The Masculinist Ideology and War-Combat Films: Reassertion of Masculinity in Hollywood*

Cem KILIÇARSLAN**

Abstract

Masculinity has been a recurring and essential theme in the formation of American cultural ideology. From its very early periods, American culture has developed along a masculinist cultural ideology that basically serves to maintain a conservative status quo, certain power relationships and a war-like sentiment for imperialistic ends. Various American philosophers, politicians and artists have contributed to the formation of such a manly perception of life. This ideology considers the act of war as a proving ground for masculinity, i.e. a test by which the manliness of American society is tested and as a chance to bring vitality to American life. Wars are considered to be ritualistic acts that turn boys into men and the warrior image is presented as the national hero in many instances of life, most notably in Hollywood films. War-combat films made in Hollywood retain the basic characteristics of this ideology and support it by providing legitimization through its filmic narratives. Interestingly, even seemingly anti-war films serve this ideology through overt and covert layers of meaning. An analysis of Hollywood war-combat films made in the post-Vietnam War period reveals that even films with obvious anti-war messages propagate a certain masculinist ideology through various strategies employed by the filmmakers. Among these strategies are the mythification of war-combat, ritualistic and transformative presentations of the act of killing, the father-son relationship and families formed by soldiers within war atmosphere. An analysis made among the most prominent representatives of the war-combat genre demonstrates how these films use these strategies to revert the overt message and latently continue to support the conservative cultural ideology that shows wars as just, inevitable and test grounds for manliness. The films analyzed are *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979-2001), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Keywords: masculinity, America, Hollywood, ideology, war

Öz

Erkeklik teması Amerikan kültürel ideolojisinin oluşumunda devamlı tekrarlanan temel öğelerden birisi olagelmiştir. Ortaya çıkışından itibaren, Amerikan kültürü esasen erkeklik teması etrafında dönen ve esas amacı muhafazakar bir statükonun ve bazı güç ilişkilerinin korunması ve emperyalist amaçlara hizmet için savaş taraftarı bir anlayışın sürdürülmesi olan bir kültürel ideoloji çerçevesinde gelişmiştir. Bir çok Amerikalı düşünür, siyasetçi ve sanatçı da hayatın tamamen erkeklik çerçevesinde anlaşılması üzerine kurulu bu oluşuma katkıda bulunmuşlardır. Bu ideoloji, savaş eylemini erkekliğin ispatı için bir ortam, yani Amerikan toplumunun yeterince erkekçe davranıp davranmadığının sınandığı bir eylem ve Amerikan toplumuna taze hayat sağlamak için bir fırsat olarak görmektedir. Savaşlar, oğlan çocuklarını tam birer erkeğe döndürecek ritüeller ve savaşçı imgesi de başta Hollywood filmleri olmak üzere hayatın bir çok kesiminde milli kahraman ideali için örnek olarak gösterilmektedir. Hollywood tarafından yapılan savaş filmleri bu ideolojinin temel öğelerini barındırır ve film ortamının kendine ait özelliklerini kullanarak bu ideolojiye meşruiyet kazandırırlar. Asıl ilginç olan, görünüşte savaş karşıtı gibi görünen filmler dahi açık ya da örtülü anlam katmanları sayesinde bu ideolojiye hizmet ederler. Vietnam Savaşı sonrası dönemde çekilmiş Hollywood savaş filmlerinden yapılan bir seçkinin incelemesi, açıkça savaş karşıtı mesajlar barındıran bu filmlerin film yapımcılarının kullandığı çeşitli stratejiler sayesinde geçerli erkeklik ideolojisinin yeniden üretilmesine hizmet ettiklerini açığa vurmaktadır. Bu stratejiler arasında savaş ortamının mitleştirilme yoluyla yüceltilmesi, öldürme eyleminin dinsel-ritüel bir biçimde ve dönüştürücü niteliklere sahip bir eylem olarak sunulması ve savaş ortamında erkekler arasında kurulan baba-oğul ilişkileri ve aile oluşumu sayılabilir. Savaş türünden filmler arasında yapılan bir seçki, bu filmlerin bu stratejiler ile savaşları adil, kaçınılmaz ve erkekliğin ispat ortamları olarak gören muhafazakar bir kültürel ideolojiye nasıl hizmet etmekte olduklarını göstermektedir. Bu çalışma kapsamında incelenen filmler şunlardır: *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979-2001), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) ve *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Anahtar sözcükler: erkeklik teması, Amerika, Hollwood, ideoji, savaş

Introduction

Masculinity in particular and patriarchy in general are represented in films in manifold ways. Since masculinity is best observable in male dominated environments, i.e. military environments and war films, such filmic narratives offer better opportunities to analyze an ideological masculinist discourse.[1] Such a masculinist discourse manifests itself in the filmic narratives through both overt and covert layers of meaning. These overt and covert layers together form a comprehensive ideology of masculinity which subscribes to the patriarchal and conservative status quo and its maintenance when confronted by outer

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1   The field of gender studies acknowledges the existence of "multiple masculinities" as defined in R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) and the specific type of ideology discussed in this study corresponds to his definition of "hegemonic masculinity." Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a certain form of socially constructed masculinity which aims to exert dominance over women, other men and social groups in general (Connell, 1995, 1998). While there are parallelisms between Connell's term and the ideological cultural ideology as defined here, the term "American cultural ideology" is preferable for a discussion of Hollywood war-combat films as it is a broader concept with other components such as religion. Otherwise, it must be noted that the basic tenets of hegemonic masculinity and American cultural ideology are in common while the latter corresponds to a cultural-historical development of the former in the USA.

forces and other competing agents. Employed intentionally or unintentionally by the filmmakers, the theme of masculinity and related concepts work collectively to create a highly complicated ideological discourse which locates masculinity and manliness at the center of a social structure based on male hegemony, which on a broader scale, serves to create an American cultural ideology. This ideology, as manifested through war-combat films, facilitates the maintenance of an imperialist political and cultural discourse and helps justify American military interventions in different parts of the world. An analysis of a selection of Hollywood war-combat films demonstrates that, regardless of their outright message, i.e. pro or anti war, these films all contribute to the creation, maintenance and furtherance of a masculinist cultural ideology.

