**Born After the Fourth of July:
Post-Vietnam Existentialism in 1990s War Films**

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Just as wars affect the society they spawn from, so, too, must they affect the films that depict them. War films from the 1940s were fundamentally up beat, patriotic propaganda (even from traditionally bleak and cynical studios like Warner Bros., which produced, among others, *Casablanca* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, both in 1943). This deep sense of American nationalism, spurred on, in part by the Cold War, continued on through the 1950s. It was not until the 1960s, with the Kennedy assassination, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the beginning of the Vietnam War, and the deepening racial divides, that American nationalism was left in ruins. The door opened for a new kind of war, one that emphasized self-awareness and rejection of conformity, two hallmarks of existentialism.

While Hollywood attempted to make so-called "anti-war" films prior to the Vietnam conflict, as Russell Earl Shain wrote, "the anti-war message failed because the harm was portrayed as an inevitable effect of a good cause. It was only when the films began to deny the nationalistic morality of war that the anti-war message could survive."[1] The Vietnam War, which was brought into America's homes through newsreels and television, provided this denial of morality. However, it was not until Vietnam was brought to the silver screen that the cinema's anti-war message took full effect.

We see the beginnings of this tone in the 1970 film *M*A *S*H*, directed by Robert Altman, yet it remains, to this day, a curious oddity in the annals of Vietnam films. For one, it is not even set in Vietnam, but rather in an army medical unit during the Korean conflict. However, the timing of its release and its stinging social commentary make it hard to analyze as anything but a thinly disguised anti-Vietnam parable, such as when Louis Giannetti asserts that "Though ostensibly about the

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[1] Russell Earl Shain, *An Analysis of Motion Pictures about War released by the American Film Industry 1930-1970*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 350.

Korean War of the early 1950s, the film was photographed in a TV documentary style that reminded viewers of the Vietnam carnage unreeling each night on the evening news."[2]   Another unique quality about the film is that it is a comedy, a dark, violent comedy of the bleakest and bitterest sort, perhaps, but a profoundly brilliant and funny comedy, nonetheless. This style of humor, foreshadowed splendidly a few years earlier by Stanley Kubrick's nuclear holocaust comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), works in sharp contrast with most war films that would follow.

To this day, just as significantly as it had been in the early 1970s, the narrative form that is the satire, which the film *M*A *S*H* indisputably is, remains a bafflingly safe form of social criticism in the American cinema. This attribute, along with the effective, if obvious, superficiality of the Korean "cover," is probably what allowed the film to be made when it was; a time when the subject of the Vietnam War cut as deeply as it ever has in our social conscience.

To see the sudden and dramatic shift between depictions of war during the Vietnam conflict, one need not look any further back than *The Green Berets* (1968), an insanely patriotic and borderline laughable (in the context of future depictions of Vietnam) film. It starred and was co-directed by John Wayne, perhaps the ultimate image of the patriotic American soldier, one whose time would clearly pass with Vietnam.

With films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986), the implied insanity (the futility of fighting for a greedy, blind-with-pride nation, the magnitude of the individual death and its priority over the good of the whole cause, the sheer horror of the overall experience, etc.) of war became more "clear" and opened the door for a re-interpretation of films depicting other wars. Author John Belton asserted that "Vietnam films tend to undermine the traditional values celebrated in films about World War II and other wars by reversing or obscuring the clear-cut distinctions drawn in earlier films between 'us' and the

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[2] Louis Giannetti*, Understanding Movies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 374.

enemy."[3]   This undermining by Vietnam films perfectly establishes a mentality for a re-examination in the cinema of other wars.

It is of significant interest to note that Vietnam films from *The Deer Hunter* (1978) to *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) dominated the 1970s and 1980s, but when the 1990s hit, Vietnam films largely dropped out of sight. In fact, the last significant Vietnam film was *Born on the Fourth of July*, which was made at the end of the 1980s. In the 1990s, we saw very little about the subject, even from someone like Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone, who has at best skirted the issue in films like *Nixon* (1995) and *JFK* (1991). The closest he came was *Heaven and Earth* (1994), which, interestingly, is a largely forgotten film now.

The biggest film of the 1990s to deal with Vietnam would probably be *Forrest Gump* (1994), which, in part due to Gump's stupidity, at times seems to make light of the war, and, more importantly, the society affected by it. Whatever the sincerity and magnitude of Gump's message, one is left to wonder how much of the movie is really an *anti-war* film.

