and coming in endless waves of undervalued humanity).... They are both totally sophisticated with their mechanical skill and up-to-date equipment, and totally primitive, with their barbaric

³³William O’Neill, “The ‘Good’ War: National Security and American Culture,” in *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II*, Ed. Andrew J. Bacevich, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 520.

³⁴John Dower, *War Without Mercy*, (NY: Pantheon Books, 1996), 9.

methods of killing.”³⁵ She cites another example of racist portrayals in the film *Objective Burma* (1945): “The enemy of *Objective Burma* is presented in a most prejudicial manner. Their faces in close-up are used to frighten a viewer with the sense of alien, unsmiling beings. The narrative suggests a group of truly barbaric men who torture and mutilate. They are called hideous names in a casual manner—‘monkeys’ and ‘slant-eyed devils’—and they are described as ‘swarming like locusts.’ However, they are also presented as *smart*, and as very, very dangerous. They are almost an omniscient enemy.”³⁶

This is an example of what John Dower calls the “superhuman enemy,” a concept that developed and was utilized parallel to that of the “subhuman enemy.” The fantastic nature of Japanese military success early in the war and bold moves like the attack on Pearl Harbor created the fear—and the image—of the Japanese as supermen. Dower writes that some of the special powers assigned to them included physical prowess, sexual appetite, intuitive genius, fanaticism, a special capacity for violence and an alleged affinity for evil.³⁷ Dower goes on to say that “subhuman and superhuman were not mutually exclusive, as might be expected, but complementary. The visual images associated with each might appear or recede in accordance with fortunes on the battlefield, but the Japanese ape and the Japanese giant went through the war together in the imagination of their Anglo-American enemies.”³⁸ The subhuman images of inferiority had been around since the days of the immigration exclusion acts, and wartime

³⁵Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 55.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 124-25.

³⁷Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 116.

³⁸*Ibid.*

added new images of the superhuman. The Japanese were decisively dehumanized in the worst possible ways.

The race hates of the war with Japan did not—could not—disappear overnight with the end of World War II. Instead, they were transferred as a new enemy developed with the onset of the Cold War. Dower writes “the transferal became even more vivid when China joined the Communist camp.... The Chinese suddenly inherited most of the old, monolithic, inherently totalitarian raiments the Japanese were shedding.... [They became] the newest incarnation of the Yellow Peril—doubly ominous now that it had become inseparable from the Red Peril.”³⁹ When the Cold War and communism spread to Korea and then to Vietnam, the Koreans and Vietnamese also took on the identity of the Yellow Peril. These images were easily transferred onto the Vietnamese in the American mind when the Vietnam War began and thereafter onto the Vietnamese of Vietnam War films. Three wars against an Asian enemy within a twenty-year span helped perpetuate the fear of Asians as a whole.

The war in Vietnam was filmed for the small screen years before it was portrayed on the big screen, with the one exception of *The Green Berets*. This was the only combat film about Vietnam released while the war was being fought. As the first “televised war,” nightly news brought Vietnam into the living rooms of America. Television footage was in large part as racist in its depictions of the Vietnamese as the films that would follow. In Daniel Hallin’s study of the media in Vietnam, *The ‘Uncensored War,’* he writes that “television painted an almost perfectly one-dimensional image of the North

³⁹Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 309.

Vietnamese and Viet Cong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical.”⁴⁰ Hallin provides another example of small-screen racism: “The theme of terrorism as an element of North Vietnamese and NLF⁴¹ policy had the important effect of putting them outside the political realm, making them appear more as criminals than as a political movement or rival government.... The North Vietnamese and Vietcong were ‘fanatical,’ ‘suicidal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘halfcrazed.’ They were vermin. Television reports routinely referred to areas controlled by the NLF as ‘Communist infested’ or ‘Vietcong infested’.”⁴²

The “vermin” images were a direct carry-over from World War II portrayals of the Japanese. The theme of terrorism stemmed from the reports of intentional attacks against Vietnamese civilians by the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese. Hallin describes the way that television created the image of terror tactics. He writes, “no television report I encountered ever suggested that the United States might have any sort of general policy of targeting civilians, attacks on civilians by the enemy, on the other hand, were routinely assumed to result from a calculated *policy* of terror.”⁴³ This theme carried over into the movies, which also ignored the political element of the war. It was easier to dehumanize the enemy by speaking of their ruthless behavior than trying to explain the reasons behind that behavior and what the People’s Army of (North) Vietnam (PAVN) and the NLF in actuality were trying to accomplish—the liberation of their country from foreign influence and unification under one government. Another reason for the disregard of the

⁴⁰Daniel Hallin, *The ‘Uncensored War’: The Media and Vietnam*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 148.

⁴¹National Liberation Front, or what the “Viet Cong” referred to themselves as.

⁴²Hallin, *The ‘Uncensored War’*, 158.

⁴³*Ibid*, 156.

politics behind the war was the tendency of the United States to view the Vietnam War, as with other third world conflicts, in Cold War terms.

World War II was seen as a war for freedom: a war to free Europe from the totalitarianism of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime and a war to free the Pacific from the tyranny of the Japanese Empire. At the end of the war, the rhetoric of freedom had spread to all the corners of the world. Third World nations that had "belonged" to European powers and the United States as colonies moved to achieve their own freedom and independence. The problem, however, lay in the development of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. The two former allies were now the two world superpowers, and the ideological differences between the communist and capitalist systems created a deep chasm in relations. The United States viewed Soviet influence as an "iron curtain" descending first upon Eastern Europe, and from there potentially over the rest of the world. In his study *Orientalism: Asians in Popular Culture*, Robert Lee writes "the demands of the Third World nations, largely peoples of color, for independence, self-determination, and economic development became the ideological arena in the contest between the Soviet Union and the United States."⁴⁴ As these smaller nations scrambled for independence, it became a contest over whether they would fall into the communist camp or the "democratic" camp of the United States. Ho Chi Minh of North Vietnam was above all a nationalist; his main goal was to make Vietnam an independent nation, free of French control. The United States, however, only saw that he was also a communist. If Ho Chi Minh were to succeed, Vietnam would fall under that

⁴⁴Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999),157.

iron curtain. The Eisenhower administration in the 1950s first espoused the “domino theory,” and so US involvement in Vietnam began. If Vietnam became Communist, the rest of Indochina would fall as well and once again the “freedom” of the Pacific would be endangered.⁴⁵

As a pro-war film, *The Green Berets* promulgates the message of the importance of fighting in Vietnam precisely to prevent the Asian nation from becoming communist. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in the movie are closely identified with the “Communists,” reinforcing the red peril/yellow peril connection. In essence a propaganda film, the film’s message was to advocate the righteousness of America’s position in Vietnam, assert the inherent evil of the enemy—and of communism—and claim that superior American technology would win the war against the “savage” and “barbaric” natives. Author James C. Wilson refers to Robin Moore’s book, upon which the film is based, when he says it “portrays a Manichean conflict, in which the forces of good struggle with the forces of evil, which in this case translates into ‘us’ versus ‘the communists’.”⁴⁶ The statement is equally applicable to the film, for no distinction is made between the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong—they are all communists—and no mention is made of the Vietnamese struggle for independence or the internal conflict that it actually was. In a presentation the Green Berets give to members of the American

⁴⁵ For political and diplomatic history of the war, see Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson’s War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989); William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part IV: July 1965-January 1968*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ang Chen Guen, “Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968)—The Vietnamese Communist Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 no.3 (1988): 341-353; and George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002).

⁴⁶Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, 37.

public at the beginning of the film, one of them even says in reference to Vietnam, “what’s involved here is communist domination of the world.”

The film also uses versions of both the subhuman and superhuman enemy. There are two ways that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers are presented. One role is that of bumbling idiots who end up as nothing more than cannon fodder under the awesome firepower of American technology. The second way the enemy is characterized is as particularly cruel troops who commit unspeakable atrocities.

On a helicopter patrol, Colonel Kirby sees Vietnamese soldiers building a bridge—in broad daylight. Kirby announces “They’re not Cong, they’re hard core regulars!” The choppers fire on them and swing back around repeatedly. There are no close-ups of these Vietnamese soldiers. Bodies are blown up and thrown in the air, but no faces are shown, and there is no blood. The bridge is destroyed; it and the soldiers were easy targets. Kirby’s chopper does not even get fired on. Apparently since they were foolish enough to build a bridge in broad daylight, they were also too stupid to have sentries and weapons ready to defend themselves—and these were “hard core regulars”!

The prisoner interrogated by Captain Nim provides another example of Vietnamese stupidity. This traitor is shown wearing a floppy hat, and in this instance the camera gets close enough to show a big dopey grin on his face, buck teeth and all—a stock American image of foolishness. He is seen pacing off the distance between buildings in the compound to provide information for mortar attacks on the camp—“intelligence” for the other side. He does this in broad daylight while people are working all around him. This enemy obviously was not “sneaky” enough to get away with it, for

one of the American sergeants notices, rushes over and punches him, knocking him flat on the ground.

The other face given to the enemy is that of the cruel and murderous villain. In the scene for the battle of the camp, while the Americans and ARVN⁴⁷ allies put up a brave fight, there are simply too many enemy soldiers to hold off—a genuine “horde” is about to overrun the camp. There are no close-ups here either, just a faceless mass of bodies. They are closely grouped together as they are shown advancing up to and through the camp. When the last of the Americans are driven out, the Viet Cong let out “war whoops” reminiscent of the Indians in John Wayne’s Westerns. The enemy tear at the bodies left behind, stealing the boots and other parts of the uniforms and personal possessions. They raise their flag in the camp as a sign of victory. Kirby radios that “those people” have the camp. By the disgust and dismay in his voice, he may as well have said “those savages.”

The best example of the superhuman enemy is in the attempted rescue operation of the Montagnard village. The Montagnards come to the camp for medical aid. The chief of the tribe has a granddaughter who hurt her foot on a punji stick and the Green Beret Doc McGee helps her out. The Green Berets learn from the villagers that the Viet Cong go to their village, take all their rice and chickens, and force the men to fight for them. Kirby tells them to come in to the camp for protection and food. The chief says he will do so, but only if Kirby comes to their village to escort them all back. This reaffirms

⁴⁷Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnamese Army.

Kirby's high standing. The shot places the Americans all standing on a slope, above the Vietnamese.

The next day the team sets out on their rescue operation to bring all the villagers to the camp. When the Green Berets finally reach the village, it has been destroyed by the Viet Cong. A sign is tacked to a tree that says "Di Di Green Berets" scrawled in childlike handwriting. "Di Di" in Vietnamese means "leave," or "go away." The chief is dead, tied to a pole. Captain Nim translates the story of the survivors for the Americans. The enemy came in the night to take all of the young men. Most refused, so the VC killed the chief and "did this as a reminder to any who resisted them." The women are collected in front of one destroyed building, staring at the ground, not speaking. Beckworth asks about the chief's granddaughter, and they learn that five VC took her into the jungle and didn't bring her back. Doc McGee finds her and says he will "do what has to be done." The body is not shown, but there is the suggestion of rape, a doubly uncivilized act, since the granddaughter was only a child.

Kirby tells Beckworth—the personification of the American public—that in the last village he saw, the Viet Cong did not kill the chief. Instead, they tied him to a tree and then disemboweled his teenage daughters in front of him. As if this were not enough, forty of them used a steel rod to break all of his wife's bones. Here is the superhuman enemy with the special capacity for evil and violence.

Another characteristic of the enemy is his sneaky ability to infiltrate the lines. There are traitors within the camp supplying information to the outside, while others turn their guns on the Americans and ARVN during the major attack. The enemy of *The*

Green Berets is alternately stupid and incapable and stealthy, sneaky, vicious, violent, and barbaric—the subhuman and the superhuman.

