The Incomplete Humans of Vietnam in Hollywood War Films

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Hollywood war films about Vietnam, whether pro-war or anti-war, often depict Vietnamese characters and culture through an oversimplified, American-centric lens. This essay critiques such portrayals, analyzing *The Green Berets* (1968) as an emblematic pro-war propaganda film and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) as anti-war films. Despite differing ideological perspectives, these films reduce the Vietnamese to faceless, voiceless figures, relegated to the background to emphasize American narratives. Pro-war films justify U.S. intervention by framing Vietnam as dependent on American rescue, while anti-war films utilize Vietnam as a metaphor for American disillusionment, often failing to depict Vietnamese characters authentically or with multidimensionality. The analysis underscores how this erasure reflects broader patterns of Orientalism and cultural stereotyping in Western media, contributing to a skewed understanding of Vietnam and its people.

Keywords: Hollywood Vietnam war films, Orientalism in cinema, cinematic representation, Americentrism

Vietnam's war against the U.S., lasting from 1955 to 1975, left an indelible mark not only on the global political landscape but also on the world of cinema. In Vietnam, many films have vividly and diversely portrayed the tragedies of the Vietnamese people both during and after the war. Many of these films have become classics of Vietnamese cinema and have gained international recognition and scholarly attention, such as *Cánh Đồng Hoang* (1979) by director Hồng Sến, *Em Bé Hà Nội* (1974) by Hải Ninh, *Đừng Đốt* (2009) by Đặng Nhật Minh, and *Đời Cát* (1999) by Nguyễn Thanh Vân.

Outside of Vietnam, Hollywood has played a major role in shaping perceptions of the country and its people through many war films. Each film brings different perspectives, but they often maintain common stereotypes about the Vietnamese. These films, whether pro-war or anti-war, typically view Vietnam through the one-dimensional lens of the West (Janette, 2006). Through this lens, even in anti-war films, Vietnam is often not portrayed as a real country with a rich history and culture, but merely an alien and hostile backdrop on which Americans fight each other in political and ideological conflicts – a metaphor for the chaos and brutality of war. Hardly standing out from this background, Vietnamese characters are "shadowy figures only glimpsed occasionally" (Kinney, 2000, p. 4). They are faceless bodies or one-dimensional characters, existing only to advance the story of the American protagonists. After watching many Hollywood films, it is not difficult for viewers to

recognize that the erasure of Vietnamese identity and humanity is not an isolated example but a trend in most, if not all, Hollywood war films about Vietnam. To clarify this argument, this essay analyzes several famous Hollywood films, focusing primarily on a pro-war propaganda film, *The Green Berets* (1968), and three anti-war films: *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

Pro-war propaganda films: "The Vietnamese need us, and they want us"

Perhaps the American ideology of viewing the United States as the leading state and representative of freedom and equality in the world is no longer unfamiliar. With this mindset, the U.S. allows itself to intervene politically and militarily in other countries, under the guise of bringing order, freedom, and democracy to their people. Scholars and the international community have exposed the hypocrisy of American interventionism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and most recently, through U.S. support for Israel's genocidal massacres in Palestine. However, in 1968, the film *The Green Berets* (named after the distinctive beret uniform of the U.S. Army Special Forces) was released with precisely this message – a message that even within the U.S., the public had started to have a hard time believing. The year 1968 was one marked by deep social unrest in the United States, with the civil rights movement, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and, most notably, widespread protests against the Vietnam War. This social upheaval weakened the U.S. government's ability to present a unified front in the Cold War.

In this context, *Green Berets*, co-directed by John Wayne and Ray Kellogg with John Wayne starring in the lead role, is a propaganda piece justifying U.S. intervention in Vietnam and calling for American support for the war half a world away. The plot of the film is very simple: a journalist skeptical of the war's legitimacy follows a Special Forces unit to Vietnam and ultimately realizes that the American presence in this distant land is justified. The film depicts the Vietnamese landscape as an endless jungle and the Vietnamese people are mainly divided into two types: "good" Vietnamese, loyal to American ideals, and "bad" Vietnamese, portrayed as barbaric and cruel.