Masculinity, War and American Culture

Masculinity, and its various associations with militarism, has been a significant component in the formation of an American cultural ideology. Almost all of the "Founding Fathers" of the country were either warriors or affiliated with the military. It was Alexis de Tocqueville who first mentioned the affinity between the newly founded American Republic and a spirit of manliness (Newel, 2000, p. 411). The poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, through his opinions on individualism, power and war, further contributed to the formation of a spirit of manliness. Indeed, most of the intellectual legitimization of the American conquest of the West--and then the rest of the world--can be traced back to Emerson. His exaltation of the American frontier as a great mechanism which creates "men" through the conquest and subjugation of "savages" laid the moralistic groundwork of many future American imperialistic ventures. For him, the westward movement and the conquest of new lands was the source of morality and dynamism for the American society (Porte, 1982, p. 426). For Emerson, conquest was desirable as "land, labor, and the wilderness signify unlimited possibilities and unprecedented opportunities for moral development" (West, 1989, p. 14). The exaltation of the land to be conquered, i.e. "the frontierization," and the glorification of war and fighting were indeed different appearances of the same basic ideology Emerson embodied; it served the realization of the agenda of a capitalist and imperialist elite. Cornel West explains how the westward expansion became the model for further imperialistic projects:

> Imperial conquest and enslavement of New World "savages," along with the resulting cheap land, labor, and surplus capital, serve as the "invisible" basis for American fascination with power, vision, and newness. This internal imperialism, which serves as an antidote for intense class, racial, ethnic, and religious antagonisms within the metropolis, both enables and constrains the Utopian value of migration and mobility in America. (1989, p. 18)

Thus, war and expansion was justified for the elite, at least in the political and economical sense; waging and winning war was necessary for the maintenance of power relations. The only remaining problem was how this justification would be carried out. At this stage, the ideology of masculinity --or "the cult of manliness"--came into the picture and it had a crucial function since it facilitated the creation of "valid excuses" for any possible war. Furthermore, it associated manhood with war and fighting and

thus any American intervention, regardless of its logical credibility, could be legitimized without further questioning. War, this ideology stated, was an extension and realization of manhood and other than being inevitable, it was necessary because it helped men reach maturity. That is why, various American philosophers who lived in the 19th century found a correlation between war and manliness: For them, war was beautiful because it enriched and reinvigorated man.

Among the American philosophers who naturalized a war-like sentiment and associated it with masculinity, Emerson was again the first prominent figure who described the beauty of war. At certain points, his advocacy reached the degree of the eroticization of war; "Sometimes," he said, "gunpowder smells good" (West, 1989, Note 33) and in his 1838 speech "War," added "War educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man" (Cadava, 1997, p. 27). Years later, another American thinker, William James confirmed, "The beauty of war is that it is so congruous with ordinary human nature" (James Jr., 1920, p. 208-9). In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James extended his argument, stating that "War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*" (Conkin, 1968, p. 45) and it was a part of man's nature, "We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank this cruel history" (1968, p. 45). For these philosophers, war called for the rebirth of masculinity which might otherwise have been weakened during times of peace (Cotkin, 1995, p. 44-5). In the world of politics, the president Theodore Roosevelt appears to be the most prominent manifestation and ideologue of such a war-like sentiment. Roosevelt, "an arch jingoist imperialist" (Conkin, 1968, p. 45), stressed the importance of "a vigorous sense of citizenship and meritocracy" (Newell, 2000, p. 220). In his addresses to the American youth, Roosevelt called for a manly citizenship; "I want to see you game, boys; I want to see you brave and manly" (2000, p. 221).

Manliness dominated the political discourse of the country in the later periods as well. Before becoming president, in his 1952 speech "Were We Truly Men?" John F. Kennedy gave a definition of being a man; "[W]ere we truly man of courage, with the courage to stand up to one's enemies, and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's associates, the courage to resist public pressure as well as private greed?" (Newell, 2000, p. 429). Owing to the American involvement in Vietnam, the issues of war and masculinity became more significant especially in the 1960s. The dominant discourse of the day stated that developments such as civil rights and feminist movements were actually pacifying the American society which had essentially been active and manly. To counter this sentiment, after bombing Vietnam, Lyndon B. Johnson summarized the whole experience through his own interpretation; "I did not only screw Ho Chi Minh. I also cut his pecker off" (Beisel, 1984, p. 4). According to Johnson, those who oppose the war are not considered man at all; "[They have] to squat to piss" (Steinberg, 1996, p. 99). As can be seen in these statements and examples, throughout its history, American culture has had a deep affinity with the concepts of masculinity and war. In other words, the issue of manliness is an integral part of American culture and "the heroic image of an achieved manhood" is "deeply ingrained in the American male psyche" (Gilmore, 1990, p. 20). These concepts have surfaced quite frequently in political and popular discourse.

Therefore, from the perspective of the American cultural ideology, war is necessary and inevitable; as the courage to go to war is a sign of manliness, war itself is an opportunity and excuse for the practice and fulfillment of manliness. War is seen as a ritual, a sort of religious or magical experience that will convert boys into full men (Goldstein, 2001, p. 263-4). Seymour Martin Lipset explains the inner workings of such an ideology and observes that Americans have a distinctive form of belief in the moralization and justification of a war-like spirit;

> Support for a war is as moralistic as resistance to it. To endorse a war and call on people to kill others and die for the country, Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side against Satan—for morality, against evil. The United States primarily goes to war against evil, not, in its self-perception, to defend material interests. And comparative public opinion data reveal that Americans are more patriotic ("proud to be an American") and more willing to fight if their country goes to war than citizens of the thirty or so other countries polled by Gallup. (1996, p. 20)

In order for such a cultural ideology to exist and act, the military functions as the medium where transformations of young men into warriors take place. In the army, and especially during basic military training, young men are taught to be real men by fighting and killing. To make warriors out of young men, the officers in the military employ techniques such as absolute submission and physical endurance. Those who cannot fulfill the expected tasks are humiliated and are called names associated with women or homosexuals, such as "faggot," "pussy," or "girl," a practice which makes it clear that "not becoming a soldier mean[s] not being a man" (Cock, 1991, p. 59-60). In other words, a young man is instructed, by theory and action, "to deny all that is 'feminine' and 'soft' in himself" (1991, p. 60). Most importantly, military training equates masculinity with violence and killing (Goldstein, 2001, p. 264), and masculine violence is exalted and turned into a cult, with the pretext that the army is training these men for wars in life. For such a conversion, the military developed certain methods while preparing the soldiers for Vietnam:

> The goal became not to just adapt to combat, but to desensitize the soldiers far enough to where they wouldn't think twice about killing a soldier on the other side. The second thing they did was draft more younger males, preferring them over men who had already formed clear value judgments and ethics. The US military knew that getting them younger and more immature allowed them to mold these men to their liking. (Carkin, 1999, p. 4)

The relationship between the ideology of masculinity and war is mutual; while the ideology of masculinity calls for wars, wars in return reinforce the ideology of masculinity. Wars create men who go through a process of transformation and men with war experiences are seen as heroes and figures to be envied in their cultures, thus becoming role models for the propaganda of war. As Barbara Ehrenreich's analysis concludes, in almost all human societies, "the warrior usually still holds pride of place as a masculine ideal—the hero of epic tales and, in our own time, the star of Hollywood action movies" (1983, p. 131).