Platoon uses a superhuman image of the enemy soldiers and also the familiar idea that there are hordes of them. Early in the film, there is a scene of a night ambush. The enemy blends in with the trees because they are so silent and stealthy. The Vietnamese soldiers seem to materialize from thin air. Their faces are shielded in darkness, and they run away after the attack. This is a recurring image—or rather, lack of one—of the enemy soldiers throughout the film. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert wrote, “there is rarely a clear, unequivocal shot of an enemy soldier. They are wraiths, half-seen in the foliage, their presence scented on jungle paths, evidence of their passage unearthed in ammo dumps buried beneath villages. Instead, there is a clear sense of danger all around.”⁴⁸ When the enemy does appear, it is in hordes. Just before the final climatic battle scene begins, the audience sees Taylor hunkering down in a foxhole with another soldier. One American from another unit comes running toward and then past them, terrified. He is frantic, yelling that “they wiped us out, we didn’t have a chance ... they’re all over the place, hundreds of them, moving this way, they’re right on my ass!” before he runs off again. They have superhuman strength in sheer numbers as well as in their uncanny ability to somehow become part of the jungle—“invisible.”

Apocalypse Now does not show battles between Americans and PAVN or Viet Cong soldiers as *The Green Berets*, *Platoon*, and *We Were Soldiers* do. But according to Colonel Kurtz, the VC in this film are also superhuman in their capacity for viciousness

⁴⁸Roger Ebert, “Gutsy ‘Platoon’ shoots straight,” *Chicago Sun Times*, December 30, 1987, 37

and evil, or what he calls, “will” and “strength.” Kurtz explains to Capt. Willard why he has left the US Army and created his own. He describes to Willard the occasion where, as part of a Special Forces unit, they inoculated a Vietnamese village for polio. When they returned the next day, Kurtz says the Viet Cong “had come and hacked off every inoculated arm ... the genius—the will to do that—they were stronger than we ... they fought with their hearts ... they had the strength to do that.... We need men who will use their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment, because it’s judgment that defeats us.” Kurtz clearly admires them, but the audience knows that Kurtz is crazy. Once again, the message is sent that the natives are not civilized because they have these “primordial instincts” and no qualms about killing. Only the more civilized Americans are capable of morality and judgment.

The earliest hint of a change in the portrayal of the enemy occurred in *Good Morning, Vietnam* in 1987. There are no pitched battle scenes here and no North Vietnamese soldiers, but there are Viet Cong soldiers, and they all have a human face. Tuan of course becomes Cronauer’s friend, and not until late in the movie does the audience discover he is VC. Tuan saves Cronauer’s life twice—the first time he pulls him out of a bar only moments before a bomb goes off inside, and the second time he brings Cronauer and his friend Eddie Garlick safely out of enemy territory after their jeep hit a mine and went off the road. The small squad of VC searching for Cronauer and Garlick before Tuan gets to them are shown in broad daylight, clearly very young. When Cronauer confronts Tuan near the end of the film, the audience gets a sense of what these young men are fighting for. Cronauer is angry and yells at Tuan, “You were my friend. I

trusted you. Now they tell me my best friend is the enemy.” Tuan retorts, “Enemy? What is enemy ... we’re not the enemy, YOU the enemy.” Cronauer, still fuming, says “Two people died in that bar....” but Tuan refutes him and says “Big ... deal.” Cronauer is referring to two Americans he did not even know. Tuan, however, has lost his mother, brother, and neighbor—all killed. He says, choking up, “We’re not human to them. Only little Vietnamese.” The American is incensed about these two deaths when to the Vietnamese, two dead is like a drop in the bucket compared to the losses they have suffered. Tuan’s statement proves that the Vietnamese are dehumanized; he tells the audience that the Vietnamese all feel that the Americans do not treat them as human beings, and the audience has seen that what he says is true.

We Were Soldiers goes even farther in overturning the old dehumanizing images. The audience still gets the sense that there are masses of enemy troops as they are shown pouring out of the mountain side, but at least some of them are given a human face. In his review, Tom Doherty notes: “The North Vietnamese forces are neither demonized nor glamorized, but, something rarer, humanized. A remarkable dual dedication to American *and* North Vietnamese soldiers begins the film.... Throughout *We Were Soldiers*, the first person plural in the title includes the NVA,⁴⁹ who are portrayed as worthy and honorable opponents, fighting on their native soil against alien invaders.”⁵⁰

The film opens with the battle of Dien Bien Phu, where the French were soundly defeated in 1954. It makes note of the fact that the Vietnamese are defending their homes

⁴⁹Americans referred to the PAVN as the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA.

⁵⁰Tom Doherty, “The New War Movies as Moral Rearmament: *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*,” *Cineaste*, 27 no. 3 (2002), 7.

against a foreign invader, first with the French and then a decade later the Americans. Throughout the film, there is a crosscutting between Lt. Col. An and Col. Moore as they plan their battle strategies. They appear to be able to read each other's minds. For example, no sooner than An tells his men to shift to the flanks of the Americans—"Don't let them breathe!"—the camera cut to Moore who says, "They're gonna try and flank us!" and orders his men accordingly. At the end of one of the days of the battle, there are parallel scenes of Moore and An checking up on their men and the lines, giving words of encouragement. The audience gets the sense that each man is an able, intelligent commander who cares about his men and is right there with them on the front lines.

The audience is also introduced to one of the Vietnamese soldiers. Though he remains nameless and does not have a speaking part, he is shown in close-up, writing in his diary. He tucks a picture of his wife or girlfriend inside and puts it in his shirt pocket. Later on, the audience sees him again as he pauses behind a tree in the midst of battle to try and compose himself. The emotion—and fear—on his face makes it clear that he is no superhuman killer. He is just trying to do the job he has been told to do. He fixes his bayonet and takes off toward Moore's command post. The camera follows him in slow motion as he aims straight for Moore. At the last minute, Moore senses his presence, whips around, and shoots him in the head. The movie ends with another parallel scene of one of the wives of a fallen American soldier reading a letter written by Moore crosscut with the young Vietnamese woman reading a letter presumably written by An. The message here is that both sides lost, and both sides suffered, because both are human.

Director Randall Wallace intentionally does not dehumanize the enemy. His focus is instead on the soldiers, Vietnamese *and* American. He says, “Soldiers are human beings. That’s what we forget when we send men off to places we don’t want to go to do things we don’t want to do. That’s why there are no villains in the picture, war is the villain.”⁵¹

Critic Bruce Weigel argues that Oliver Stone was the first to humanize the enemy. He writes: “Instead of the leering, yellow-eyed ‘gooks’⁵² of most other American films about the war, Stone portrays them in *Platoon* as the beautiful, dark, leaf-draped ghosts of soldiers that they were in our minds, flying through the bush, impossible, even often in death, to embrace. He portrays them not as madmen full of hate and a maniacal notion of torture, but as simple and dedicated men and women who fought and died to drive out the invader as their countrymen had done for ten thousand years before them.”⁵³

While it is true that these soldiers have an undeniable military prowess and they bear no resemblance to the buffoons of earlier films like *The Green Berets*, there is so much other racism depicted in the film that *Platoon* cannot truly be held up as a film that does not dehumanize the enemy. On Chris Taylor’s very first patrol in the jungle, he is struggling to keep up and to adjust to the climate. He stumbles and freezes when he comes across a dead Vietnamese soldier. One of the other soldiers asks him, “Whatsa matter boy? Ain’t gonna bite you. That’s a good gook—good and dead.” Soon Taylor

⁵¹Quoted in Stephen Hunter, “The Director, On a Mission,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2002, G4

⁵²“Gook” is another derogatory term for Asians and commonly used in the Vietnam War. Renny Christopher explains the origins of the term come from the war with the Philippines at the turn of the century where the Filipinos were referred to as “goo-goos.” See Christopher, *The Viet Nam War The American War*, (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1995), 122.

⁵³Bruce Weigel, “Stone Incountry: A PLATOON of the Mind,” in “Platoon on Inspection: A Critical Symposium,” *Cineaste*, 15 no. 4 (1987), 11.

refers to the Vietnamese as “gooks” as well, even though he is supposed to be educated and adhere to a higher moral code than the soldiers that have been there longer and are more cynical. In a voice-over of a letter to his grandmother he says, “I’m so tired, a gook could be standing right in front of me.” Even Sgt. Elias, who was there on his third tour and had admitted that, at one time, he really believed in the cause and that the Americans were there to help the Vietnamese, uses derogatory terms. Elias tells Taylor to “lace up your extra ammo ... don’t leave nothin’ for the dinks.”

Other racist depictions of the Vietnamese are scattered throughout the film. When the patrol stumbles upon a recently vacated VC camp—the tea kettle is still warm—two of the Americans begin to rifle through some papers that were left behind. The documents are booby-trapped, and the two are killed; one has his arm blown off. Back at camp, one of the Americans who goes by the name of Bunny asks: “you hear that story about the gooks putting chemicals in the grass [marijuana]? So we don’t fight? So we become pacifists?” In one battle scene, none of the Vietnamese have faces. Elias cuts down at least five enemy soldiers while he is running through the jungle and they drop at the first bullet and without a sound. There is some hand to hand combat in the final battle scene, and one Vietnamese shoots an American in the knee to wound rather than kill him.

These are not “beautiful, dark-leaf draped ghosts.” This is clearly the image of the vicious, violent, superhuman enemy, and one that does not play by the “rules” of war. When the platoon rounds up the villagers in order to search the village for weapons and question them about VC activity in the area, someone yells out to “Put ‘em in the pig pen!” In another scene, Sgt. Barnes shoots a wounded VC. The eyes of the Vietnamese

stare up at Barnes, but he makes no sound, and there is no blood. This stands in stark contrast to shots of wounded Americans, where there are close-ups of the wounds spurting blood, screams of agony, and death gasps. There is no respect shown to these Vietnamese soldiers or civilians, and none of them are individualized or portrayed kindly. Weigel may be right in that the movie does not portray the enemy as stupid or incompetent, but there is little, if any, respect shown to the enemy in uniform, and certainly none shown toward the Vietnamese civilians. Oliver Stone's intention with his film was to create a powerful, accurate representation of combat in Vietnam. American soldiers did refer to the Vietnamese as "gooks" and "dinks." Fear and the nature of war prevented most from thinking of or viewing Vietnamese enemy soldiers or civilians with respect or kindness. The problem, however, is that while the film is not intentionally racist, it does continue to use racist language and imagery, which aids in perpetuating the stereotypes. Stone is depicting and perhaps criticizing racism, but audiences that are not thinking critically walk away with reinforced racist imagery. *We Were Soldiers*, therefore, is the first Vietnam War film to truly reverse the negative image of the enemy soldier in earnest.

Jeanine Basinger remarks that in World War II movies made during the war, the Japanese army is the enemy, but in post-WWII films, the Japanese become the complication or problem rather than the enemy. The example she gives is in *Objective Burma* (1945), where the enemy is the Japanese while the jungle is the problem that complicates escape from the enemy. In later films such as *Battle Cry* (1955) and *The Naked and the Dead* (1958), the Japanese become the complication and the true enemy is

now portrayed as the jungle and/or the inner psychology of the men.⁵⁴ The war had ended and Japan was an ally of the United States. Though the war with Vietnam ended, the country remained an enemy of the United States, and for years there was no reason to shift focus away from the Vietnamese as the true enemy. Perhaps *We Were Soldiers* at last marks a turning point with Vietnam War films since it is the first to change the depiction of the enemy.

Although *We Were Soldiers* does change many aspects of how the enemy has been portrayed, there is one recurring image of the Vietnamese soldier that it too continues to use: that of the hordes or waves of the enemy. This dehumanizes the enemy because there are no individuals and no one soldier stands out from any of the others with any special or super powers. Rather, the idea is that all of them together have great power. This image also ties in to the idea of the monolithic Asian, for the soldiers are all alike, all inseparable and indefinable from one another. This concept of the monolithic Asian developed long before the United States ever went to war with an Asian country, however. It is most noticeable in the way that Vietnamese women and peasants have been represented over time.