The image of the "bad" Vietnamese, primarily the "Viet Cong" (i.e., the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam), is constructed as barbaric and cruel, engaging in acts such as decapitating and mutilating American soldiers, raping and looting civilians, harming children, and forcing civilians into their army. Essentially, they are depicted as a savage and inhumane group, which Sergeant Doc McGee describes in a press conference response to reporters in the U.S. as those with "the intentional murder of innocent women and children".

In contrast to the inhumane Vietnamese are the "good" Vietnamese, who are vulnerable and in need of protection by the American military. Captain Nim of the South Vietnamese Army is depicted as capable but entirely reliant on American support. Naturally, the film includes a character who is both weak and in need of protection, yet completely innocent to contrast with the savage and brutal enemy – an orphan boy named Hamchunk. The villagers are portrayed as indistinct, chaotic, and powerless, entirely dependent on Americans for aid and protection. Therefore, according to *Green Berets*, the presence of American troops in Vietnam is entirely justified and even righteous. McGee asserts to the American press that "they [Southern Vietnamese] need us, and they want us" to fight against the (Northern) Vietnamese who deliberately kill innocent women and children. The American soldiers in this film are all heroes, rescuing villagers, protecting their people and property, vaccinating children, and even advising and educating the people on family relations. Although in the

film, the American journalist accompanying the military to Vietnam is clearly convinced of the “noble” intervention of the U.S. in the S-shaped country, in reality, the wave of anti-war protests in the U.S. and around the world continued unabated in the following years.

Another detail in *Green Berets* that demonstrates the filmmakers’ superficiality towards the truth and what was really happening in Vietnam, and how the people and the country actually were, is shown in the final scene of the film. At the end of the movie, John Wayne’s character, Colonel Mike Kerby, is seen holding the hand of the boy Hamchunk as they walk along a beach with a classic cinematic sunset backdrop, both heading towards the setting sun. The only issue is that the sun is setting over the East Sea, that is the South China Sea all to the East of mainland Vietnam.

Anti-war films: the incomplete humans of Vietnam

If *Green Berets* is a clearly pro-war and one-dimensional film, then other Hollywood works such as Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) present anti-war viewpoints with somewhat more nuanced perspectives. However, these films still largely view Vietnam from an American perspective. This means that, although these films are more invested in understanding Vietnam than *Green Berets*, which has the sun setting in the East, the Vietnamese people remain ghostly figures moving in a distant, unfamiliar land and speaking a language that no one understands.

For instance, in *Apocalypse Now*, Vietnam serves as a metaphor for the absurdity and brutality of war. The film, based on Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, originally set in the Congo, shifts the story across continents to Vietnam, turning the Vietnamese into the “new tribe of Indians” in this new wilderness. This tendency to view non-white people as interchangeable is not uncommon in Hollywood anti-war films. In fact, in *Full Metal Jacket*, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman even says, “We’ll let the gooks play Indians.”

The “Viet Cong” are portrayed as cruel, ruthless, and entirely dehumanized. The peak of this cruelty is depicted in *The Deer Hunter* with a scene where “Viet Cong” soldiers force American prisoners of war to play Russian roulette. In this game, a bullet is placed in the chamber, the player spins the chamber, and then pulls the trigger while aiming at their own head. Depending on the position of the bullet, the gun may or may not fire. Anyone who chooses to play this game is either barbaric, treating killing as entertainment, or does not value their own life. Clearly, although the film is considered anti-war, it portrays the Vietnamese in the same light as U.S. General Westmoreland, who held policies of indiscriminately killing Vietnamese, bombing southern villages, and burning homes, turning civilians into refugees just so the “Viet Cong” would have nowhere to hide. In Peter Davis's documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974), Westmoreland states, “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.”