Hollywood and War

Hollywood films, and particularly war and combat films, depict a masculinist framework which has greater implications than being mere portrayals of manliness. The most visible versions of masculinist and patriarchal messages are seen in war-combat films which construct images of war inscribed by the codes of masculinity as defined by the patriarchal culture. These messages again might appear in the form of outright representations and characterizations or hidden and subliminal manifestations of an ideology whose primary aim is to maintain a social structure based on male leadership, hegemony and privilege. Instead of questioning the possibility of a cultural and social system based on gender equality, Hollywood films attempt to reinstate the patriarchal and male-centered socio-cultural structure.

Hollywood's contribution to the American war effort is by no means a new development. Throughout American history, Hollywood was asked by the US Government in various occasions to extend its support for present military conflicts (Slocum, 2000, p. 14). Thus, cinematic skills began to be used for war effort. Instead of presenting the war in its full cruelty, Hollywood filmmakers used their skills "to contain these shocking images in formulaic narratives with upbeat or at least reaffirming endings" (2000, p. 14). Other than presenting war imagery in more controlled and acceptable forms for the public, Hollywood also supported a cultural ideology of war-mindedness in various ways. While appearing to be critical of the government's policies and authority at times, in essence, Hollywood filmmaking has always remained on a path aligned with the cultural ideology and national interest (Mellen, 1977, p. 248). The post-World War II Hollywood war films were characterized by this patriotic discourse. With the emergence of communist threat, Hollywood films began to depict clearly identifiable enemies in a period when the differentiation between "us" and "them" was crucial. Visualization of masculinity paralleled the development; American protagonists became more masculine and behaved in more manly, firm, righteous and stable ways.

However, as J. William Gibson states, the American defeat in Vietnam created such a serious crisis in the American identity –and particularly in the male identity– that these old style patriotic films did no longer have any credibility (1994, p. 7). During the Vietnam War, the dominant images of war and the heroic warrior created by World War II films were rejected by most soldiers in Vietnam. These soldiers, Gibson states, used "John Wayne" as a term of mockery and ridicule to describe a soldier who did a foolishly heroic act (1994, p. 8). In Vietnam, concepts such as heroism, patriotism and bravery were no longer valid. The year 1978 marks a turning point for Vietnam War films. With the release of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the American public for the first time came to grips with the reality of the Vietnam War. The release of *Apocalypse Now* next year –1979– and its significant critical and commercial success showed that, from this point on, the success of a Vietnam War film was dependent on its depicting an anti-war stance. The coming of *Full Metal Jacket* in 1986, *Platoon* in 1987, and *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1989 confirmed the phenomenon that the American public wanted to see the defeat in Vietnam and that from the intellectual perspective a war film was good only if it had an anti-war message. As Michael Cimino once stated, "Any good picture about war has to be anti-war" (Allan

2002:8). Therefore, these films emptied war from the elements, such as bravery, sacrifice and heroism, which it had traditionally been associated with. Nevertheless, these films, behind their anti-war façade, posed another ideological problem; they were, in more sinister ways, still perpetuating the masculinist ideology. The cultural ideology was being reinforced through the application of masculinity in these films.

Generally speaking, Hollywood creates and maintains the basic assumptions and codes of the masculinist cultural ideology in various ways. Among many, the most notable strategies Hollywood uses are the mythification and spiritualization of war and combat, spiritual transformation through a ritualistic act of killing, the display of the military world as a family of fathers and sons, and the presentation of war as a medium between good versus evil. Francois Truffaut once observed that all war films, however anti-war their rhetoric, promote a vicarious desire in the viewer to be a brave soldier in battle (Sarris, 2002, p. 25). Similarly, certain war films present an image of war which is still in conformity with the traditional ideology of masculinity, since the explicit anti-war message is negated by the latent manifestations of masculinity and manliness. This glorified depiction of the battlefield and combat transforms the war experience depicted on the screen into a spiritual experience on the side of the spectator. Even the issue of defeat is presented as an experience which will further contribute to the sanctification of the war experience. Regardless of the type of experience of war, both war itself and the warrior image is exalted and presented in visual form as an equivalent of the traditional myths with almost supernatural or transcendent values and meanings. A selection among the post-Vietnam era examples of war-combat films demonstrates how these strategies are put into practice.

The Deer Hunter and *Apocalypse Now*: The Mythification of War

As Bill Nichols pointed out, the narrative in Vietnam War films "approaches closer to myth than to history" (1981:76). *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979, *Redux* 2001) present a "constructed" and mythified version of the Vietnam War based on individual perspective and memory. Such Vietnam narratives try to rewrite the history from the perspectives of the present and they regenerate versions of this past war according to the requirements of the day. It is true that this mythopoetic approach creates fine cinematic examples. Yet, it also blurs the distinction between the complex reality of the war with a Puritanical dualistic reality created for pragmatic purposes. Francis Ford Coppola's boastful statement "*Apocalypse Now* is not a movie about Vietnam. My movie *is* Vietnam," (Thomson, 2001, p. 24) illustrates this fact in the best manner. In order to reconstruct the Vietnam experience, these films

> seek to displace the complexities of social experience with a deeper 'essential' meaning drawn from popular mythology with, for example, the Vietnamese replacing the Indian as mysterious "Other," and exorcism through the mythic quest. What distinguishes these films is the degree of aesthetic `excess' employed to formalise and ritualise the trauma of confrontation between white civilisation and the alien Other. (NFVLS, 2002, p. 7)

The mythologizing of the Vietnam War and the consecration of the combat atmosphere create an exotic and even eroticized perception of war and present it to the spectator as a spiritual experience. By moving the war to the level of "nightmare" these films carry it to a mystical and even religious dimension. The hellish war of the films might be a place to run away from, but it also offers redemption. Despite all negative description of the war, the overt and covert meanings still construct an attractive image of the military and war.