Vietnamese Women and Civilians

Racist depictions of Vietnamese women and peasants stem from the long history of racism toward Asians in the United States. Racism toward Asians and Asian Americans began in the middle of the nineteenth century when the first Chinese immigrants came to America. The earliest immigrants came to California to join the Gold Rush after 1848,

⁵⁴Basinger, *World War II Combat Film*, 125.

and many others came in the following decades looking for jobs, which they found in abundance on the railroads. In her study of Chinese immigration, historian Erika Lee notes that the Chinese were immediately and continuously targets of racial hostility and violence and later of discriminatory and exclusionary laws. The reason for this, she argues, was the “American Orientalist ideology that homogenized Asia as one indistinguishable entity and positioned and defined the West and the East in diametrically opposite terms, using those distinctions to claim American and Anglo-American superiority.”⁵⁵ The United States already had a “race” problem with African Americans, only recently emancipated. The same racial qualities assigned to African Americans were applied to the Chinese to emphasize the similar racial threat this new group posed. Lee mentions the use of terms such as “heathen,” “inherently inferior,” “savage,” “depraved,” and “lustful.”⁵⁶ The Chinese arguably had it worse, for white Americans were at least accustomed to seeing and interacting with African Americans. The fact that the Chinese were “new” made them all the more strange and possibly dangerous.

Chinese women posed an additional problem for Americans. Lee notes there were almost 900 Chinese prostitutes in California by 1870. This presented a sexual danger. Lee writes, “Their mere presence made possible the crossing of racial and class lines and renewed fears of ‘moral and racial pollution.’ Chinese prostitutes were also believed to carry more virulent strains of venereal disease that had the power to ‘poison Anglo-Saxon blood’.”⁵⁷ The Page Law was passed in 1875 to prevent any more Chinese

⁵⁵Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 25.

⁵⁶*Ibid*, 27.

⁵⁷*Ibid*, 26.

women from coming to the United States. Chinese women had been labeled as prostitutes, and the stereotype would still be found in films produced more than a century later.

Chinese men were the next target, and the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, was the first time in American history that an immigrant group was banned on the basis of race. The Chinese were seen as stealing jobs from American citizens. The act barred laborers and allowed only a few merchants, students, diplomats and other elites into the country every year. Many continued to enter the United States, however, crossing over from Mexico or Canada. Lee estimates at least 17,300 Chinese entered the United States illegally across the borders between 1882 and 1920.⁵⁸

Existing racial stereotypes merged with the image of the criminal, “illegal alien.” Popular contemporary images of “John Chinaman” built upon “racialized notions of Chinese criminality, alienness, racial inferiority, and difference and the threat of invasion.”⁵⁹ As Robert Lee notes, this John Chinaman was a popular character on the minstrel stages from the 1850s on. The characters were played in yellow face, and Lee explains: “The minstrel representation of the Chinese immigrant as a racial Other relied on a trope of insurmountable cultural difference.... The Chinese were seen as having an excess of culture. This excess had led them into a state of degradation and cultural degeneration. Excess and degeneration, of course, carried with them connotations of disease, contagion, and pollution.”⁶⁰ The “yellow peril” that posed a threat to the United

⁵⁸Erika Lee, “Enforcing the Borders,” in *Journal of American History* 89 No. 1 (2002), 55.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁰Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 35-36.

States began to appear in popular culture, further confirming the legal position of the Chinese in America as alien “others.”

In spite of the laws and the way society treated Asians, the availability of jobs continued to beckon. Between 1885 and 1908, approximately 150,000 Japanese, 26,000 Filipinos, 6,000 Koreans, and slightly fewer than 5,000 Indians immigrated to the United States.⁶¹ Japanese farm workers first began to arrive in California in the 1890s after the Chinese had been excluded. The rhetoric of the anti-Chinese campaign was immediately applied to the Japanese and later to these other Asian groups.⁶² To the Anglo-American eye, the Japanese and other Asians looked just like the Chinese and were all part of the same race.

A 1917 Immigration Act created the Asiatic Barred Zone, officially excluding not just the Chinese but other Asians as well. This zone covered all of south Asia from Arabia to Indochina and the adjacent islands. It also included Burma, India, Thailand, the Malay States, the East Indian Islands, Asiatic Russia, the Polynesian Islands and parts of Arabia and Afghanistan.⁶³ “Orientals” were “Orientals”—there was no distinguishing between groups; all were inferior, “other,” and therefore not qualified or perhaps even capable of becoming US citizens. A number of Supreme Court cases solidified racism as the official, legal policy of the United States toward Asians and Asian Americans. The ruling in *Takao Ozawa vs. United States* ruled that the Japanese, as non-whites, were ineligible for naturalization and citizenship. In *United States vs. Thind* in 1923, the court

⁶¹Robert Lee, *Orientals*, 108.

⁶²Christopher, *Viet Nam War*, 122.

⁶³David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 340.

stated that race was a social, not a scientific category. While true, at the time this interpretation meant that only “Caucasians” by social definition—e.g., white skin—could become citizens.

Not until 1943 was the Chinese Exclusion Act repealed. It had become something of an embarrassment that, while the United States was supposed to be China’s ally in the war against Japan, it did not allow Chinese people onto its own soil. Though a quota system remained in place, a certain amount of Chinese immigration became legitimate, and the Chinese were allowed to become naturalized citizens with all the rights citizenship afforded.⁶⁴ The act was especially important according to Robert Lee because “the ideological statement implied by the dismantling of racially specific barriers signaled an erosion of white supremacy as a national doctrine.”⁶⁵

There were still many barriers to be faced, however. Less than a decade later, in 1952, the McCarran Walter Act created an “Asia-Pacific Triangle.” While this act did open quota slots for some Asian countries for the first time, it also harkened back to the Barred Asiatic Zone. The purpose of the quota was to restrict Asian immigration, limiting the number of persons of Asian descent born or residing anywhere in the world to only one hundred per country.⁶⁶ It would not be until the 1965 immigration act, passed after the United States had become involved in Vietnam, that these racial barriers were dismantled permanently. But at the time the war began, racism ran rampant and

⁶⁴Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 203.

⁶⁵Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 149.

⁶⁶Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 238.

was reflected in the portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in the popular culture of the United States.

These ideas of the “Oriental” as ineligible for US citizenship and the “Barred Asiatic Zone” to keep out *all* Asians translated into the portrayal of the “Monolithic” Asian on screen. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese—all were lumped into the one image of the Asian. The images of the minstrel shows were adopted by the cinema, and many continued to be used by numerous Vietnam War films.

Just as Asians were believed to be inferior in real life, so too were they given subordinate roles on screen. With rare exceptions, in the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood did not give Asian actors leading roles, and most of the roles they were allowed to fill were that of villains or subordinates. Actress and filmmaker Tiana (Thi Thanh Nga) writes that “Hollywood’s perception of the Asian seemed to have been derived directly from the nineteenth century frontier view of Chinese as a subhuman species suitable for building levees, laying railroad track, doing laundry, or being dangled from trees by those ridiculous pigtails.”⁶⁷ The same images used in the anti-immigration campaign were played out on the silver screen. In his study of how various mediums of popular culture including film distributed images of the “Oriental,” Robert Lee gives the example of Fu Manchu. Sax Rohmer created the character, asking readers to “imagine a person tall, lean and feline ... a close shaven skull and long magnetic eyes of true cat green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire eastern race.... Imagine that awful being, and

⁶⁷Thi Thanh Nga, “The Long March From Wong to Woo: Asians in Hollywood,” *Cineaste*, 21 No. 4 (1995), 38.

you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.”⁶⁸ Millions of people read the series of Rohmer’s novels, the first of which appeared in 1913; the last in 1959. Millions more saw the screen adaptation of Fu Manchu, the “yellow peril incarnate.”

In the 1940s, with World War II, the new face of the yellow peril belonged to the Japanese. As most West-coast Japanese Americans had been put into internment camps, they were unavailable for employment. This was not a problem for filmmakers, however. The cinematic tradition in Hollywood was based upon the adage that all Asians look alike. Actors of various Asian backgrounds were used regardless of the nationality of the character—Chinese actors played Japanese and vice versa. This tradition continued with the Vietnam War films and Vietnamese characters.⁶⁹

When original nineteenth-century frontier stereotypes grew outdated, they were replaced by new ones. In her book *The Viet Nam War The American War*, Renny Christopher focuses more on literature than film in her examination of how the war and the Vietnamese people have been represented, but what she says can easily apply to cinema as well. For example, on the majority of representations in Euro-American literature, she writes that good Asians were portrayed as the sidekick or ally under the control of and always inferior to the Euro-American(s). The rest of the Asians were “sinister Orientals” with an inscrutable and cunning nature: “Good or bad, they are

⁶⁸Quoted in Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 113-114.

⁶⁹Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese,” 10.

always alien others, never human beings on equal footing.”⁷⁰ The racism of the time could not allow otherwise.

Another mark of inequality in Asian characters was their speech, though Christopher points out that the inability to speak proper English is a trait of all stereotypically represented ethnic groups. Native Americans spoke in monosyllables like Tonto; the working classes had no grammar; African Americans could not speak properly through their “thick lips”; and the Irish spoke nothing resembling English.⁷¹ Continuing this tradition, the vast majority of Asian characters spoke a Pidgin English. This, too, is characteristic of Vietnam War films. A closer examination of the selected films will show how the “monolithic Asian” and the same recycled stereotypes of women as prostitutes and backwards peasants have been used in representing the Vietnamese.

“All Asians Look Alike”

The earliest Vietnam War films did not use Vietnamese actors to fill their Vietnamese parts. In *The Green Berets*, there are four speaking roles given to Vietnamese characters. Colonel Cai is played by Jack Soo, a Japanese-American. The role of Captain Nim went to George Takei, also a Japanese-American. Colonel Cai’s sister-in-law, Lin, was played by Irene Tsu, a Chinese-American actress. Cai and Nim represent the South Vietnamese allies of the Green Berets. Lin helps them capture the North Vietnamese General Thi. Thi is played by William Olds, who does not appear to have Vietnamese or any other Asian ancestry at all. The role of the orphan Hamchunk was filled by Craig Allyn Jue.

⁷⁰Christopher, *Viet Nam War*, 116.

⁷¹*Ibid*, 125.

Though I could not identify Jue's ethnicity, his filmography includes an appearance on the television series "M*A*S*H" as a Korean youth in 1972.

Apocalypse Now continued to lack Vietnamese actors. Filmed in the Philippines, director Francis Ford Coppola used the Ifugao Indians, a native Filipino tribe, for the parts of his Vietnamese Montagnards of Colonel Kurtz's personal army.⁷² None of the Vietnamese parts are credited.

Platoon devotes minimal screen time to Vietnamese characters, though some do appear in close-up and speak in their native tongue in the village scene where the American soldiers take revenge on the community for killing two of their own, accusing the peasants of harboring Viet Cong soldiers. The actors listed include Bernardo Manilili as the village chief, Than Rogers as his wife, Li Thi Van as his daughter, and Clarisa Ortacio as an old woman who lives with a one-legged man, played by Romy Sevilla. While it is possible that Rogers and Van are of Vietnamese descent, the other three names sound more Latin than Asian and therefore may be Filipino, as the movie was filmed in the Philippines. *Good Morning, Vietnam's* two main Vietnamese characters, Tuan and Tranh, are played by Tung Thanh Tran and Chintara Sukapatana, respectively. Sukapatana was born in Thailand, and though I was unable to find background on Tran, his name suggests that he is Vietnamese. The owner of the bar Adrian Cronauer and other American troops frequent is Jimmy Wah, played by Cu Ba Nguyen, also Vietnamese. The actors that play his Vietnamese students include a smattering of Vietnamese names, but many others that are of other Asian backgrounds. This was

⁷²Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Story-telling*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 21.

progress, however, and likely due in large part to the growing Vietnamese population in the United States.