However, the existentialism that was first brought to the genre with the Vietnam films of the 1970s and 1980s, all decidedly anti-war, still exists today, only the philosophy has transcended itself into other wars. Interestingly, this anti-war existentialism has returned to the once abandoned sub-genre of films about World War II, the so-called "good" war, which had, in some ways, taken on an almost obscenely nostalgic quality. Two recent films examining the Second World War, *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*, both 1998, are clearly children of the post-Vietnam war film movement. This is not only in the increased level of violence depicted, but thematically, as well. Along with the third World War II film from the 1990s to be examined more thoroughly in this text, *The English Patient* (1996), these two films, *Ryan and Line*, as film critic Ty Burr says, view "World War II through the novel filters of post-Vietnam disenchantment."[4]

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[3] John Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture* (St. Louis: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994), 180.

[4] Ty Burr, "Top Guns," *Entertainment Weekly* (1 March 1999): 130.

Just when Hollywood thought that America had tired of war films, it turns out that they may have only tired of Vietnam films. But since their views of war were still fundamentally the same, they would allow Hollywood to reinvent the cinematic visions of other wars, namely, World War II. Hollywood, with clear support from the masses, has taken the ground work of war-time existentialism laid down by Vietnam films and applied them to World War II, thus turning our visions of the "good war" upside down.

One aspect of existentialism is the concept of self awareness, which goes against the "traditional" war films which Belton described as being a place where "The needs of the individual frequently give way to those of the group. The exceptional circumstances of the battlefield force individuals to place their own needs beneath those of the platoon."[5] Existentialism, among other things, essentially signifies a sense of self-awareness within the world they are forced into, and we see this in the modern war film. Just as Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) in *Apocalypse Now* is forced to rebel against the mad, chaotic, and anarchic world he is dropped into by a reckless and irresponsible army, so, too, are the men in *The Thin Red Line*.

In that film, the men quickly realize the suicidal nature of their missions, and the pacifistic officer in charge, Captain Staros (played by Elias Koteas), eventually outright ignores a direct order from Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) to attack a gun nest head-on at the top of a hill. He knows he would be sending the men straight into a wall of machine gunfire, and he refuses, failing to see any plausible justification. This is the sort of patriotic rejection that would not be seen as often- if at all, in the pre-Vietnam era. Later in the film, Colonel Tall dismisses Staros from duty, using the argument, "You're too soft," which is one way to say that he is not strong enough to see beyond the value war places on the individualism, the basis of most existential ideas. Indeed, the entire clash between Tall and Staros is symbolic of the clash between pre- and post-Vietnam images of the individual's place in war. Even in *Saving Private Ryan*, a relatively patriotic film, we see the primary ethical dilemma

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[5] Belton, 165-166.

centering on the concept of the individual (Ryan) versus the group (Hanks' platoon), a topic that was not so blatantly discussed before Vietnam.

Although Ryan is definitely patriotic in a sense (after all, it opens and closes with shots of the American flag, a classic war film icon), it never really answers the question of whether or not it is worth it to save Private Ryan. Pre-Vietnam war films felt the need to rationalize everything (even a relatively anti-war film like *Bridge on the River Kuwait,* 1956) found justification for war when one of its characters runs around at the end, shouting the simple explanation of "Madness!" over and over), but Ryan seems content with the moral ambiguity that has been a hallmark of war films in the post-Vietnam era. This ambiguity probably stems from, again, the emphasis on the existential individual, who is described by *Philosophy* writer Mel Thompson as taking each situation and showing his true nature through his reaction to it.[6] Moral ambiguity is the inevitable result of a world where ethics is defined by each separate situation.

Moral ambiguity is the benchmark of *The English Patient*, where the line is so blurred that we often do not even know if the countries are clear about their positions, let alone the people forced to interact within them. This brings us to a second aspect of existentialism, and that is a rejection of conformity, namely national conformity. In the film, we have a Hungarian, Count Almasy (Ralph Fiennes), who is mistaken for being everything from German to English (hence the ironically-titled, English *Patient*), and the mistakes are not, in any way, meaningless or insignificant. Mistaken identity plays a key figure in the plot of the film and it shows the further emptiness of war, by showing that not everything is about real ideals and beliefs, but rather about something as superficial as nationality. It is hard to imagine a more unpatriotic notion.

This blurring of "bad" and "good" guys, part of which makes *The English Patient* so rich a film, has become very common in post-Vietnam films, and though *Saving Private Ryan* reverts to the old ways of portraying the "bad" guys as pure evil without individualism (a concept that Stephen Spielberg avoided

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[6] Mel Thompson, *Philosophy* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1995), 176.

with his other 1990s World War II film, *Schindler's List* (1993), and Wolfgang Peterson rejected both beautifully and horrifyingly with the 1981 film, *Das Boot), The Thin Red Line* manages to perfectly show both the savagery and the humanity of both the Japanese and the Americans. The result is a film that shows war not as an act of good versus evil, but as an act against being, the fundamental existential concept. This is explored in most post-Vietnam films, including *The English Patient*, where we see people who are not even on the front line having their lives destroyed by World War II, and we see numerous sets of romantic couples permanently torn apart by the effects of war.

