

The falsification of the vietnam war through film assignment

[History](#)



The Falsification of the Vietnam War Through Film The Vietnam War was possibly one of the toughest times in American history, there was no escaping or evading the fact that America lost it's first war. Vietnam was not just a war abroad but also a war at home, an internal war, resulting in a broken country after the loss. One of the many widespread issues with Vietnam was that it was a living room war; this was the first war that was televised and manipulated in order for the media to receive ratings and viewers, being extremely biased in the way it was portrayed.

Also biased are the films that were made about Vietnam; the most well-known of these war films are: Born on the 4th of July, Platoon, and Rambo: First Blood. While viewing these films it is evident to see how the veterans were treated and how the overall sense of nationalism decreased tremendously throughout the many years the war took place. All of these films can be classified into a specific type of narrative: quest narrative, chaos narrative, restitution narrative, or docudrama. These films also share many common underlying themes such as: realism (or lack of), loss of masculinity, personal epistemology, and the non visual enemy.

It is not just a coincidence that all of these different films with different stories and objectives all contain the same themes and messages; it is evident that these themes and portrayals are relevant issues that remained in the minds of all Americans during and after the war. In Marita Sturken's article Reenactment and the Making of History: The Vietnam Olney 2 War as a Docudrama, she presents us with the different types of Vietnam War film narratives: restitution, quest, chaos, and docudramas.

A restitution narrative can be defined as a full circle film: starting at healing, then to illness, and finally back to healing (Sturken 85). An example of this can be seen in the movie *Born on the 4th of July* where we see the veteran Ron Kovic injured and recovering in a hospital after being paralyzed in war, healing. After Ron is discharged from the hospital he returns to his parents home where they must take care of him; this causes Ron to become mentally unstable because he cannot take care of himself, nor can he get over the fact that he must be dependent on his parents once again, illness.

Towards the end of the movie is when Ron begins to accept the fact that he is now paralyzed and cannot do everything he once could, full circle back to healing. A quest narrative, according to Sturken, can be defined as a film in which the Vietnam War is portrayed as a learning experience for the veteran and thus him taking control of his own recovery (Sturken 93). An example of a quest narrative can be seen in the movie *Platoon* where Chris Taylor has no idea where he is going in life and decides to volunteer for the Army.

In Vietnam, Taylor finds himself transforming into who he is suppose to be in the jungles of Vietnam. The film results in Taylor becoming a man and discovering not only himself, but also his beliefs and outlooks on life, a learning experience. Sturken defines chaos narrative as a film that has no specific order of events and seemingly no purpose or explanation throughout the film, but it all comes together and makes sense in the end (Sturken 95). The theory of chaos narratives can be seen in both *Olney 3* *Born on the 4th of July* and *Rambo: First Blood*.

Born on the 4th of July can be characterized as a chaos narrative because as you are watching the movie you do not see the purpose of many of the events, or the meaning behind them, but as the film progresses you later see how it is tied all together. Rambo is a chaos narrative because the viewer sees nothing but action throughout the film with no real explanation as to why it is all happening; it is obvious that there is no definite order going on and we are overwhelmed with all the events happening so quickly.

There is also hopelessness present throughout the film and is apparent especially in the ending when Rambo breaks down and cries to the chief who trained him that he is suffering from PTSD. This adds to the feeling of hopelessness and misdirection of the film in general: the actual disorder of events adds to the idea and emphasis of the chaos in the chaos narrative. Finally, the docudrama *Sturken* describes can be defined as the merging of historical facts in a dramatic form (Sturken 89). Sturken discusses the idea of Vietnam being a “living room war” in relation to the docudrama; she states that since the viewers seen real footage and photographs of the war, it would be necessary for the docudramas to show this “realism” (Sturken 94). An example of a docudrama is *Born on the 4th of July*, which was based on the memoirs of veteran Ron Kovic. This film is a docudrama because while the events that are portrayed might have happened, they are exaggerated and dramatized in order to appeal to the audience and to give viewers the feeling that this is real.