Being a documentary, *Hearts and Minds*, does use real Vietnamese people; it was partially filmed in South Vietnam in November and December 1972.⁷³ The main Vietnamese character in *We Were Soldiers* is North Vietnamese Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An, played by Don Duong, who was born in South Vietnam. Most of the other credited Vietnamese soldiers are in fact played by Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans. The American private Jimmy Nakayama is played by Brian Tee, an American of Korean and Japanese descent. Perhaps Hollywood filmmakers have shown once and for all that, given the proper resources, they are inclined to choose “authenticity” over the old “all Asians look alike.”

Though this is due in part to the growing Vietnamese population of the United States, it can also be attributed to the increased sensitivity toward ethnic and cultural differences that was a result of the Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights movement began with African Americans working to fight racial inequality in the United States. This was also an outcome of World War II and the development of the Cold War. The United States claimed it was fighting for freedom and democracy in the war, and in the Cold War the American rhetoric revolved around the United States as representative and protector of the “free” world against the “slavery” of communism. African Americans protested the gap between rhetoric and reality within the United States, for they were still being denied the rights and privileges of white American citizens.

⁷³Gregg Kilday, “The Skirmishing Over ‘Hearts’,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1974, Section 4, 18

Nazi racial theory and attempted genocide of the Jewish “race” also quickly cast a negative light on the idea of race at the end of the Second World War. Robert Lee notes that, “anxious to replace the invidious category of race, for which there was little scientific justification and significant political cost, liberal theorists subsumed race relations to ethnicity.”⁷⁴ Ethnicity became the “politically correct” category of identification for minority groups. As African Americans slowly made headway in the 1960s and 1970s, other marginalized or minority groups followed suit, including women, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans. As Will Maslow of the American Jewish Congress said in his summation of the attitude of various ethnic organizations, “You can’t fight discrimination against one minority group without fighting it against others.”⁷⁵

This is not to say, however, that racial hatred disappeared. Lee also writes, “the race problem is assumed to have been resolved with the dismantling of state-sponsored racial discrimination in the 1960s.”⁷⁶ Though the watershed Civil Rights Act of 1964 did in fact ban discrimination based on race, many obstacles remained in the way of equality. This is apparent in the way that Vietnam War films continued to stereotype the Vietnamese people.

Women As Prostitutes

The stereotype of Asian women as prostitutes stems from the days of the Page Act in 1875 and continued to crop up on screen with Vietnam War films. In *The Green Berets*,

⁷⁴Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 158.

⁷⁵Quoted in Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), 10.

⁷⁶Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 183.

Lin must prostitute herself as part of the plot to capture General Thi. While she seduces him, the Green Berets sneak up and infiltrate his mansion. When they enter the bedroom to drag Thi away, they find Lin in the bed, too, covered only by a sheet. It is apparent that she is ashamed by what she has done and that her brother-in-law, Colonel Cai, is disappointed in her, in spite of her crucial role in the plot. Colonel Kirby has to counsel Cai to forgive Lin for that very reason, which he eventually does.

Author Rick Berg describes Lin as one who “fulfills the role of all women in *The Green Berets*, as well as in most Vietnam narratives. She is an object of desire, one of the South’s ‘top models’ ... and a potential victim.... Wayne gives women a strict role in war. Either the allies protect them or the enemy rapes them.”⁷⁷ Lin is clearly an object of desire and in a way has been raped by the enemy, though she initiates the sexual encounter for the sake of her country. To round out the stereotype, the allies do protect her both by retrieving her from enemy territory and by forgiving her.

Hearts and Minds also utilizes the prostitute stereotype. The only young Vietnamese women shown in the entire documentary are in fact prostitutes. One clip follows two American soldiers as they walk down the streets of a South Vietnamese city, followed by two prostitutes who are practically begging to be bought. The Americans brush them off, saying they cost “too much money.” Their bodies are not even worth the meager price they are asking. Another scene shows two American soldiers with two Vietnamese prostitutes. All four are shown from the waist up, naked. Some sort of sheet separates the couples and the two men talk to each other. They make jokes about the

⁷⁷Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud, 54.

women they are with and talk down to or over them. The only other women present in the documentary are much older. Two septuagenarian sisters talk about how they have been wounded and can no longer work. They talk of the death of their sister and the destruction of their home. A mother is shown grieving at the funeral of her son. Davis also shows an interview of an older lady who was arrested and badly beaten by the South Vietnamese police. The way the prostitutes are treated is intended to display bad behavior on the part of the American troops. But, as with *Platoon*'s use of negative portrayals of the enemy, the fact that the image is there helps to perpetuate the stereotype.

Good Morning, Vietnam is a transitional film in regards to the prostitute stereotype, for it both utilizes and counters the image. Cronauer and his friends see two young women, in short, tight skirts at Jimmy Wah's bar. The ladies are initially hanging on the arms of two other American soldiers until Cronauer lures them over yelling "Girls! Girls!" and flashing a wad of cash. They are not explicitly referred to as prostitutes, but the money suggests it. For the remainder of the film, however, *Good Morning, Vietnam* presents a main female character who is young and most certainly not a prostitute, though she is an object of Cronauer's desire.

When he first arrives in Saigon, Cronauer says he feels like a "fox in a chicken coop," chasing skirts. He calls the natives "dragon ladies," but it is not necessarily disrespectful—the audience gets the feeling he would make a similar comment about women in any country. He finally sets his sights on one girl in particular: Tranh. Cronauer chases after Tranh and tries to speak English to her, but she doesn't understand him. He eventually follows her to her English class, which is taught by an American

soldier. Cronauer asks his friend Eddie Garlick, “how do I get this girl to go out with me?” Garlick tells him he will not be able to, for “this culture is *very* different.”

But Cronauer is persistent. When he asks if she could date the teacher of her class and Garlick says it might be possible, Cronauer promptly steps in and takes over the class. Tranh’s brother, Tuan, sees right through him and stops him from pursuing Tranh after class, telling him to stay away. He says, “You’re phony, just like French and American before you. I know Americans—they take advantage of girls and leave.” Cronauer gives in and agrees to let her go. He begins to develop a friendship with Tuan, at first in hopes of still having a chance with Tranh, but as time passes he becomes truly fond of the young man. Tuan takes him to their village in one scene, where Cronauer takes a walk alone with Tranh. She tells him they have no future together and can’t be friends, because it is “not good for me ... Vietnam ladies not friends.” Tranh’s character therefore acknowledges the stereotype of Vietnamese women as prostitutes while at the same time refuting it: not *all* Vietnamese women—certainly not the “ladies” —are “friends” of the Americans, and she refuses to be seen on that level.

Cynthia Fuchs argues that the character Tranh is not necessarily a positive step in the representation of Vietnamese/Asian women. She writes that the film “schematizes[s] women as figures for American experience in Vietnam.... Adrian adores an ethereally pristine, white-dressed Vietnamese girl-woman who represents the untouchable alien culture.” Fuchs goes on to say “the romantic vision of the Asian woman as inaccessible undermines *Good Morning, Vietnam*’s unusually positive representation of Vietnamese

people.”⁷⁸ There are two ways to look at this. One is that Fuchs is right in that the film did not go “all the way” toward a fair portrayal of Vietnamese women. Another way is to see the film as an improvement over previous portrayals of Asian women.

Fuchs says because Cronauer cannot be with Trinh, she marks Asian women as “untouchable aliens.” Because Cronauer cannot be with and does not really know Trinh, she remains mysterious and forbidden—a common trope for the “Oriental” woman in the eyes of Anglo-American men. Gina Marchetti writes that “one of the more enduring aspects of the Western vision of Asia involves the East’s supposedly intrinsic seductiveness.”⁷⁹ Trinh represents an image of the feminized, exotic Eastern world, as well as the American construct of Asian woman-as-child. Cronauer’s frustration with her inaccessibility is a metaphor for the frustration of the American experience in Vietnam.

On the other hand, if Trinh *had* ended up with Cronauer, she would be little different from any of the other women in Vietnam War films who are represented as prostitutes. This film does provide an honest portrayal of a cultural difference. If a Vietnamese woman was seen in the company of an American soldier with no other Vietnamese around, she would automatically be labeled a prostitute.⁸⁰ Although Trinh’s character in some respects is a “romantic vision” of Asian women, as Fuchs says, the film also uses Trinh’s character to represent *cultural* differences.

This is made clear by the fact that when Trinh does go out with Cronauer, her entire family goes with her to chaperone, in order to keep her from being seen as a

⁷⁸Fuchs, “Vietnam and Sexual Violence,” *America Rediscovered*, Eds. Owen and Gilman, 123-124.

⁷⁹ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 67.

⁸⁰Interview, Bill Wilson, January 16, 2008.

prostitute. Garlick tells Cronauer from the get-go that he cannot be with Tranh because of the cultural differences, and Tranh herself tells Cronauer that it could never work for that very same reason. Marchetti writes, “in many Hollywood films, romance is used as a metaphor for interracial and intercultural understanding.”⁸¹ Because Cronauer’s romance with Tranh is a failure, so too is there a lack of interracial and intercultural understanding. As Fuchs says, “US technology (Cronauer as a voice on the radio) is unable to comprehend the very culture it proposes to rescue.”⁸² In spite of the fact that ultimately the understanding fails, clearly an attempt is made. In doing so, *Good Morning, Vietnam* teaches the audience something about the people and the culture of Vietnam, rather than perpetuating stereotypes and pretending that Vietnam does not have its own culture that is very different from America’s. This is what makes the film such an improvement over prior portrayals not only of Vietnamese women, but of Vietnamese people in general.

Backward Peasants

The third most common image of the Vietnamese is that of backwards peasants. This idea stems from the notion of the inferiority of Asians as a whole. The manner of their dress, their language, and their culture were all seen as indications of inferiority by Anglo-Americans. The development of scientific racism and social Darwinism at the turn of the century placed the white race at the top of the racial hierarchy. This helped bring the United States and Europe together in their collective missions to colonize the world.

⁸¹Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril,”* 126.

⁸²Fuchs, “Vietnam and Sexual Violence,” *America Rediscovered*, Eds. Owen and Gilman, 123-124.

Colonies were viewed as necessary for economic expansion, and given that the most powerful European countries—Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain—all had a wealth of colonies, officials in the US government believed that the United States also needed to acquire colonies to be competitive. In the colonies throughout the world, however, the European powers believed it was their right, even their obligation to take control and subordinate the native populations. This went against American ideals, for the Revolution had been fought for the very reason that Americans did not believe in being forcibly governed by an outside power. The notion of American superiority and the belief that the very survival of the American nation was at stake helped reconcile the issue for the American government and the American public, however. In 1898, with the Spanish-American War, the United States became a colonial empire with the acquisition of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, the Americans and native Filipino insurgents were allied together against the Spanish. When Spain capitulated, it was initially unclear what would happen to the Philippines. Expansionist fever expressed the desire to utilize the gains of the war. A view expressed in *National Geographic* stated that the United States should “take its rightful position among the nations of the earth.... The welfare of our nation lies largely in the development of our trade with the nations south of us and countries of the Far East.... Our policy in the future must be an aggressive one.”⁸³ Some believed if the United States did not assert control, another European nation would take over and colonize the Philippines. The islands were a prime location

⁸³Quoted in David J. Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902*, (New York: Hill and Wang: 2007), 50.

for improving trade with China as well, which was an as-yet-untapped market at the turn of the century. Historian David Silbey quotes a speech by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to President William McKinley to illustrate the belief in the necessity of outward expansion. Lodge said, “The time has now come when [the domestic] market is not enough for our teeming industries, and the great demand of the day is an outlet for our products.... With our protective tariff wall around the Phillipine islands, its ten million inhabitants, as they advance in civilization, would have to buy our goods, and we should have so much additional market for our home manufactures.”⁸⁴

Not only was Lodge expressing the economic factors and benefits of taking control of the Philippines, his statement also indicates the racial element involved. He said, “as they advance in civilization.” Clearly the belief was that they were “behind” and there were some advancements to be made. Under American tutelage and with American products, this could be accomplished for the good of “all” sides. The mission of the colonists was best expressed in Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” which he wrote in response to the American take-over of the Philippines. It was the duty of the colonists to teach the natives, to feed and clothe them and put them to work—to help them become “civilized.” McKinley spoke of America’s “divine ordination” to take on “international responsibilities” overseas.⁸⁵ Historian Kristin Hoganson writes of three assumptions made about the Filipinos that together meant they were unfit for independence and self-government. Filipinos were believed to be

⁸⁴Silbey, *War of Frontier and Empire*, 54.