In *The Deer Hunter*, the communist soldier is depicted as a savage, constantly shouting “Mau! Mau! Mau! Mau! Mau!...” over and over again, pushing the player to shoot themselves in the head during the Russian roulette game. Similarly, in *Full Metal Jacket*, the only dialogue – if it could be called such – from the communist girl is “Shoot me! Shoot me! Shoot me!...” repeated endlessly. These portrayals suggest that in American films, communists know nothing but shooting and killing, and their language is primitive. As Peter Arnett (1978), an American journalist who spent years as a war correspondent in Vietnam, expressed, “...there was not a single recorded case of Russian roulette,

not in the voluminous files of the Associated Press anyway, nor in my experience either. The central metaphor of the movie is simply a bloody lie." Arnett also referred to the film as "Vietnam's final atrocity."

In Hollywood films, the Vietnamese are portrayed as not fully human. This dehumanization is conveyed through both imagery and sound. In Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, the female "Viet Cong" is essentially depicted as an obscure force, with no clear origin, simply the agent behind deadly gunfire coming from unknown directions. When her image finally appears on screen as she turns around, she is shown as a fierce figure, relentlessly firing her weapon against a fiery backdrop, evoking a hellish, savage scene. Similarly, in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), the "Viet Cong" remain faceless, merely shadowy figures lurking behind trees, bringing death to the American soldiers, each of whom is given a name and a personal history.

The Vietnamese in these films not only lack a complete image, but they also have no voice, or when they do speak, no one understands them. In contrast to the American soldiers who speak perfect English, the Vietnamese either speak as if they were toddlers, or the audience cannot understand what they are saying, whether in English or Vietnamese. In *Full Metal Jacket*, a prostitute in a short miniskirt and a spaghetti-strap top walks from the side to the center of the frame and in front of two American soldiers. Her image is presented in full because as a prostitute, her image is also her community, not only to the diegetic soldiers, but also the spectators, but one thing that is decidedly unfull is her choppy, broken English: "Ah baby, me so horny, me love you long time." Also in this film, another prostitute refuses to sleep with a Black American soldier, and when she speaks Vietnamese to a South Vietnamese soldier/pimp, none of the sounds she makes is intelligible. Even when the Vietnamese character is not an uneducated prostitute, such as the student named Trinh in *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) directed by Barry Levinson, their language is still unintelligible. In *Apocalypse Now*, the French characters speak French with a native accent, and when they speak English, it is completely understandable to the audience. But when Trinh speaks either English or Vietnamese, it is very difficult to understand, as the actress playing Trinh, Chintara Sukapatana, is Thai.

The important point here is that even though these characters are given "speaking roles," understanding what they say is not considered important, which is why Hollywood does not invest in language and accent training for these "local" actors, despite its well-known dedication to perfecting both visuals and speech. Matthew McConaughey lost over 20kg to play an HIV-positive character in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013). Long before the era of Vietnam War films, Hollywood had already placed great emphasis on accent work. Meryl Streep learned a Polish accent for her role as Sophie in *Sophie's Choice* (1982). In 1983, Al Pacino changed his voice to portray Tony Montana, a Cuban immigrant who rises to power in the Miami drug trade in *Scarface*. In *Yentl* (also 1983), Amy Irving played Hadass, a young Jewish woman in a story set in a Polish village in the early 20th century. Irving had to learn Yiddish for her role, as the film included many scenes of Yiddish dialogue. More recently, Charlize Theron, a South African actress, trained to speak with an American accent – specifically, a working-class Florida accent – to portray serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003). Meanwhile, Leonardo DiCaprio learned a South African accent with a dialect coach for his role in *Blood Diamond* (2006). These are just a few examples of Hollywood investing in actors' speech to add realism and authenticity to their characters, which is considered a worthy investment. However, training actors to speak English and Vietnamese in a way that audiences can understand is given very little attention in Hollywood. Whether Vietnamese characters – or actors playing