A highly conservative film, *The Deer Hunter* describes the Vietnam experience of a group of three young men who represent the second generation of a Ukrainian Orthodox community in a small industrial town in Pennsylvania. The three young men Michael, Steven and Nick are about to leave their town for the Vietnam War and Steven is going to get married before they leave. The film seems to make the commentary that, despite their Eastern Orthodox origins, these people have completely been Americanized as can be understood from their American daily rituals; the boys meet at pool halls, drink beer, talk about girls and war, and go hunting. This initial depiction of the community and the final scene of the film support the view that the film focuses on the effects of the Vietnam War on America in general and the minorities and small town in particular.

The film's ideological dimension lies in its handling of the war and the depiction of the protagonist Michael. The film does not deal with the subject of what America did to Vietnam; it deals with what the Vietnam experience did to America. Also, the film does not offer a commentary on or an alternative interpretation of the war, nor does it state that American intervention in Vietnam was unjust. In its populist approach, the film is actually about the championing of the American values and small town life against a totally unknown and alien world. Instead of representing the complexity of the Vietnam experience, the film presents a dualistic perception of the world and it makes no commentary outside its own sphere. At this point, the film's ideological stance becomes evident; it makes generalizations through such spatial limitations. Apart from the scenes in Vietnam, which are rather stereotypical or unreal, the whole setting is the small town America and the mountains around it. America as symbolized by -or reduced to- the small town world is a sort of safe haven, a quasi-paradise. The characters do not seem to fit in any other place and wish to come back to their town as quickly as possible.

The filmmakers offer a parallelism between the act of hunting on American mountains and fighting in Vietnam jungles. As the title suggests, hunting is a kind of metaphor which aims at establishing a commentary on the act of killing. The image of the hunters with their rifles in their hands resembles the image of the early colonial hunters and frontiersmen who wandered on the same mountains. The central character in the film is Michael Vronsky, who serves both as a catalyst among the group and a spiritual leader. As Ryan observes, Michael "is a metaphor for a new leader, one who heals wounds done to the community" and adds;

> [Michael] rises above his context and seems to acquire a meaning that
> transcends the material world. He is often associated with high mountains
> and with a shamanic knowledge that seems almost spiritual. Other characters
> in the film are subordinated to his higher power. . . . Moreover, Michael is
> elevated above others. . . . He is idealized. (1989, p. 118)

Presented as the archetypal American hero, Michael is shown hunting on his own, unlike the others, who either forget their boots or make noise. His self-sufficiency and determination to kill, along with the metaphor of hunting and the moment of killing the deer, are intentional representations of masculinity. Thus, the film uses hunting and other similar masculine rituals to create a covert layer of meaning which suggests that being able to kill is the measure of being a man. The Russian roulette scenes taking place in Vietnam, though historically inaccurate, further suggest that manhood is tested in such rituals where one should be able to pull the trigger and prove that he is not afraid to die.

At the end of the war, Nick is dead, Steven is crippled and Michael is spiritually wounded and emasculated. Following his return, Michael realizes that he is not able to kill deer anymore. While the incident seems to portray a new Michael transformed by the Vietnam war into a more humane person, this meaning is eroded once it is revealed that he is not able to get into sexual relationship with women either. In another sense, the war had a castrating effect on the hero and took away his masculinity. The veterans and, hence the USA, not only lose their lives and honor in Vietnam, they also lose their manhood. Michael is able to return to the mountains and remains as a war hero; the hunter who does not kill. Yet, his maturation does not manifest wisdom but confusion and trauma. The film concludes "We are no longer full men" and this complicated and even paradoxical theme reinforces the feeling of victimization and becomes an excuse for practices of masculinity. In other words, the film, by depicting pacified males, also calls for a restoration of masculinity. The mythical hero might have been wounded; yet, he sets examples for other males in his transformation. The film does not create males who do not prefer to go hunting or to war. In contrast, through the action of killing, it provides the society with ritualistic moments of wounding and victimization. The film ends with the community singing "America, Sweet Home." Thus, the losses of America as symbolized by Steven's missing legs, Michael's crippled masculinity and Nick's death are compensated by the restoration of the communal spirit. The inversion of reality and the victimization of the American male by the apparently-evil and inhuman Vietnamese constitute one of the primary ideological dimensions of the film.

Similarly, *Apocalypse Now* presents an account of Vietnam War that takes place along a mythological journey. Based upon Joseph Conrad's story "Heart of Darkness" (1898), the film is shaped in the form of a journey on a river. The film's plot revolves around the battle-weary Captain Willard, who is on a secret upriver mission to find and execute the renegade Colonel Kurtz, who has reverted to a state of murderous and mystical insanity. Willard is informed by his superiors that Kurtz has established a kind of primitive kingdom in the depths of the jungle. In a state of insanity, he recites Western classics and it seems as if he has found his own version of the meaning of life; he believes that horror lies at the center of human existence. Kurtz is mystified by the violence he has witnessed in the war and tries to reproduce this horror in the alternative community he has established. The film's closing statements "Horror, the horror," with the visual accompaniment of classics scattered on the floor, reveal that Kurtz is actually commenting on the history of the Western civilization.

While the film's title refers to the Biblical apocalypse, which seems to suggest that Vietnam is hell for America, the story is more like the *Pilgrim's Progress* into the

depths of an infernal place, i.e. a mythical journey of awakening and transformation. The opening scene, accompanied by The Doors song "This is the End" shows a whole forest burning after the napalm bombing by American forces. Thus, the graphic excellence of the opening scene foreshadows the final scene and the thematic message of the film. As is the case in the battle between good and evil (America and the communistic Vietnam), the Vietnam War is the final battle for America; it signifies the end of glorious times.

The film's message about war is revealed in a rambling speech by Kurtz at the end of *Apocalypse Now,* where he describes an atrocity, which bears no relation to any known incident. He tells Willard that the Northern Vietnamese soldiers hacked off the arms of children vaccinated against polio by the humanitarian Americans, because, instead of resisting the Americans, these people had let their children be vaccinated. Seeing the pile of cut arms in the center of the village, Kurtz comes to the realization of the horror and the "beauty" of this violence. He is stigmatized by the power and beauty of horror war creates: "I thought: 'My God, the genius of that. The will to do that. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realized they were stronger than we" (Coppola, 1979).