⁸⁵*Ibid*, 55.

uncivilized savages, “children,” and were feminized as a whole.⁸⁶ The first two images had their antecedents in supposed characteristics of Native Americans and African Americans. The stereotyped “savage” lacked “the self-control, work habits, and chivalrous restraint that supposedly characterized civilized men,” while the “stereotype of the childlike Filipino paralleled long-standing images of African Americans as children who were too immature to participate in government and of Native Americans as wards of the state.”⁸⁷ The feminized image underlined the belief that Filipino men were not “manly” enough to self-govern, and also indicated the need for US intervention to make the Philippine gender order “right.”⁸⁸ These images in turn were antecedents of the portrayals of the Vietnamese people.⁸⁹

In the 1960s, most of South Vietnam was very rural and very poor. The majority of the people were peasant farmers. To the Americans, their lifestyle seemed to be from another age. Peasants lived in thatched huts, not “houses.” They did not have electricity or washing machines or televisions or any of the material wealth that Americans did—their civilization was different and therefore “backward.” When the United States first became involved in the war in Vietnam, it was widely believed that the North Vietnamese Communists would never be able to stand up to superior American technology. The majority of Vietnam War films have at least one shot of Vietnamese peasants working in their rice paddies, repeatedly reinforcing the stereotype.

⁸⁶Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish American and Philippine-American Wars*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 134-137.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 134, 135.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 137.

⁸⁹For additional discussion of American imperialism and cultural conceptions of “inferior” races, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

A number of peasants live in the Special Forces camp in *The Green Berets*, residing there as a part of the American campaign to “win the hearts and minds” of the people. They are shown performing manual labor, either in their rice paddies or in the camp, building trenches or making other improvements. The conical hat is ubiquitous. There are no close-ups and none of the peasants have speaking parts. They are the meek and obedient villagers the American troops will protect. When the camp is attacked and has to be evacuated, Kirby says “move ’em out” and they are herded like cattle.

In *Hearts and Minds*, Lieutenant George Coker, a former prisoner of war from 1966 to 1973, is shown speaking to school children in his hometown of Lyndon, New Jersey upon his release and return to the United States. When asked what Vietnam was like, he tells them that it was very beautiful “except for the people.” He says, “People over there are very backward and primitive,” and he even goes so far as to say that “they’re always dirty.” General William C. Westmoreland⁹⁰ is shown saying, “Vietnam reminded me of a child.” These two men wholly buy into the stereotype of Asians as backward children waiting to be taught and civilized by the Americans.

Apocalypse Now takes the notion of inferiority and backwardness much farther, to the point of portraying the people as “primitive,” even “savage.” When Captain Willard finally finds Colonel Kurtz’s “camp,” he finds a whole tribe of “savages.” Human skulls are everywhere and dead bodies hang from trees. Some of the natives wear partial uniforms and carry guns, but the majority wears very little clothing, are covered in body paint and armed with bow and arrows. They are repeatedly referred to as Kurtz’s

⁹⁰Westmoreland was commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam from 1964 to 1968.

“children,” and he acts like he is their God. In her film review, Marsha Kinder calls this relationship “problematic.” She writes that, though the audience is told that Kurtz’s followers worship him so because he has managed to get “practical results,” they never witness this supposed military efficiency. Therefore, Kinder says, “what this relationship between Kurtz and his followers does imply is a complete passivity and demoralization of the Montagnards, who historically are known to have been quite independent and strong.”⁹¹

The scene where Willard kills Kurtz is inter-cut with shots of the people performing a caribou sacrifice, which is depicted as very tribal, very primitive, and very frenzied. When Willard comes back out of Kurtz’s domain, all of the natives turn toward Willard and stare, and then kneel down quietly, waiting for his command. They do not speak, they do not appear to have any minds of their own—Coppola may as well have used cavemen. Some critics like Ruth McCormick compare the images and roles of the natives to those found in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899. McCormick also calls the setting of Kurtz’s temple reminiscent of Puccini’s *Turandot*.⁹² In Puccini’s opera, a princess surrounds her palace with the severed heads of her rejected suitors. The average film-goer, however, in all likelihood misses these high culture references. If he or she does not know what the film is alluding to, the only message received is that the Vietnamese are primal savages.

⁹¹Kinder, “Power of Adaptation,” 16

⁹²Ruth McCormick, “Apocalypse Now,” *Cineaste*, IX no. 4, (1979): 53.

Frank Tomasulo writes that, in conveying its supposed message about the “human condition,” the film uses the Vietnamese and Cambodians⁹³ to represent the primitive “origins of human nature” while the Americans represent the civilized side of humanity. Tomasulo argues that this “dramatic license in the service of universal truth exacerbates the unconscious racism of the film’s figurations and its portrayals of the essential otherness of Third World peoples.”⁹⁴ Though Conrad’s novella is a part of the turn-of-the-century civilization rhetoric, Coppola places *his* story in the setting of Vietnam in the 1960s. He updates the scenery, the American characters and the technology to match the new setting, but he leaves the native people in the same role that Conrad put them in—the uncivilized savages, in spite of the fact that Vietnamese civilization is thousands of years old. This was a conscious choice. Coppola may have wanted to convey that war is hell and can “break” someone and make them insane, but what the film actually portrays is that the Vietnamese are at the outset uncivilized and savage in comparison to the Americans. It takes war to turn a more cultured American into a similar savage. The experience of war and what men like Willard and Kurtz have seen and done is what has made them lose all sense of morality. But even when the Americans do “break,” they are still superior to the natives. The natives still bow down to them and follow their every wish and command. The most savage thing about this film, therefore, is its racism.

Good Morning, Vietnam devotes a significant amount of screen time to Vietnamese civilians and provides evidence that this particular stereotype may be on the

⁹³Kurtz’s compound is reportedly in Cambodia.

⁹⁴Tomasulo, “Politics of Ambivalence,” *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud, 154-155.

wane. One particular reason for the difference is the setting of the film—the city of Saigon. The majority of the natives shown, therefore, are urban rather than rural. These Vietnamese are not peasants; there are no farms around. They live in houses and have electricity; they drink Coca-Cola and go to the movies. The Vietnamese who lived in the cities of South Vietnam were therefore much more Americanized because they had access to and were influenced by American products and contact with American citizens—first businessmen and later soldiers. There are occasional shots of the lush countryside and conical hat-topped figures working amidst the rice paddies. However, much more screen time is devoted to Cronauer’s relationships with Tranh and Tuan and also to his English class. David Callaghan is a bit harsh in his conclusion that the pupils are portrayed as “congenial, child-like simpletons” who find Cronauer’s “juvenile babbling hilarious.”⁹⁵ Cronauer does teach them slang and curse words rather than “real” English, and while his babbling may be juvenile, it is also hilarious. The film is supposed to be a comedy, after all. One of the first things a foreign language student wants to do is learn how to swear, so I feel this would be comical with any culture, and the film does not intend to make the Vietnamese students “child-like.” For instance, Cronauer tells the class that he is going to teach them how to have a conversation in New York City. Even Americans like to poke fun at how New Yorkers talk; the likelihood of one of the students ever making it to New York is very slim, so the impracticality of the lesson is comical as well.

⁹⁵Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese,” 264.

Levinson was not the first, nor will he be the last, to create a military comedy. He made it okay to laugh *about* the Vietnam War, though not necessarily at it. Cronauer jokes about the weather; he mimics President Johnson and former Vice President Nixon. He creates his own characters on air in a way that showcases Robin Williams's talent with voices and accents. There are no jokes about the men and women that were killed, and there are no jokes about the Vietnamese as a people. In the end, as William O'Neill writes, "it transpires that even the Vietnam War had its funny side if you dig deeply enough."⁹⁶

David Callaghan does go on to admit that this film is unusual in its willingness to depict any aspect of Vietnamese daily life.⁹⁷ This includes showing a Buddhist ritual at a local temple, as well as eating and shopping from Vietnamese vendors on the streets of Saigon. The chaperoned date of Trinh and Cronauer is another example. By highlighting some of the cultural differences, the film is teaching that Vietnam does in fact have a rich culture of its own and is not just a "war." Callaghan calls it "the most extensive portrayal of Vietnamese lifestyles and characters in a Hollywood film up to that point in time."⁹⁸

The peasant portrayal in *The Green Berets* is the most common image of Vietnamese civilians found in Vietnam War Films. *Apocalypse Now* takes the inferior stereotype to its extreme, but later films like *Good Morning, Vietnam*, are starting to break down the stereotype and give a more detailed and honest picture of Vietnamese

⁹⁶O'Neill, "The 'Good' War," *The Long War*, Ed. Bacevich, 526.

⁹⁷Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese," 265.

⁹⁸*Ibid*, 263.

life, Vietnamese culture, and Vietnamese people. There have been no films since that match or step ahead of *Good Morning, Vietnam* in this respect, but neither have there been films that regressed to the point of a fleeting glimpse of the simple peasant or the savage of *Apocalypse Now*.

Another element of the peasant image goes back to the theme of dehumanization. There is a wealth of instances in Vietnam War films where civilians are dehumanized just as much, if not more, than the enemy in uniform. Historian Michael Shafer argues that, while race unquestionably was a factor in World War II, in Vietnam, it was “all-pervasive.” Little distinction was made between enemy and ally—they were all Asian and therefore all “‘slopes,’ ‘dinks,’ ‘gooks,’ The entire population was potentially hostile both because it was a guerilla war and because American attitudes made the entire population alien.”⁹⁹ Any South Vietnamese citizen was a potential member of the Viet Cong; there was no possible way to tell an enemy from an innocent just by looking at him or her. Even women and children were potentially VC. David Desser explains how this furthered the cycle of racism. He writes, “this is the simple but painful refrain heard time and again from veterans, in novels and in films: that they could not distinguish ally from enemy, friend from foe. The Occidental, racist cavil that all Orientals look alike became painfully all too true in Vietnam.”¹⁰⁰ Not only did this further the stereotype of the Monolithic Asian, it meant that *all* Vietnamese, not just those in uniform, were dehumanized.

⁹⁹Shafer, “The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy,” *Legacy*, Ed. Shafer, 86.

¹⁰⁰Desser, “‘Charlie Don’t Surf’,” *Inventing Vietnam*, Ed. Anderegg, 94.

Hearts and Minds does not spend any real amount of time focusing on the enemy, though it does provide commentary on a common stereotype of the “Oriental” that is dehumanizing. One of the most famous clips in the film is of General Westmoreland and his statement on the value of life. Director Peter Davis begins the sequence with footage of the national cemetery in South Vietnam. There are sounds of wailing and crying, which are very eerie. A mother tries to climb into her son’s grave while the dead man’s son clutches his father’s picture. Davis cuts back and forth from this scene to one where Westmoreland is saying, “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient ... Life is not important.” The General comes across as callous and ignorant of what Vietnamese people are really like, but his statements, however, are not at all surprising considering the racist attitudes of many Americans of his time. The Japanese had allegedly proved that they did not value life, after all, with their kamikaze attackers and suicidal resistance in World War II. Westmoreland fought in World War II. To him, as to many Americans, all Orientals were alike; therefore the Vietnamese surely valued life as little as their wartime Japanese counterparts. To not value human life, after all, makes one less than human.