All of the ideas about ruined lives go back to a basic convention seen primarily in post-Vietnam war genre films, and that is the myth of domesticity. The one thing that becomes almost universal in war films is the reason men fight, and that is to get back to the comfort, stability, and safety of their homes and loved ones. The post-Vietnam film rejects this as nothing more than an illusion, and, by way of everything from Willard's ex-wife in *Apocalypse Now* to the treatment of Tom Cruise's disabled veteran by people back in America in *Born on the Fourth of July*, shows that this world does not exist; that men, and, subsequently, their families, are permanently scared by war. The death of Ryan's three brothers reaffirms this belief, as does the countless dead, physical and emotional, in *The English Patient*, and the wife of one of the men (Ben Chaplin) in *The Thin Red Line,* who has the audacity to ask for a divorce before he even returns from battle. This convention, commonplace today, would not be present in the pre-Vietnam era. It would have been perceived as too damaging to a nation's, and, subsequently, a soldier's, morale.

Today's war movies are, thanks to the jolt Vietnam provided to American films and society, easy to place in both a historical and philosophical context. The Vietnam films of the late 1970s and 1980s came forth with a bold new vision of war that today's war films; even ones about World War II have embraced. These films are where war is portrayed as ugly, morally ambiguous, downright brutal, and certainly not patriotic. It shows the nation's disenchantment with itself, the myth of the

United States. And, on a deeper level it shows our continued and deepening disenchantment with the act of war itself.

We now, whether consciously or not, understand the fact that war is, *as The Thin Red Line* so blatantly states, in both words and symbols, a crime against existence, thus the call for existentialism. The Vietnam films blazed this path, and now we see these concepts applied to cinematic visions of other wars, as well. As Burr wrote, some war films today are "visions . . . that could never have been realized if Vietnam had still been lying undigested in our cultural craw."[7] After years of ignorance and denial about the pain of Vietnam (and, in a sense, perhaps, all wars whose true face was once hidden by rigid, blinding and socially-conforming patriotism), films like *Coming Home* (1978), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *and Born on the Fourth of July,* allowed us to finally accept it and move on, but not by forgetting the true nature of war. Today's war films, like *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *The English Patient*, show us we have not forgotten this doctrine.

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[7] Burr, 133.

Filmography

Apocalypse Now. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. With Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando. Paramount, 1979.

Born on the Fourth of July . Dir. Oliver Stone. With Tom Cruise, Willem Dafoe. Universal, 1989.

Bridge on the River Kwai. Dir. David Lean. With Alec Guiness, William Holden. Columbia, 1957.

Casablanca. Dir. Michael Curtiz. With Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman. Warner Bros., 1943

Coming Home. Dir. Hal Ashby. With Jon Voight, Jane Fonda. MGM, 1978.

Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Peterson. With Jurgen Prochnow. Columbia, 1981.

The Deer Hunter. Dir. Michael Cimino. With Robert DeNiro, Meryl Streep, John Cazale. Universal, 1978.

Dr. Stranglove. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. With Peter Sellers, George C. Scott, Sterling Hayden. Columbia, 1964

The English Patient. Dir. Anthony Minghella. With Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Kristen Scott-Thomas. Miramax, 1996.

Forrest Gump. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. With Tom Hanks, Galy Sinise. Paramount, 1994.

Full Metal Jacket. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. With Matthew Modine, Lee Ermey, Vincent   D'Onofrio.Warner Bros., 1987.

The Green Berets. Dir. John Wayne. With John Wayne, David Janssen, Jim Hutton. Warner Bros., 1968.

Heaven and Earth. Dir. Oliver Stone. With Tommy Lee Jones.
Hollywood Pictures, 1994.

JFK. Dir. Oliver Stone. With Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee
Jones, Joe Pesci. Warner Bros., 1991.

M*A*S*H. Dir. Robert Altman. With Donald Sutherland,
Elliott Gould, Tom Skerritt. 20thCentury Fox, 1970.

Nixon. Dir. Oliver Stone. With Anthony Hopkins, Joan Allen.
Hollywood Pictures, 1995.

Platoon. Dir. Oliver Stone. With Charlie Sheen, Tom
Berenger, Willem Dafoe. Orion, 1986.

Saving Private Ryan. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. With Tom
Hanks, Tom Sizemore. Dreamworks, 1998.

Schindler's List. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. With Liam Neeson,
Ralph Fiennes. Universal, 1993.

The Thin Red Line. Dir. Terrence Mahck. With Nick Nolte,
Sean Penn. 20th Century Fox, 1998.

Yankee Doodle Dandy. Dir. Michael Curtiz. With James
Cagney. Warner Bros., 1943.