Vietnamese – are understood doesn't seem to matter. From the perspective of Hollywood filmmakers, whether the characters are Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, or Filipino, they are all just "gooks." The French philosopher Alain Brossat recently wrote about the depiction of Asians in Western films, which he called "colonial films." Ironically, Brossat wrote that Asians will never speak the languages of white people, especially English, properly, because English is seen as a distinctive and pure marker of true civilization ("vrai civilisé"). In this light, Vietnamese characters in American films often speak incomprehensible English because they are not "truly civilized" people. As for Vietnamese, since most viewers don't understand it and likely don't find it important, intelligible Vietnamese pronunciation in films is not a priority for Hollywood, even in films that claim to be "about Vietnam."

In summary, the alienating portrayal of Vietnamese in both image and voice reinforces the idea of the Vietnamese (and, more broadly, non-Western, non-white people) as "the Other," alien and incomprehensible. When Vietnamese people speak Vietnamese (something that is very rare in American films), it is treated as background noise rather than meaningful dialogue. And when conversation between Vietnamese people needs to be meaningful to advance the narrative, it has to take place in English! Surely, no audience watching Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* (1993) would fail to wonder why Vietnamese farmers working in the rice fields are casually chatting with each other in English.

Conclusion

Hollywood war films about Vietnam often reflect a one-sided and oversimplified view of the Vietnamese, whether in pro-war propaganda films or anti-war films. While films like *The Green Berets* present a simplistic and biased portrayal of the Vietnamese with the aim of promoting U.S. military intervention, anti-war films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket* still portray the Vietnamese through an American lens, often reducing them to faint shadows without a full presence, both visually and audibly. In Hollywood films, not only is there a lack of representation of the diversity and richness of Vietnamese culture, but there is also a lack of effort in making Vietnamese characters authentic and multidimensional. From the American perspective, the Vietnamese remain "the Other," unimportant and not worth understanding.

These films exemplify what Edward Said termed in 1977 – Orientalism – a study and representation of the East from a Western perspective, often resulting in biased, discriminatory, and reductive portrayals of Eastern cultures. Consequently, the depiction of the Vietnamese in Hollywood cinema not only reflects a narrow and one-sided view but also reinforces stereotypes and cultural divides between Western and Asian cultures, specifically Vietnamese culture. When Vietnamese people appear in Hollywood films, they often serve merely as a backdrop to highlight American stories, rather than being portrayed as characters with their own personalities and vibrancy (Kinney, 2000; Robinson, 2018).

Some argue that it is understandable for American films to reflect American perspectives and viewpoints. However, as journalist Nathan Robinson (2018) aptly questioned, can war films that overlook the perspectives of those most deeply impacted – the Vietnamese, who continue to face death and destruction decades after the war – truly be considered films about Vietnam? Similarly, historian Christian Appy questioned the 2017 documentary *The Vietnam War*, in which the filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick stated that they made the documentary for the American

soldiers who fought in Vietnam and claimed the film was apolitical. Appy (2017) wrote, “Is it possible to make a film for one side’s combatants and still remain neutral?” [original emphasis]

Recently, Spike Lee’s *Da 5 Bloods*, released in 2020, tells the story of four Black veterans returning to Vietnam to recover the remains of their fallen comrade and to retrieve lost U.S. military gold. The film serves as a political thesis aimed at exposing racial discrimination against people of color in the U.S. With this political agenda, the film understandably makes efforts to show respect for Vietnamese culture and people through intelligible languages and the inclusion of Vietnamese stories. In this respect, the film can be seen as a well-meaning gesture towards the local culture. Nevertheless, in a crucial sense, *Da 5 Bloods* is yet another project where U.S. soldiers return to Vietnam to recount the same old U.S.-centric tale of American tragedy, that is, on the very soil they once destroyed. It simply replaces white Americans with black Americans.

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Full Metal Jacket, 1987, Stanley Kubrick

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