In *Apocalypse Now* before Willard starts upriver with his patrol boat crew, Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) and his Air Cavalry unit attack a village on the river. The two reasons for the attack are so they can insert the PT boat and so Kilgore, a surfing fanatic, can surf the waves at that particular beach—a place he had not been able to go thus far because it was “hot” enemy territory. The Americans swoop over the village in their helicopters while they play Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” over a loudspeaker on

one of the choppers. Kilgore says with glee, “Scares the hell out of the slopes!” The camera shows the Vietnamese village, where in the school yard, the children are rushed inside. The peasants start scurrying around, collecting weapons while the Americans shout “run Charlie¹⁰¹!” The Vietnamese are all shown from high above, from Kilgore’s perspective in the helicopter, so they look like mere ants on the ground. The camera gets close enough to the ground to show a wounded American, however, who is in the courtyard, screaming in anguish, bright red blood flowing from his wound. A Vietnamese woman who only moments before was rushing the children to safety runs up and throws a grenade into the medevac helicopter, blowing them all up. Kilgore calls them savages, and his helicopter chases after the woman, firing bullets into her back until she falls to the ground. Kilgore calls in an air strike and orders his men to “blow ’em to the Stone Age, son.” Napalm blooms in the tree line, and the scene closes with Kilgore’s famous line: “You smell that ... I love the smell of napalm in the morning ... smells like—victory.” Albert Auster and Leonard Quart observe that the Vietnamese in this scene “are at least given some dignity as ferocious fighters.”¹⁰² The audience could see this as dignified, or just as an indication of how ferocious the Vietnamese are “by nature,” however.

Historian William O’Neill summarizes the way that most Vietnamese civilians are portrayed. He writes, “In most Vietnam movies the natives are hardly noticed, except when they turn out to be Viet Cong guerrillas, victims of American atrocities, or are

¹⁰¹The Vietnamese were commonly referred to as “Charlie,” which comes from the NATO Phonetic Alphabet for VC (Viet Cong), which is “Victor Charlie.”

¹⁰²Auster and Quart, *How the War was Remembered*, 66.

officers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), always depicted as incompetent, venal, and eager to avoid fighting.”¹⁰³ Films therefore have encouraged these stereotypes of Vietnamese people in general. *Good Morning, Vietnam* has been the only film to truly show a different side of the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese culture with developed Vietnamese characters that do not fall into any of the aforementioned categories.

Significant changes have occurred in the portrayals of Vietnamese in Vietnam War films over the past three decades. The most improvements have been made regarding the image of the enemy soldier. Positive steps have been taken toward improving the image of Vietnamese women and peasants, but there is still much work to be done. Reasons for these changes include the increasing size of the Vietnamese-American population, as well as increased respect for cultural differences. In some respects, the legacy of the war in the American mind has still prevented a fair and equal portrayal, particularly of the South Vietnamese people.

In October of 1965, the Hart-Celler Immigration Act abolished all of the national origin quotas, and immigrants were to be admitted to the United States on the basis of their skills and/or relationships to people already residing in America.¹⁰⁴ Thereafter, immigrants from Asia and the Asian-American population grew rapidly. By 1971, more Asians migrated to the United States than Europeans.

They quickly took on the status of “model minority,” for by and large Asian Americans achieved successful ethnic assimilation. Robert Lee says this was a result of

¹⁰³ O’Neill, “The ‘Good’ War,” *The Long War*, Ed. Bacevich, 533.

¹⁰⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 259.

“stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement.”¹⁰⁵ The model minority moniker has its roots with the end of World War II and the Japanese. The race hatreds of the Pacific War faded quickly after 1945 and the Japanese were viewed as intelligent pupils. In his study of the race war, John Dower sums up the transformation by saying, “in a time of peace, in a word, the extremely negative images of the Japanese as primitives, children, and madmen summoned forth the victor’s more charitable side: as civilized mentor, parent, doctor, therapist—possessor, without question, of superior power.”¹⁰⁶ By transforming into a peaceful, economically successful, democratic society, the Japanese proved themselves to be a model ally. Domestically, the idea of the Japanese as a model ally transformed into the concept of the Asian American as a model minority.

Robert Lee attributes the “model minority” label on Asian Americans to the fact that in the 1970s they were “not black.” Asian Americans were politically silent and ethnically assimilable at a time when African Americans were very much involved in the Civil Rights movement.¹⁰⁷ Black Power stressed black pride and a refusal to assimilate—exactly the opposite of how Asian Americans were behaving. On the one hand, Asian Americans were seen as “good” precisely because they were adapting to American society and culture without causing “trouble” like some other minority groups. On the other hand, this successful assimilation was viewed as troublesome. Lee goes on to say that this rapid growth of the “model minority” made Asian Americans seem like

¹⁰⁵Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 145.

¹⁰⁶Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 305.

¹⁰⁷Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 145.

the Viet Cong—they were everywhere, invisible yet powerful.¹⁰⁸ He writes: “The model minority has two faces. The myth presents Asian Americans as silent and disciplined; this is their secret to success. At the same time, this silence and discipline is used in constructing the Asian American as a new yellow peril.... The Asian American is both identified with the enemy that defeated the United States in Vietnam and figured as the agent of the current collapse of the American empire.”¹⁰⁹ Though legal and political racism had ended in terms of immigration and naturalization laws, cultural racism continued to thrive. Reception of the waves of refugees after the end of the war in Vietnam illustrates this.

There were two main waves of refugees in the postwar period. The first came in 1975 as part of the American-sponsored evacuation of South Vietnam. They came directly to refugee camps on the US mainland. The second wave consisted of the “boat people,” or overland refugees, who fled in opposition to the new government of Vietnam’s economic and rural resettlement programs. This group spent time in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other parts of Indochina before coming to America. More than 400,000 refugees came to the United States from Indochina between 1975 and 1980.¹¹⁰ Historian George Herring estimates the total number of those who resettled in the United States to be around one million.¹¹¹ There was also the problem of “Amerasians.” Children born of American soldiers and Vietnamese mothers, they faced discrimination both in Vietnam and the United States. In Vietnam, “to not

¹⁰⁸Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 11.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid*, 190.

¹¹⁰Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 237-238.

¹¹¹Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 342.

have [sic] a father is to not be a viable social object,” and this, coupled with the “sin” of the mother’s miscegenation damned them in their native country. Their Vietnamese identity marked them as a potential target of racism in America in addition to their discomfort with the English language and American culture.¹¹² The 1987 Amerasia Homecoming Act admitted Amerasians and their close family members to the United States as immigrants, though they were treated as refugees and given full refugee benefits and access to training programs.¹¹³

A 1982 study on racism and how the Americans and the Vietnamese viewed each other found that one-fourth of respondents to a survey agreed with the statement “America has too many Asians in its population.”¹¹⁴ The nature of this lingering racist sentiment is perhaps best illustrated by the issue of these Vietnamese refugees. James W. Tollefson provides an interesting study of the immigrants in his article “Indochinese Refugees: A Challenge to America’s Memory of Vietnam.” As his title suggests, the mere presence of Vietnamese refugees has caused a whole set of psychological problems for Americans. He writes, “To many Americans, Vietnamese remain deadly guerrillas ... pitiful ‘boat people,’ ... or ‘economic migrants’ taking jobs from hard-working Americans.”¹¹⁵ The century old fear of losing “American” jobs to these Asian immigrants once again reared its head. Tollefson says that there was tremendous sympathy in the late 1970s, but this turned into what he calls “compassion fatigue.” This was due to the fact that what official attention was given to the refugees by the

¹¹²Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 252-253.

¹¹³*Ibid*, 253-254.

¹¹⁴Christopher, *Viet Nam War*, 151.

¹¹⁵James W. Tollefson, “Indochinese Refugees: A Challenge to America’s Memory of Vietnam,” *Legacy*, Ed. Shafer, 262.

government focused on the high rate of unemployment and the money spent on public assistance.¹¹⁶ If the majority of the American public repeatedly hears that its tax dollars are going to support a group of people who appear to be making no progress, resentment is to be expected. It appears that Vietnamese immigrants are in a no-win situation: if they have jobs, it is because they “stole” them from Americans, but if they are not working, they are living off the money of hard-working Americans.

Tollefson argues that the reason why most Americans—especially the policy-makers—have not been able to form connections with the refugees or truly welcome them to the United States is because most of America has not confronted its dehumanized images of the Vietnamese. He writes that the dehumanizing process has been easier to overcome with regard to the “enemy.” North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers are increasingly viewed as good soldiers and fellow warriors, while most of the refugees are from South Vietnam, “whose soldiers Americans described as ineffective, corrupt, and weak. To many Americans, they lost the war.”¹¹⁷ The issue of refugees brings the limits of American acceptance of Asian Americans to the surface. It is easy to accept the North Vietnamese in the spirit of “war is a terrible thing.” It is not so easy to accept the South Vietnamese due to the sentiment that it was their fault there was a war in the first place and that it lasted for so long.

In films like *We Were Soldiers*, it is evident that the former “enemy” has now garnered respect. To attribute the negative stereotypes solely to the South Vietnamese, therefore, is indicative of just how sensitive a subject—and the American loss—still is

¹¹⁶Tollefson, “Indochinese Refugees,” *Legacy*, Ed. Shafer, 268.

¹¹⁷*Ibid*, 272.

today. No film since Tollefson's article was published in 1990 has yet portrayed the South Vietnamese soldiers as kindly as seems to be necessary to break down these stereotypes, though *Good Morning, Vietnam* showed Hollywood's willingness to portray the South Vietnamese civilians in a gentler light. Small steps have therefore been taken in this direction, but one major leap remains: films that portray the war from a Vietnamese perspective.

One reason why films have continued to use the image of the backward peasant is the reluctance to see the Vietnamese point of view. If Vietnam remains an "uncivilized" country, the political element of the war can more easily be ignored. If all of the South Vietnamese civilians are apolitical peasant farmers, the war can remain a certain way in the American memory. Americans can believe that a US presence was necessary to protect the poor, innocent Vietnamese from the communists and that American involvement was therefore justified. "Backward" peasants are not politically active or revolutionary. By keeping the Vietnamese locked in this typecast, the films do not have to address the political element of the war or the Vietnamese perspective. Albert Auster and Leonard Quart wrote in 1988 that no films about the war addressed "the political or historical bases for the war or the Vietnamese perspective of the conflict. None touched on North Vietnamese nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, or the character of that culture. In fact, the Vietnamese were depicted primarily as cannon-fodder ... and their country as nothing more than a landscape for American moral commitments and personal fantasies."¹¹⁸ No film since their work was published has touched on these subjects either.

¹¹⁸Auster and Quart, *How the War was Remembered*, xv.

Hollywood films remain focused on the American experience of the war, whether they claim to accurately represent the war, as with *Platoon*, or merely use the setting of Vietnam as a vehicle for commentary on contemporary situations in the United States, like *Hearts and Minds*.

At the outset of *Hearts and Minds*, the documentary seems to be the one film that does pay some attention to the Vietnamese side of the war. Peter Davis interviews Father Chan Tin, who says “we fought against China for twelve centuries, French for one hundred years and finally when the Vietnamese were liberated from foreign oppression in 1954, the Americans came in. We fight only for freedom, independence, and national unity.” Davis’s message is that the United States was fighting a counter-revolutionary war.¹¹⁹ The camera cuts from Tin back to the United States—specifically, to a Revolutionary War re-enactment. The re-enactor says with pride that the colonists “rose up against the most powerful army in the world” and remarks that it was close to being a civil war, with brothers fighting against brothers. When asked, he refuses to see the parallel with “Oriental politics” and the situation in Vietnam. Daniel Ellsberg¹²⁰ is then shown, saying that Americans never admitted that the war in Vietnam was a counter-revolution. The film then cuts to Senator J. William Fulbright, who explains that Ho Chi Minh sent letters to the United States to try and win support for his nationalist, revolutionary movement and was ignored.