While each of these films have different messages and seemingly different characters and plots, there are many common themes that are relevant in

these films; one Olney 4 of the most evident being masculinity and loss of this masculinity. Masculinity, according to Sturken can be defined as the ability to control a situation, being the leader of the pack, and making your own decisions without answering to a higher individual or power (Sturken 89). Loss of masculinity is defined by Sturken as the inability to take care of oneself, thus depending on those around them (Sturken 91).

Professor Neda Atanasoski, of the University of California Santa Cruz, defines the loss of masculinity as the veteran losing full physical movement of the body resulting in the deterioration of relationships, both physical and emotional, causing complete mental breakdown and therefore loss of control , i. e. , masculinity (Atanasoski, 2/3/11). Both of these definitions are relatively the same and most, if not all, of these Vietnam war films represent masculinity and the loss of masculinity in one way or another.

Masculinity, specifically the gain or discovery of masculinity, is extremely evident in the movie *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone in 1986. Here we see a young Chris Taylor's transformation throughout the war, he starts out as a young adult who has no idea what he is doing in life and throughout the film, which takes place in the jungle of Vietnam, he finds himself and transforms into a man. The most prominent example of Taylor's masculinity is evident in the scene where he kills the wounded Barnes, his enemy/rival.

This is a gain in Taylor's eyes and he has now defeated the evil, Barnes, resulting in him now becoming a man. " He started out a young innocent boy and turned into a savage and hard man" (Atanasoski, 2/3/2011). While there is a discovery of masculinity in *Platoon*, there is also a loss of masculinity as <https://assignbuster.com/the-falsification-of-the-vietnam-war-through-film-assignment/>

well. This loss is evident in the closing scene of the film where Taylor is being Med-Evaced out of Vietnam, due to Olney's injury, he begins to cry, showing his vulnerability and lack of control of his emotions (Atanasoski, 2/3/2011).

This scene is also key in the loss of masculinity because Taylor's narration tells the viewers that he will forever be in Vietnam with Barnes and Elias battling for the "possession of his soul"; this gives us the idea that he does not fully belong to himself, therefore he cannot control every part of his life, proving the lack of his masculinity. The theme of masculinity is extremely evident in Oliver Stone's *Born on the 4th of July*, where we see the deterioration of a once strong and beloved young man.

Throughout the film we are presented with the idea that going to war is the manly thing to do and one who doesn't do so is taunted as a woman; this is clear in the scene where the young Ron Kovic and his friends are sitting around a diner discussing their plans for after high school and they all refer to their friend as a girl for not wanting to join the army. More specifically, the loss of masculinity is the central theme of this film; a paralyzed and weak Ron comes home from war and must now depend on his parents to take care of him.

Not only is Ron physically disabled, he is also mentally traumatized by the idea of not being able to get an erection and reproduce. This is a blunt form of the loss of masculinity and it seems as though this is Ron's only worry with his disabled body. He feels as though because he is unable to have normal sex, he is no longer viewed as a man and does not receive the attention he

normally would if he were not disabled, further emphasizing the loss of his masculinity.

Masculinity is also very evident in Rambo, throughout the entire film we see a triumphant John Rambo fighting his way out of trouble from an insistent cop who wants Olney 6 to throw him in jail. We see the theme of masculinity in Rambo himself because he is basically trained to be killer, a member of the Green Berets. The idea that this man, Rambo, who is seen as just a drifter by the cop, being able to come into this town and wreak that much havoc is unbearable and mortifying.

The cop is the example of a soft body and the loss masculinity in the sense that he is unable to protect his town from the savage and “psycho” killing machine that is Rambo (Modleski 23). On the other hand, Rambo is the ideal of masculinity and hard body because he cannot be controlled by anyone, even authority; whether he is “good” or “bad” is not relevant to the theme of masculinity (Jeffords 35). Besides Masculinity, another common underlying theme of Vietnam war films is realism, or the lack of realism.