This revelation has two functions for the film's ideological and racist message. Other than depicting the Viet-Cong as psychopaths who can easily mutilate children for their political goals, this made-up story offers the traditional right-wing discourse about why the U.S. couldn't win in Vietnam; Americans didn't have the stomach for a real war. The enemy was too violent and Americans were too civilized to win against such a primitive enemy. This reversion of truth, reinforced by such fabricated stories, creates an image of the war which resembles a psychedelic journey into the depths of the human psyche. The overt level of the film, through this metaphor of journey, demonstrates that war is hell and madness, and it turns man to his visceral status. The latent layer, on the other hand, presents this transformation in a mystical and attractive manner. Therefore, the difference between civilization and primitivism is blurred and in many cases it is possible to say that the film actually glorifies war by giving it such mystical qualities. While it is possible to conclude that the film is an attempt to create a narrative that depicts the whole Vietnam experience as total insanity, the film's pragmatic ideology and opportunism resides in its multiple meanings.

In its presentation of a Eurocentric perception of the world contrasted against a primitive Vietnam, the film does not delve into the qualities of the primitive cultures it depicts stereotypically. *Apocalypse Now* reduces man to the level of a primitive killer who only wants to survive. Stripped from all civilized elements, Willard goes through a transformation and becomes a primitive man himself. Willard's killing Kurtz in his temple in the final scene is thus a ritual killing, as can be understood from the coincidental sacrifice of a cow outside the temple. The film presents a parallelism between the modern and the primitive societies, and ends with the message that at the bottom of everything, there is horror. Technical and visual sophistication of Hollywood filmmaking results in a completely psychedelic style with a conservative discourse; man does not change, as Kurtz's reading of T.S. Eliot and other classics shows. Nevertheless, the exaltation of the moment of death as a sacrificial ritual overweighs the intellectual commentary on the meaning of civilization as suggested by the final scene. Furthermore, the act of killing not

only brings the end of Kurtz's alternative civilization but also is a kind of pseudo-victory on the part of civilization (America). While the film appears to depict the meaninglessness and insanity of war, it also ends with a reassertion of masculinity and America's victory, as, however ironical it might seem, America wins this particular war with the collapse of Kurtz' civilization.

The film's depiction of the Vietnamese is another aspect where the masculinist ideology creates a version of "the other" for its own purposes. The Vietnamese primitives are barbarous and cannibalistic. The film, through its epic journey, uses the Vietnam War only as a background to comment on the Western civilization, not as a chance to explore the other side's perspective. Furthermore, the film's presentation of the sacrifice of life, be it animal or human life, seems more in line with the interpretation that killing is necessary for the nurturing of civilization. The ambiguous end presents Americans as fully transformed into the primitive cultures they have been trying to kill. Yet, the film does not present a transformation on the side of the Vietnamese. They are presented as much more primitive–as can be seen in their using spears and arrows--and inhuman–as the cannibalistic and barbarous portrayal of their village shows. The war is presented as a mythical journey for Willard, which ends with his destruction of the ultimate criticism of the culture he belongs to.

Thus, these two films, behind their mythopoetic approach, try to reconstruct the historical Vietnam experience through an exalted representation of the "warrior male" image. However anti-war their message might seem, the war experience presented in a mythical form has the special charm that presents it not only as hell but also as a ground of redemption.

Platoon and *Full Metal Jacket*: Transformation and Ritual

The opening scene of *Platoon* (1986) is very similar to the final scene of *The Deer Hunter*. The film opens with a lament-like tone and the movement of the camera among trees and other visual elements help create a funereal mood. Thus, the film makes its first commentary on the Vietnam War; grief and mournfulness about the war and a lost cause. Starting in the form of a requiem, the film's atmosphere slowly turns into a religious tale of soul searching in which all the soldiers of the platoon, including the protagonist, are presented as a band of sinners.

The protagonist Chris finds himself in a platoon split between two more experienced soldiers, Elias and Barnes. As the plot develops, it becomes evident that the film is not about the confrontation with the enemy; the film mostly depicts the relationship of American soldiers and soon the whole story takes the shape of a war among American soldiers; it is a civil war not a war against the Vietnamese. As Chris' voice-over shows; "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves - and the enemy was in us" (Kopelson, 1986). The film, through Chris' dilemma, offers a clash between two different value systems conflicting within American culture. Chris' own commentary of the split between the two soldiers is illuminating both in terms of its content and the mythfication of the conflict as *Platoon* depicts an account of the Vietnam War which Americans see just like the epic wars in their history books which transform men; "It was from these

roots that the essential conflict between Elias and Barnes grew in my mind. *Two* gods. Two different views of the war. The angry Achilles versus the conscience-stricken Hector fighting for a lost cause on the dusty plains of Troy" (Kopelson, 1986). Apart from the direct use of metaphors, the Vietnam conflict is thus reduced to an oversimplified white versus black and good versus evil dichotomy by the filmmakers as well. Oliver Stone's reductionist attitude presents the audience a protagonist who would be forced to make a choice between the two options. The choice will not only yield a moral outcome but also turn Chris into a full man who now is able to act.

> And I would act as Ishmael, the observer, caught between those two giant forces. At first a watcher. Then *forced* to act - to take responsibility and a moral stand. And in the process to grow to a manhood I'd never dreamed I'd have to grow to. To a place where in order to go on existing I'd have to shed the innocence and accept the evil the Homeric gods had thrown out into the world. To be both good and evil. To move from this East Coast social product to a more visceral manhood, where I finally felt the war not only in my head, but in my gut and soul. (Kopelson, 1986)

Hence, Chris's transformation is from a state of passivity to one of action and full manhood. It was necessary for Chris to take that step and act, i.e. kill. The chance takes place with his killing Barnes, who caused the death of Elias in the film's climactic scene, where Elias dies mimicking the crucified posture of Jesus Christ, thus becoming Stone's sacrificial hero of the American intellectual in an unjust war. Chris' seeking vengeance will be his test of manhood but, ironically and miraculously, Barnes is wounded by an American aircraft when he is about to kill Chris as well. Chris kills the wounded Barnes, symbolically leaving his intellectual innocence behind and becoming a full soldier. By killing Barnes, one of his father figures, he goes through a transformation. His killing of his evil side, the film asserts, results in the completion of his search for manhood. Now, just like Michael in *The Deer Hunter*, he has completed his ritual cycle. To further support this miraculous and mythical moment, the first thing Chris sees when he opens his eyes is a deer inside the forest. Elias, before he was killed, had said that if he comes back to life once more, he would like to come as a deer. Elias, who was crucified, is resurrected and Chris is now a full man.