This method is what James Wilson calls “ironic juxtaposition,” where Davis “repeatedly undermines the prowar position by exposing the disparity between the

¹¹⁹Slater, “Teaching Vietnam,” *Inventing Vietnam*, Ed. Anderegg, 284.

¹²⁰Ellsberg was an American military analyst who worked for the Pentagon in the 1960s.

rhetoric of American officials and the actual devastation of the war, calling into question the very integrity of those officials.”¹²¹ So while the film does teach the audience something about the origins of the war in Vietnam for the Vietnamese, the ultimate goal is to focus on the mistakes made by the Americans.

What the film does successfully is to make the Vietnamese human by showing how much they have suffered because of the war. In a sequence on bombing, Davis starts with clips of George Coker and Captain Randy Floyd, both pilots. Floyd speaks of his “technical expertise” and how incredible it was to fly. Coker calls American technology “the ultimate in aviation.” The camera cuts back to “primitive” Vietnam—from children with missing limbs, to explosions, to Floyd and Coker expressing how “thrilling” and “deeply satisfying” bombing was. Then Davis turns back to Vietnam.

One man is shown in his destroyed village; he used to raise pigs, but a bomb destroyed everything he had. Next we see two older women, whose seventy-eight-year-old sister died. One woman is silent and one is crying; they have no home left, and they are wounded and cannot work. There are twenty-five seconds of complete silence while the camera holds on one sister’s face as she continues to wipe her eyes. Davis uses this technique more than once. In his analysis of the documentary, David Grosser writes that the technique “forces the viewer to confront the feelings of the people on the screen.... *Hearts and Minds* tried to break down the viewers’ emotional distance from the brutality of the war in order to allow people to be horrified by it.”¹²² The method is very heart-

¹²¹Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, 95.

¹²²Grosser, “‘We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side,’” *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud, 276.

wrenching and therefore effective, but ultimately the documentary is still focused on the United States. After all, the film was intended to be about *American* involvement in the war and intended for *American* audiences to show them their mistakes in going to war. Davis shows how the Vietnamese have suffered in order to show the audience what the United States had done to Vietnam; the film still does not treat the Vietnamese as a people and a country in their own right. Vietnam is still a “war” and not necessarily a country and a culture.

Platoon is intentionally centered on the American experience of the war and the moral tug between good and bad, right and wrong. Vietnam serves as the setting and the Vietnamese serve as the “props” upon and around which the drama is carried out. The village scene in *Platoon* is one of its most powerful and serves as a perfect example of how American-focused the film is. The platoon is out on patrol and gets a report that some NVA soldiers are in the village ahead. They prepare to move on, but find they are missing one of their own—Manny. As they continue moving forward, they see him up ahead, tied to a tree, his throat cut. The whole platoon, but in particular Sgt. Barnes, is outraged. Taylor’s voice-over says, “The village didn’t know we were coming that day; if they did, they would’ve run.”

When the platoon does reach the village, the peasants are all rounded up. No enemy soldiers are found, but the Americans do find machine guns and much more rice than would be necessary to feed the villagers alone, an indication that NVA or Viet Cong soldiers have safe harbor there. The Americans are yelling and swearing at the peasants, who scream and shriek in fear. Soon someone says, “let’s waste the whole village.”

While the rest of the men continue searching, Barnes tries to interrogate the “gook honcho,” who says he doesn’t know anything. Barnes will not accept that answer. The village chief’s wife starts yelling, scared, and Barnes shoots her in the head to shut her up. Her daughter starts crying. Someone else says “Let’s do the whole ... village.” Barnes puts his gun to the wailing girl’s head to threaten her father into speaking. At that moment, Elias steps in, and a fight breaks out among the Americans between those who want to torch the village and those who want to back off. When Elias later reports the murder Barnes committed to the captain, the platoon splits between those that side with Barnes and those that side with Elias. David Callaghan writes that “the loss of Vietnamese life in the village is terrible, implies Stone, but it is still of secondary concern in relation to its impact on the Americans for the remainder of the film.”¹²³ This is the turning point of the film and sets up the rest of the plot of the movie. Barnes kills Elias in another battle so that Elias cannot continue to push for an investigation into his conduct. Taylor learns this and, in turn, takes his revenge at the end of the film and kills Barnes. As he leaves the scene of this last battle on a helicopter, his final voice-over makes the observation: “I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves and the enemy was in us.” The implication is that the war was a trauma for the Americans alone; Vietnam and the Vietnamese had virtually nothing to do with it except to serve as the setting. Though this is what the film is meant to be about, once again it leaves the Vietnamese as those that are acted upon, rather than actors, and gives no indication of the trauma suffered by the people of Vietnam.

¹²³Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese,” 211.

Although *We Were Soldiers* does include a dedication to the People's Army of North Vietnam and gives the enemy a human face, the film is still essentially about the American experience of the Battle of Ia Drang. The audience meets the Americans back at home while they are training and preparing to go off to war, as well as their wives and children. The majority of the battle is shown through the eyes of Moore or his men, not the North Vietnamese. Roger Ebert in his review of the film writes "there is an attempt to give a face and a mind to the Viet Cong [sic] in the character of Anh [sic], but significantly, he is not listed in the major credits and I had to call the studio to find out his name and the name of actor who played him."¹²⁴ Ebert goes on to acknowledge that the majority of war movies do in fact identify with one side or the other, not both. This appears to be the case for films made in Vietnam as well. Films made in the United States are made for American audiences and naturally lean toward portraying the American point of view, and vice versa.

Wayne Karlin is an American novelist who has also edited and translated fiction from Vietnam. His book *War Movies: Journeys to Vietnam: Scenes and Out-takes* is about his trip to Vietnam to help make the film "Song of the Stork," in which some young Vietnamese filmmakers attempt to re-create the war of their parents' generation. In talking with one of the Vietnamese directors, he notes, "our films center on the American experience, as you'd expect. The thing is, the Americans I've seen in the Vietnamese films have mostly been terrible stereotypes also."¹²⁵ Perhaps as long as a film is made in one country or the other by native directors there will always be

¹²⁴Roger Ebert, "A Soldier's Story," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 1, 2002, 29.

¹²⁵Karlin, *War Movies*, 31.

stereotypes and the movie will always be focused on the country of its production—and naturally so. In a conversation with a Vietnamese veteran, Karlin says: ““In the scenes I’ve read of your script that involve the guy based on you, ‘Vinh,’ we, the Americans, if we’re shown at all, it’s like that, as a sort of relentless, inhuman force.’ ‘Yes,’ he said gently. ‘But as you say ... you did the same. It’s realistic, isn’t it?’ He stared at me in silence for a while. ‘There was only one way we could see each other’.”¹²⁶ Long after blatant, state-sponsored racism has disappeared, stereotypes can linger and obscure the “truth,” or at the very least block an “objective” view of the war. During the war, there was only one way the opposing sides could see each other—as the enemy. Now, however, in order for there to be compassion and understanding, there must at least be an attempt to see the “enemy” in different lights and from different viewpoints. If not, the war will always be “American” from the American perspective, and vice versa for the Vietnamese.

It is not unheard of for a Hollywood film to portray war from the “enemy’s” viewpoint, however. History has shown that it is possible to change the way that former enemies see each other. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the story of a German soldier in World War I, is the most popular example from that war. Jeanine Basinger writes that the film adaptation of the book “illustrates the horror of war, not only in its death and destruction, but also in its wasting of a nation’s youth, both physically and mentally.... It stresses the futility of war and the psychological pressures on the men who fought in

¹²⁶Karlin, *War Movies*, 195.

it.”¹²⁷ The audience sees the German soldiers not as the enemy, but as victims of the war, just like the Allied troops.

There are even World War II films that portray the war through Japanese eyes. *None But the Brave* (1965), *Hell in the Pacific* (1969), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) were all American-Japanese co-productions. The first two suggest similarities between the Japanese and American soldiers, and there are situations where the survival of both sides is dependent on mutual cooperation.¹²⁸ *Tora! Tora! Tora!* tells the story of Pearl Harbor both from the American *and* the Japanese viewpoints.¹²⁹ Twenty-five years after the end of World War II, the racism toward the Japanese had been set aside far enough for Hollywood to show the war from the perspective of an enemy formerly deeply despised and feared. In spite of the racial barrier, identification with the Japanese was possible. More than twenty-five years have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, but that point has not yet been reached for Vietnam War films. No collaboration has yet occurred.

Perhaps this is because the Vietnamese viewpoint has not yet been truly acknowledged¹³⁰. In her study of representations of the war in Vietnamese films, Laurel Westrup writes that the purpose of her article is not to demonstrate that Vietnamese versions of the war are any more or less valid than American depictions. Her goal is

¹²⁷Basinger, *World War II Combat Film*, 89.

¹²⁸Michael Paris, “‘What Happened was Wrong’: *Come See the Paradise* and the Japanese-American Experience in the Second World War,” *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, Ed. Michael Paris, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 113.

¹²⁹Basinger, *World War Two Combat Film*, 175.

¹³⁰“The Vietnamese perspective” is problematic in itself because the Vietnamese government now essentially ignores the perspective of the former South Vietnamese, especially those that fought with the Americans. Most South Vietnamese cemeteries, for instance, have been bulldozed over, and the government has painted the picture of an external war with the United States rather than a civil war. Interview, Bill Wilson, January 16, 2008.

instead to recognize them. She writes “by expanding the canon of Vietnam War films we can work toward accomplishing a public understanding of the war that mirrors the political, cultural, and social complexities inherent in the conflict itself.”¹³¹ The fact that there is another perspective out there must first be recognized and respected before any move toward collaboration—and understanding—can be attempted.

There are many reasons why the Vietnamese perspective has not been recognized; one of them is because films have never shown it. History impacted the ways that the Vietnamese were portrayed, and the film portrayals in turn have had their own impact upon history. A powerful example of this relationship is illustrated by the concern over American prisoners of war and those still listed as missing in action. The POW/MIA lobby emerged almost immediately after the last American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. They demanded a full accounting of Americans still listed as missing in action. Historian George Herring writes that by the 1980s, the lobby was even more powerful, and MIA had become synonymous with POW. He says, “the linkage of MIAs to POWs muddled an already complicated issue, suggesting that any of the missing might be prisoners. Roughly one-half of the more than 2,000 service personnel listed as POW/MIA were known to have been killed in circumstances where the body could not be recovered. Between 1975 and 1993 various congressional and executive groups studied the issue intensively and produced not a shred of evidence that a single American was being held captive in Vietnam.”¹³² The issue has never gone away, however, and films

¹³¹Laurel Westrup, “Toward a New Canon: The Vietnam Conflict Through Vietnamese Lenses,” *Film and History*, 36 no.2, (2006), 51.

¹³²Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 360, 362.

have helped add fuel to the fire. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser's essay "Never Having to Say You're Sorry" describes that way that the *Rambo* films "re-wrote" the Vietnam War into something worth fighting. Rambo goes back to Vietnam to rescue American soldiers still held captive there. On the issue of the POW/MIAs they write, "The need to believe in the MIAs gives credence to the view that the Vietnamese are now and *therefore have always been* an inhuman and cruel enemy. Vietnam's alleged actions in *presently* holding American prisoners serves as an index of our essential rightness in fighting such an enemy *in the past*."¹³³ In seeking some sort of salve for the American conscience, therefore, these films only furthered racism toward the Vietnamese. Driven both by the actual movement to recover the missing personnel and the sentiment of the 1980s that the United States was justified in going to war with Vietnam, the films that brought the story of the POW/MIAs to the big screen did so in such a way that added to the racist sentiment toward the Vietnamese.