Realism, according to Professor Atanasoski, is defined as the portrayal of an event with the intentions to have the work result in a visualization of the real events, what it was really like to be there (Atanasoski, 2/3/2011). Going off of this definition of realism one would say that it is not entirely possible to reenact every detail of a war to make it exact, and this is true; which brings in the idea of personal epistemology. Personal epistemology, according to Atanasoski, is defined as the personal view or personal account of a real life event.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-falsification-of-the-vietnam-war-through-film-assignment/>

Atanasoski also goes on to say that personal epistemology emphasizes American individualism with the idea that experience is the most valid form of knowledge (Atanasoski 2/3/2011). While personal epistemology and realism are closely related in definition, there is a distinction to be made between the two; according to Brian Woodman the difference between these two is that realism goes off of actual facts and events and personal epistemology can cloud the portrayal because Olney 7 it is biased based on each individual experience (Woodman 12).

Out of the three films only two were based on real life events containing realism and the idea of personal epistemology; these two being *Platoon* and *Born on the 4th of July*, both directed by Oliver Stone who is a Vietnam veteran. The third, *Rambo*, gives us a different kind of message by playing into the lack of realism, knowingly doing so (Atanasoski 2/3/2011). The film *Platoon* is loosely based on Stone's own personal experience in Vietnam, leaving us with the obvious idea of personal epistemology; while we see an event that could be real and factual we are reminded that since Stone is indeed a veteran and this film is based on his own experience, it could not possibly be one hundred percent correctly portrayed; leading into the idea of mystifying historical contexts and exaggerating the involvement and situations of the war in order to make a point (Woodman 27). To go further, this theory of personal epistemology plays into the idea of race and gender, it totalizes the view of the war and indirectly denies cultural difference, the war was not the same for everyone, even if Stone remembers it as such (Atanasoski 2/3/2011).

Realism and personal epistemology is immensely evident in Oliver Stone's *Born On the 4th of July*, which is based on the memoirs of Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. The plain fact that it was based on his experiences, shows the idea of personal epistemology. Throughout the film we are presented with Kovic's life of anguish and pain, after becoming a quadriplegic due to being shot in the spine. We are only presented with Kovic's life and his experiences, which emphasizes again the totalizing view of the war Olney 8 nd also allowing other's experiences to be erased (Atanasoski, 2/3/2011).

Realism is evident in this film when we see the way in which Kovic was paralyzed and this is idea of injury and pain is not exaggerated because it is indeed backed by actual experiences, and he is not the only veteran who was paralyzed, therefore allowing the viewers to see that it was real because it could have potentially happened to anyone, not just a specific individual in a specific instance.

The difference between the realism and personal epistemology in *Born On the 4th of July*, is the idea that Kovic's own personal and detailed experiences could not have been shared and could not have been mimicked exactly by anyone, therefore making them personal; but the idea that many veterans were faced with such inhibiting injuries and anguish ties into the realism of the film. A final common aspect of these Vietnam War films, and war films in general, is the reoccurring faceless enemy.

All of these films either show no direct enemy, or an over generalized and stereotypical form of one; in these films the faceless enemy being the Viet Cong and Vietnamese Army. Faceless enemies, according to Atanasoski, de-

emphasizes the importance of all Vietnamese who lost their lives in the war, whether intentionally doing so, or not (Atanasoski 2/3/2011). The faceless enemy is extremely evident in *Platoon*, which also causes us to question exactly who the enemy really was.

No where in the film do we see an actual face to face battle, we see a war fought from far away and when it is fought in the same proximity as the enemy, they are camouflaged and inconspicuous. This lack of a common enemy leaves us wondering who exactly were we fighting, and the idea of internal war springs from this rhetorical question (Modleski 75). This lack of an enemy and idea of internal war that springs from it, is a suspicious way for Stone to relay the Vietnam War; if we do not see the actual enemy and there is indeed a constant internal conflict, who exactly were we fighting?