The film puts a naïve American against the backdrop of Vietnam War and by employing mythological language and iconography attempts at commenting on a cultural problem within American culture. Nevertheless, while doing so, it also presents a highly glorified image of war as a place where supernatural transformations take place. In this sense, Stone's vision of war is not different from Emerson's or James', in that his characters are put into situations where they are in "swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man" (Cadava, 1997, p. 27). The problem is solved through the killing of the evil while the naïve intellectual is transformed into a full man. Therefore, beneath the professed intellectual conflict, the film also presents a mythified and ritualized transformative process on the part of the individual, reinstating the masculinist cultural ideology and presenting a still romantic image of war.

On the surface level, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) appears to be a film with a very strong anti-war message. However, *Full Metal Jacket* conceals a very strong masculinist discourse, which it claims to be working against. The film, despite its professed condemnation and critique of militarism, constructs and reestablishes a masculinist discourse through the reversal of certain themes, especially in its climactic final scene. While criticizing an aggressive masculinity, the film again ritualizes the act of killing and depicts the transformation of the protagonist into full manhood through "the kill."

The film consists of three sections, each of which represents a stage on the path of becoming a full man. In the first stage, the soldiers are at the boot camp, where they are treated like girls by their superiors, always in submissive positions and are sexually and physically insulted and abused. Apart from the sexually humiliating treatment, they are told that they will all be "killers" in time. In the world of the military, being a man is associated with being able to kill. However, this transformation is not a simple mechanical process, as the protagonist Private Joker declares, "The Marine Corps does not want robots. It wants killers. The Marine Corps wants to build indestructible men, men without fear" (Kubrick, 1987). The boot camp rituals do not aim at killing all these soldiers' feelings; on the contrary, these feelings, especially their passions, are redirected using their "killer instincts."

Sexual symbolism is highly visible and verbal; from the first day on, their rifles are referred to as sexual organs, but interestingly, these weapons have the qualities of both female and male sexual organs. The soldiers are "erotically conjoined, wed to, a machinic icon of phallic sexuality, yet one that is named and embraced as a girl" (Rambuss, 1999, p. 102). Thus, their rifles become the extension of their masculinity, both as the tool and the target of their sex, as Sergeant Hartman orders, "This is the only pussy you are going to get" (Kubrick, 1987). While the first stage depicts the soldiers as being sexually abused or raped by the superiors, at least verbally, the second stage, which takes place in Vietnam, is where they can enjoy their own masculinity with their own rifles and sexual organs. The frequent appearance of Asian prostitutes in Saigon further demonstrates that the whole war has a sexual connotation, "By introducing us to Vietnam through an encounter with a prostitute, and then replaying that scene over again later in the narrative, . . . ," *Full Metal Jacket* depicts Vietnam as a playground as well as a battleground for the Americans" (Rambuss, 1999, p. 101).

The final scene, where three soldiers of the platoon are killed by a Vietnamese sniper girl, reveals the film's sexual –and intentionally Freudian– message. Since it is possible to interpret the act of killing and gun-using as metaphors of sexual intercourse, i.e. a penetration into someone else's body, the girl holding the gun poses a double threat to the masculine psyche. Again the protagonist is caught within the dilemma between his humanitarian principles and the reality of war and has to kill the wounded girl to seek revenge of his dead friends. Kubrick, by employing a female Vietnamese character, achieves more than one aim. On one level, the kill is directed towards a female figure that represents Vietnam. On a deeper level, the kill is associated with sexual intercourse. A blending of both layers makes it obvious that Joker's killing the girl will also be his step into manhood. He will achieve his first kill, which in one sense is the end of his virginity. The girl's body is surrounded with soldiers in a circle with their rifles pointing at her.

> [T]he scene itself is visually composed so as to evoke a gang rape. "Hard core, man. Fucking hard core," one of the men pronounces over the girl's prone body. His epitaph renders this [one of] the film's group-sex scenes, and the only one for the Marines, trained from boot camp to eroticize death, to achieve some form of consummation. (Rambuss, 1999, p. 104)

Thus, despite his wearing the helmet with the peace sign on, Joker is initiated into manhood by his act of killing. While becoming a full man by killing the girl, he betrays his humanistic principles but at the same time knows and accepts that, in order to be complete, one has to do the killing.

As it is seen, both *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* reach a climax with "the kill" and in both films, the protagonist kills the opponent, only because the "conditions of war leads him to kill." Yet, faced with the enemy in this moment of truth, he does it intentionally, as a choice. Thus, while the filmmakers were focusing on the theme of loss of innocence, the films, with both overt and covert layers of meaning, render a narrative, which in its complexity, serves to create a climactic moment which brings the spectator to accept the killing. In both cases, the scenes in which "the kill" takes place are depicted with great cinematic mastery. Using slow-motion technique, loud music and fast-moving camera techniques, the filmmakers turn the moment of killing into a ritualistic moment, which transforms not only the protagonist, but also the spectator. "The kill" scene resembles the sacrificial moments when the one who will take life is faced with the eyes of the sacrifice and is faced with the human dilemma of whether to take the life or serve "a higher purpose." It is the definition of such a higher purpose or a sort of necessity that prevents the spectator from asking whether the dilemma is a real one. The associated religious imagery further confirms that these films agree on one point; the glorification of the moment of killing and the courage required to do it. Both films, in this sense reverse their anti-war discourse; it might be true that war turns men into killers and takes away their innocence. Yet, the mystical charm and exaltation of the point of transformation are more likely to mean that the kill is a fact of life, a rite of passage into manhood and thus is necessary.