David Palumbo-Liu argues that "race does not 'disappear' as much as it is muted. It is still available for activation and mobilization."¹³⁴ The example he uses is the one of the scandal over Asian contributions to the 1996 presidential campaign. Wealthy and successful Asian Americans were investigated for their contributions to the Democratic National Committee.¹³⁵ At the first hint of scandal and wrong-doing, suddenly the money was "Asian" and suspicious. Racism toward Asians and Asian Americans is still near enough to the surface to be instantly activated. Another example of this is evident in

¹³³Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo*'s Rewriting of the Vietnam War," *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Eds. Dittmar and Michaud, 105.

¹³⁴Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 5.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

economic competition with Japan and China. In the epilogue to his study of the race war in the Pacific in World War II, John Dower writes, “racial undertones, however muted, have been present on all sides in the postwar relationship between former belligerents, and it is predictable that harsher racist attitudes reminiscent of the war years will again rise at time of heightened competition or disagreement.”¹³⁶ There has been increased competition in the economic market, and racist sentiment has reappeared as a result. Dower says there is a new Japanese “superman” in capitalist industry, especially in the field of high technology. Even though many Westerners do give the Japanese credit for “hard work, farsighted planning, and high standards of production,” Dower writes, as economic imbalances rise, so does the tendency of Japan’s competitors to attribute Japanese success to “deviousness.”¹³⁷

Chinese economic competition is also on the rise. It is estimated that at its current growth rate, China’s economy will be the largest in the world thirty years from now. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) says that because of its size alone, China would dominate Asia and rise to the level of the United States and the European Union as a global economic superpower.¹³⁸ Because of China’s communist government and the history of hostile relations with the United States since the end of the Cold War, many view this as a threat. The CSIS therefore cautions, “narrow trade disputes could escalate to become a broader ‘China problem’ because most Americans find repugnant the Chinese government’s limitations on religious freedom, violations of basic human

¹³⁶Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 312.

¹³⁷*Ibid*, 313.

¹³⁸C. Fred Bergsten, Bates Gill, Nicholas R. Lardy, and Derek Mitchell, *China: The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know Now About the Emerging Superpower*, (New York: Public Affairs,2006), 9.

rights, and restrictions on freedom of speech, via censorship of the Internet and other mechanisms.”¹³⁹ It would be all too easy to extend criticism of the Chinese government and its “backward” or “uncivilized” ways onto the Chinese people themselves. As Dower noted, a competitive environment is more conducive to the revival of racist attitudes. Films that help keep racist imagery alive mean that these racist attitudes, though at times may be “muted,” are indeed still available for activation.

Film has undoubtedly had an impact on diplomatic relations as well. Gordon Arnold writes that “when, after the war, the communists led a reunified Vietnam, it is difficult to imagine that the vague and often stereotypical portrayal of Vietnamese persons on film and in public pronouncements did not play some part in the slow pace of progress toward diplomatic relations between the two former adversaries.”¹⁴⁰ For almost twenty years after the end of the war, Vietnam was still viewed as the “enemy.” It was not until the Clinton administration that diplomatic relations between the two countries finally began to open up and normalize where all previous efforts had failed. In 1994, the US embassy in Ho Chi Minh City¹⁴¹ was returned to the United States, and in 1995 Clinton announced his intentions to establish full diplomatic relations. A trade agreement was finally signed in 2000, and in that same year Clinton visited Vietnam, the first president to do so since Nixon visited American troops in 1969. The message of his visit was “Vietnam is a country, not a war,” as he attempted to show sensitivity to Vietnamese feelings.¹⁴² *Good Morning, Vietnam*, as the first film to carry this message, was perhaps

¹³⁹C. Fred Bergsten, et al, *China: The Balance Sheet*, 75-76.

¹⁴⁰Arnold, *Afterlife of America's War in Vietnam*, 205.

¹⁴¹When South Vietnam fell to North Vietnam in 1975, its capital, Saigon, was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

¹⁴²Herring, *America's Longest War*, 365, 367-68.

ahead of its time. Or quite possibly it indicated that the American people were in fact ready to share this view and only when this became apparent was the government ready to go ahead and act on those sentiments.

It is not the obligation of filmmakers to depict the Vietnamese perspective. An American director could not in all fairness do this accurately without collaboration with a Vietnamese director or other Vietnamese sources. It certainly is not the obligation of filmmakers to utilize the Vietnamese viewpoint if it has nothing to do with the message of the film. Sometimes films like *Platoon* and *We Were Soldiers* intend to be solely about the American experience. *We Were Soldiers* proves that this can be done so in a way that does not depict the traditional racist imagery of the past. *Platoon*, however, proves that in some instances, use of this racist imagery is, to some extent, necessary to “accurately” represent the war. Contemporary racist sentiments may be crucial in order to describe and explain the language used and the hatred involved. The point of this study, however, is to show that it is possible to devote, at minimum, pieces of a plot to the Vietnamese story; that it is possible to produce films that devote equal attention to both sides of a conflict through collaboration. Although not all Vietnam War films have done or will do this—nor is it necessary—it is important for audiences to be aware that the imagery and stereotypes, though often there for a reason, are in fact racist. The American public needs to know that not all Vietnamese or Asian women are prostitutes, not all civilians are peasants and “uncivilized,” and not all soldiers are demonic. It is equally important for historians to be aware that as long as popular audiences are subjected to this kind of racist imagery and the same stereotypes repeatedly, they will

continue to have a lingering effect on race relations with Asian Americans within the United States as well as foreign relations with Asian nations.

Conclusion

There are hundreds of Vietnam War-related films. Some qualify for the category simply because one or more characters are purported to be veterans scarred or otherwise affected by the war. Dozens more have actual combat footage, and some have Vietnamese characters. There are a number of films that have been studied and written about so extensively they are considered part of a “canon” of Vietnam War films. These include *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, as well as other works such as Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and the *Rambo* and *Missing-in-Action* blockbuster series of the 1980s. There have been two major waves of Vietnam War related films, the first in the late 1970s and the second in the mid-to-late 1980s. The war has dwindled as a subject of cinematic interest for the past two decades, but the production of *We Were Soldiers* and the 2006 release of *Rescue Dawn* show that it is far from dead. Though the two recent films were not box office hits relative to the blockbusters of the late 1970s and 1980s, the continuing comparisons of the War in Iraq to Vietnam may mean a third wave is yet to come.

The six films considered here are a few of the ones that devote the most screen time to portrayals of North Vietnamese and/or Viet Cong soldiers as well as Vietnamese civilians. They provide a useful tool in examining how American society and American culture has viewed and treated Asian Americans over the past forty years. The war in Vietnam did not cause race hatred toward Asian Americans and the Vietnamese; that had

existed for a century prior to the landing of the first American troops on the shores of Vietnam. The war did not help race relations, however. Race hatreds from World War II in the Pacific were revived with a vengeance. Stereotypes of Asians were repeated over and over again, and the whole country was dehumanized. The trauma that the United States experienced as a result of its first “lost” war makes the entire era a painful one for many. There is a need to somehow explain—or blame—the failures away, and some of it falls on to the people of Vietnam and to their relatives in the United States. Some Americans still do not know, or do not acknowledge, the far more serious trauma experienced by the country of Vietnam as a result of the war.

The changing nature of the filmic portrayals of the Vietnamese translates into the changing nature of race relations. History has impacted the way that the Vietnamese have been portrayed in these films, and in turn the films have an impact on history. None of these films are truly about racism, or about the Vietnamese, and many audience members may not even notice the racist portrayals on screen. Some viewers are more focused on the American troops and their reactions while watching films.¹⁴³ It is a natural reaction to identify with what is familiar. The problem with racism, however, is that it stems from fear of the unfamiliar, of the “other.” Even if the message is not overt, even if the viewer walks away from a film without really noticing the way that the Vietnamese were characterized, the portrayal is there. When the same portrayal and the same stereotypes are used time and time again, however, the message does become overt and American audiences “learn” what Vietnamese people are like.

¹⁴³Interview, Ted Foster, January 07, 2008.

We have seen why particular images were used, and we have seen how some of those images have changed, for as Thomas Slater writes in his essay on *Hearts and Minds*, “films about Vietnam (as with all historical films) reveal more about the time in which they were made than about the time to which they refer.”¹⁴⁴ In the words of veteran Bill Wilson, in the first waves of Vietnam War films, the Vietnamese are “always stereotypes, always acted upon, rather than actors, [and] always diminished, in part because they’re shorter.”¹⁴⁵ This was the only way that the majority of American society had ever viewed Asians and Asian Americans. But with the passing of new immigration laws that ended legal discrimination against Asians, and with the settlement of more than one million Vietnamese refugees in the decades after the end of the war, Asians became more a part of American life. Asian Americans learned from African Americans to fight for their civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s. They utilized America’s rhetoric of freedom and democracy expounded during World War II and the Cold War to call attention to the reality of their own plight. Like many other minority groups, Asian Americans modeled their actions on the values and tactics made popular by Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁴⁶ The oldest stereotypes, especially that of the monolithic Asian, could no longer stand up to reality and racism has become taboo.

This is not to say, however, that Asians and Asian Americans are no longer stereotyped and no longer face any sort of racism. American society, like American films, has shown improvement, but problems remain. Robert Lee writes that racially

¹⁴⁴Slater, “Teaching Vietnam,” *Inventing Vietnam*, Ed. Anderegg, 284.

¹⁴⁵Interview, Bill Wilson, January 16, 2008.

¹⁴⁶Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 314.

motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans have been growing throughout the United States since the 1980s.¹⁴⁷ David Palumbo-Liu notes that “economic success and class ascension do not necessarily erase racial distinctions that leave Asian Americans susceptible to being redefined as ‘foreign’ at specific historical moments. ‘Difference’ is thus understood and deployed in various moments—some benign, or even conciliatory, other emphatically brutal. Each instantiation has its own particular historical context.”¹⁴⁸ The POW/MIA issue, economic competition with China and Japan, and the 1996 presidential campaign contribution scandal all indicate instances where Asians and Asian Americans have been redefined as “different” and “foreign,” and where old racial distinctions have been employed. Vietnam War films show that while it has been difficult to eradicate racial distinctions and stereotypes, it is not impossible.

Because Vietnam was a war, the enemy soldiers were naturally dehumanized, and because of the long history of racism toward all Asians, Vietnamese civilians and the South Vietnamese allies were dehumanized as well. The negative portrayal of enemy soldiers is only just beginning to crumble, and very few have attempted to even chip away at the image of the backwards peasant. Collaboration—and a willingness to view the conflict from the “other” side may be necessary for these stereotypes to disappear completely. These are things that have not yet occurred, but history has shown with the example of World War II films that it is possible. Vietnam War films have not yet reached that point. They both illustrate and help perpetuate the negative images and stereotypes.

¹⁴⁷Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 216-217.

¹⁴⁸Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 3.

A note left at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall read, "War destroys everything except memories."¹⁴⁹ For those who have no personal memories of the war in this culture where seeing is believing, it is important that the kind of "memories" that films provide of the war are ones that will break down stereotypes and destroy racism, not prolong them. Wayne Karlin provides some thoughts on how he teaches people about the My Lai massacre, where American troops killed an estimated three hundred or more Vietnamese, many of them women and children. He says, "I've learned what I should do. I think people have to do that. I think people can do that. Otherwise, what's the point of teaching? Or writing? Or film-making? It's all to show us what is possible. What we are capable of. The example of darkness and the example of light."¹⁵⁰ Hollywood has shown the example of darkness in its racist portrayals of the Vietnamese people. We are now just beginning to see the example of light. If Hollywood is moving that direction, we can be reasonably assured that the American public is as well.

¹⁴⁹Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered*, 147.

¹⁵⁰Karlin, *War Movies*, 122.

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