According to Professor Atanasoski, Stone decidedly left the enemy faceless to further prove his point that the Vietnam War was unnecessary and destructive to the integrity and unity the United States once obtained (Atanasoski 2/3/2011). The dynamic of a faceless enemy is also important in *Rambo*, even though the war portrayed is not being fought in Vietnam, it is a result of the Vietnam War. A damaged and obviously mentally unstable John Rambo is fighting against the cops and causing a war for himself, in which he is fighting alone.

During this war Rambo constantly has flashbacks of an over generalized and stereotypical Vietnamese soldier slashing him and torturing him. The faceless enemy is apparent here, although we do see a few Vietnamese

<https://assignbuster.com/the-falsification-of-the-vietnam-war-through-film-assignment/>

individuals randomly throughout the film, there is no direct affiliation with them or a background as to why they are there, it is left up to the viewers imagination to fill in the blanks.

The lack of a story or background of these Vietnamese soldiers, while their actions obviously play a great role in who John Rambo is, further emphasizes the devaluing of the Vietnamese lives in the war; we see who Rambo is and why he is this way, but it is not important enough for us to see the other side of the battle because they are not American, therefore do not matter to us (Atanasoski 2/3/2011). Further expanding on the element of the faceless enemy is the movie Born on the 4th of July. Although this film is mostly about the return of an injured and mangled veteran, we do have some background and scenes set in Vietnam.

The beginning of this Olney 10 film is where we see specifically the faceless enemy, we see Kovic shooting at huts and other soldiers throwing grenades into the air and so on, but we never get a glimpse of who they are throwing them at. According to Tania Modleski, we do not see a target or enemy in Born on the 4th of July, because giving the enemy a face would have forced us to feel sympathy for those we were fighting against, which would've taken away our feelings of anger and hatred for the common enemy who severely ruined our hero, Kovic (Modleski 73).

The thought of viewers not being shown the enemy in order to inhibit our feelings of empathy and understanding for a fellow human being is extremely disturbing and upsetting; it leaves viewers with the feeling that we must only feel sympathy for those Americans who have lost lives in Vietnam,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-falsification-of-the-vietnam-war-through-film-assignment/>

when in reality we should mourn for any death of any human being, no matter if they are an enemy or an ally. While the Vietnam War was definitely a tough time in America, these films portraying it, in no way do it justice, nor do they give Americans a sense of what really happened.

The fact that these three seemingly different Vietnam War films all have common themes and events might lead one to believe that the war was apparently the same for all of the soldiers, when in actuality it was immensely different. Not one person who served in Vietnam, whether it be American or Vietnamese, have the same recollection of events, the same stories, or even the same opinions about the war.

I believe it is safe to say that these films should be strictly viewed for entertainment purposes and even though two of the three are portrayals of actual veterans experiences, these individual's recollections mixed with Hollywood magic and interpretations are not a valid view of the Vietnam War and it's aftermath. Olney 11 Work Cited Atanasoski, Neda. " Vietnam War as a Reenactment. " Class Discussion. University of California Santa Cruz. 3 Feb. 2011. Lecture. Jeffords, Susan. " The Reagan Hero: Rambo. " Ed. Robert Eberwein. *The War Film*. New Brunswick (N. J.): Rutgers UP, 2006. 140-55. Print. Modleski, Tania. *Do We Get to Lose This Time? Revising the Vietnam War Film. " The War Film*. Ed. Robert T. Eberwein. New Brunswick (N. J.): Rutgers UP, 2006. 155-72. Print. Sturken, Marita. "" Reenactment and the Making of History: The Vietnam War as a Docudrama"" *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997. 85-121. Print. Woodman, Brian J. "

Represented in the Margins: The Images of African American Soldiers in the Vietnam War Combat Films. " The War Film. Ed. Robert T. Eberwein. New Brunswick (N. J.): Rutgers UP, 2006. 90-117. Print.