Saving Private Ryan and *We Were Soldiers*: Families, Fathers and Sons

The significance of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) is that, after two decades of war-combat films with overt anti-war messages –as a legacy of the Vietnam War– it is the first war-combat film which retouches issues such as honor, sacrifice, and dying for a cause. On the part of the filmmaker this sudden change from anti-war to heroic narrative required a sort of justification. As Peter Ehrenhaus observes:

> One solution is to leapfrog over the source of traumatic memory (Vietnam) and manufacture redemption by giving presence to an even more distant past (World War II). The use of Holocaust memory in *Saving Private Ryan* re-enables American national identity. On first glance, American moral righteousness in this narrative is placed securely beyond reproach, and an Americanized Holocaust memory is situated in the mainstream of national identity. (2001, p. 312)

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Thus, acting upon the righteousness of being on the right side in the Holocaust issue, the film attempts to create a war-combat atmosphere in which the traditional elements of the ideology of masculinity can be propagated. By employing the memory of the Holocaust, the film bypasses the anti-war sentiment created by Vietnam. Hence, the film reinterprets the American past in order to restructure a moral ground on which war can still be seen and depicted as just and right. Despite its portrayal as an infernal environment, war is still romanticized and conventional themes related with masculinity and fighting are championed as well. In this sense, the film is more about the restoration of masculinity and the reversal of the anti-war spirit which emerged in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Since none of the wars and operations in the 1990s, i.e. the Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq operations, are enough to depict combat scenes, a return to the past is necessary, if the ideology is to continue its propagation. As stated earlier, one of the primary tactics of the masculinist ideology as used by Hollywood style of filmmaking is to use victimization; defeat can only be tolerated and used as a pretext for further action if the protagonist can be seen as a victim. Similarly, a victory with no loss is not ideological. Unless the themes of sacrifice and courage are shown, a war-combat movie cannot be ideological.

It wouldn't be wrong to state that at this stage, what Hollywood is trying to do is to repress the experience of Vietnam to the depths of the American collective subconscious and to replace it with the victorious moments of the past. Peter Ehrenhaus agrees that *Saving Private Ryan* is actually about the post-Vietnam trauma; "*Saving Private Ryan* [is] a response to this nation's enduring traumatic memory, frequently characterized by the condensation signifier of 'the Vietnam syndrome'" (2001, p. 312). Owen adds that *Saving Private Ryan* is indeed a call to American people to redeem themselves through a rededication to the principles that defined them as "a people" (1999, p. 25). Therefore, the film tries to restore dignity to American manhood and the military, and attempts at reformulating a sense of patriotism for the American public in order to provide moral justification for the American presence in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Somali.

One way of dealing with this task is presenting the war not as an act of imperialism but as an individual's war stripped of its political connotations. As director Steven Spielberg declared in a Newsweek interview "Of course every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie. . . . At its core, [*Saving Private Ryan*] is also a morality play. . . . I think when we fight, war is no longer about a greater good but becomes intensely personal. Kids in combat are simply fighting to survive, fighting to save the guys next to them" (Carkin, 1999, p. 1). Thus, other than rewriting American history for justifications of war, the film attempts to establish a masculinist discourse founded on the theme of brotherhood and male bonding.

Taking place during World War II, the plot revolves around a group of soldiers trying to locate one Private Ryan and send him back to his home as he has lost all his brothers and is the only remaining son of the family. On the other hand, most of the story is dedicated to the relationship between Captain Miller and his soldiers. Although he is too young to be their father, his soldiers respect him and develop a kind of myth around his identity. His explanation of his ideas on the war in general and their duty in particular helps the soldiers to understand Miller's confused but paternalistic attitude towards them. Thus, Miller suddenly is promoted to the level of a father figure among the soldiers.

On the micro level, the act of saving Private Ryan is the dictum under which these young men stay together and face death. Hence, the film's success can be explained owing to this double layered ideology. The soldiers' free choice of staying with Miller and continuing to search for Ryan becomes their own soul searching which ends with their confrontation with death. Thus, their transformation and initiation takes place without coercion. Miller at one point declares that any soldier who is not willing to come with the group is free to leave, which is a completely unrealistic practice in an atmosphere of war. However, the act serves its ideological purpose as it makes the soldiers' initiative to stay with Miller a volunteering act. The outcome will again be a result of free choice. When found, Ryan says that he will not go back to his home; "Tell my mom I'm with the only brothers left" (Spielberg, 1998). The others agree; in war they are all brothers. As their duty is over, the soldiers are free to return but they do not desert their "fathers and brothers" and stay to protect one strategically important bridge.

Thus, from the ideological perspective, the death of Captain Miller and his soldiers is necessary, since through these deaths the survivors will be transformed. Since the whole film is told in flashback, the film's opening and closing scene shows Ryan, now an old man, crying in a cemetery surrounded by Christian and Jewish tombstones under the American flag. The sacrifices of the others have made them heroes and Ryan a full man. His existence is an accolade of the brotherhood and heroism of these young men who sacrificed their lives for him.

As Captain Miller's last words to Ryan, "James! Earn this" show, the only "greater good" in war is the bond among soldiers. The film presents war as a medium in which new families of fathers and sons are established. The survival of Private Ryan at the end of the film demonstrates that he owes his life to all these dead soldiers who, instead of going back to their places of duty, preferred to stay with him and defended a bridge, just as a family would have done. As can be seen in the relationship between his soldiers and Miller, the film conscientiously pays homage to myths of masculinity without touching upon any other issue.

As his and Captain Miller's exchange of opinions on the nature of war shows, Corporal Upham is the embodiment of the Emersonian intellectual. He and Miller recite Emerson's statement "War educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man." Through the character of Upham, the film makes the commentary that, at times of crisis, quick and determined action is necessary. Otherwise, such lack of manliness will result in total failure and even massacre of the family. However, in the final scene, Upham goes through the "Emersonian transformation" and becomes the killer as a measure of his manhood. Even Upham, the weakest character in the film, learns the "truth of war"; you have to do the killing. At this final moment of truth, he goes through his own transformation, and in the eyes of the spectator, does something "right." As his earlier quoting of Emerson envisaged, he is brought into close contact with the enemy and it is his own free will which kills the German soldier who killed his friends. He kills the German soldier and becomes a man. Shortly, the film uses the Holocaust as the moral starting point and depicts the formation of families of men in the world of war and ends with the ultimate sacrifice a man can do, one towards his son(s). The ideology of

masculinity restores not only the solidarity of soldiers but also the nation's vision of itself as just and manly.

Just as *Saving Private Ryan* is a return to the glory of World War II, *We Were Soldiers* (2002) is a return to the mentality of John Wayne-style heroic films with their strong emphasis on warrior brotherhood and heroic acts. The film is also an indicator of a turn that is taking place in the Hollywood war-combat genre at the beginning of the new century. More specifically, the film marks the end of a period in Hollywood war-combat films; it seems as if even the alleged anti-war sentiment of the Vietnam films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* is over and from this point on Hollywood war-combat films, freed from the Vietnam syndrome, can deal with the Vietnam War with a reasserted –but this time in a more sinister sense– patriotism of the 1950s and early 1960s. Even the pseudo-anti-war sentiment of the 1970s and 1980s is now replaced with an outright manifestation of patriotism. So as to achieve this –especially in a Vietnam War film– the film takes place in what Paul Fussell calls,

> the ideological vacuum [i.e.] . . . a place where the meaning of the initial cause has dissolved away to leave only the bloodier and much more immediate reality of young men fighting not just for their own lives but for those of the guys next to them. (Zacharek, 2002, p. 1)

Similar to *Saving Private Ryan*, the film does not question the validity of the American involvement in Vietnam, a cause almost impossible to support. Nevertheless, the film gives full support to the ideology of masculinity presented again in the form of families established by fathers and sons in combat zones. The act of heroism on the part of combat soldiers is the utmost manifestation of this masculinist ideology couched in heroic language. Although *We Were Soldiers* attempts to be critical of war as can be seen in its seemingly better treatment of the Vietnamese, the themes of heroism and manliness overpower these superficial humanitarian elements.

Loosely based on a true event, the film narrates the battle of La Drang Valley in which the first group of soldiers dropped to Vietnam had to protect the perimeter around a football-size field for two days. An interesting detail in the films is that before he leaves for Vietnam, the protagonist Lt. Col. Harold Moore compares the pictures of the massacre of the French by the Vietnamese with the massacre of George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry at Little Big Horn. As can be seen in this scene, the American past and experience in the frontier West is extrapolated to Vietnam. From the very beginning, the film shows Vietnam as a new territory America has to fight for. The only problem is the "natives." Again the parallelism between the cruel Vietnamese and savage Indians who scalp American soldiers is striking; the enemy is barbarous and primitive.

The rest of the narrative brings together scenes that show the protagonist Moore's family life and military life and illustrate a character that is completely fatherly, not only towards his family and five kids but also towards his soldiers. When one of his soldiers asks him about being a father and being a soldier at the same time, he responds, "I hope that being good at one makes me better at the other" (Davey, 2002). In total contrast to the boot camp scenes in *Full Metal Jacket,* his basic training methods are very friendly and fatherly. The soldiers treat each other as members of a big family and in one extraordinary

occasion they are ordered to take off their boots and check each others' feet to see if their friends are all right. The scene is important because it shows that starting from brotherly love, the relationship among the soldiers is slowly developing into a kinship with spiritual and even religious connotations; their caressing each other's feet reminds the spectator of Jesus' anointment. This religiosity is further repeated in various scenes in which soldiers are depicted as understanding each other without saying a word. A kind of spiritual communication takes place between them. Similar to Moore, who treats his soldiers' wounds, his wife Julie cares for the wives of the soldiers back at home. However, this dichotomy serves to assign each sex its own role. Women are "back home" and busy with domestic affairs. Like their husbands they "unite their powers" and form their own version of sisterhood. When they are away from each other because of war, the soldiers and their wives form their own spiritual families in which they will observe solidarity.

At the combat zone, the concept of the perimeter has sexual connotations; it is a line which should not be crossed and its rupture is symbolized by a Vietnamese soldier's running with a bayonet-fixed rifle pointed at Moore's back. The bayonet's phallicity poses a sudden threat towards American military masculinity, but Moore is able to kill the Vietnamese soldier. Furthermore, when they realize that their ammunition has finished, American soldiers are ordered to fix bayonets in order to attack the Vietnamese foxholes. Interestingly, Americans are able to defeat the Vietnamese with bayonets. The scene's sexual connotations are obvious; the unification of American manhood and military power with the phallus-bayonet results in the defeat of the enemy.

The corresponding character to *Saving Private Ryan*'s Upham, the military-journalist Galloway contributes to the masculinist discourse of *We Were Soldiers*. He leaves his camera –a passive object– aside and begins to use a rifle–the killer phallus. When the combat is over, he is completely transformed; he no longer considers himself associated with the journalists who come to the battlefield to report the incident. His battle weary face in total contrast to the snobbish attitudes and casual clothes of the journalists gives the message that the outsiders cannot understand the reality of combat. Galloway, like many others in the platoon, is transformed into full manhood. From this point on, he will use his camera, now associated with his manly task of persuasion, as a weapon.

Both these films represent examples not only of the restoration of American dignity and glory but also the reassertion of American masculinity in an age when American military interventions and wars against terrorism are the most prominent elements of the agenda. Other than depicting incidents that claim there are cases to die for, these films used the atmosphere of war and combat as an excuse for the practices of masculinity and proof of manliness. Since American cultural ideology is based on the presumption that the proof of maturity for a male is his practice of aggression, i.e. his practicing "the kill," it seems unlikely that these war-combat films, even with anti-war messages, will help to end the wars. On the contrary, these films reinforce the maintenance of a masculinist perspective of the world, thus, in one way or another, all call for war.

Conclusion

All these Vietnam War combat films offer versions of a rewritten past. While the majority of them have a critical stance towards the American involvement in Vietnam, in

their subjective re-construction of the Vietnam memory, these films serve the basic tenets of the American cultural ideology, which aims at maintaining the status quo and furthering the interests of an imperialistic agenda through the continuation of war efforts. Even in their humanitarian attitudes these war-combat films do not offer alternative perspectives to the issue of war but repeat the same underlying ideology. Through their mythologizing of the Vietnam War and their consecration of the combat atmosphere, they are all in line with the conservative cultural ideology which sees war as just and good after all. These films are not anti-war films in essence; on the contrary, they present an exotic and eroticized image of war and thus transform the atmosphere of combat into a spiritual experience for the spectator. The enemy, the fighting, the kill, all become detached from reality. By moving the war to the level of "nightmare," these films carry it to a mystical and even religious dimension. The hell might be a place to run away from, but it also offers redemption. That's why, although these films present characters who want to escape from hell, the overt and covert meanings still construct an attractive image of the military and war. In an age when justification for military actions became all the more difficult, the most recent examples of these films reveal that the cultural ideology used to continue wars is alive and in a highly adaptive manner continue to create meanings and new definitions that will persuade not only the American public but also the world community that these wars are just and inevitable. For the analysis and refutation of such an ideology it is necessary that war films find novel ways of depicting masculinity and war as a test of it.

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