

Chris Latson

Hollywood's Vietnam

The Vietnam War was a military struggle fought in Vietnam from 1959 to 1975, involving North Vietnam in conflict with United States forces and South Vietnam. The United States became involved in Vietnam because they feared the “Domino Theory.” This was the belief that if all of Vietnam fell under a Communist government, Communism would spread throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. The U.S. government, therefore, supported the South Vietnamese government. Hollywood did not pass this opportunity to put its signature on the war through film. Hollywood presented Americans with its versions of one of the most controversial wars in U.S. history.

Hollywood also presented the war in the form of “Patriotic Values”. Leaders in the film industry “maintained that Americans would not pay to watch a film about their country’s losing a war” (Mintz/Roberts 292). So to accommodate these producers made movies that didn’t show the military as losers. This was clearly present in the movie *First Blood* in which an ex-soldier is forced by government officials to defend himself. “The movie suggests that men like John Rambo did not lose the war; politicians back home did.” (Mintz/Roberts 292).

Producers and directors also “Ramboized” the war in movies”. Rescuing M.I.A.’s and P.O.W.’s became a huge concern, and Hollywood took advantage of this by releasing a stream of movies. In the film *Rambo: First Blood II*, Rambo returns to rescue MIA’s and POW’s in Vietnam. He is even able to change history and actually help America win the war this time, which was most likely to the delight of many

Americans.

One of the versions that Hollywood presented its people with was that Vietnam was a senseless and unprofitable war. It was shown how war poisoned the minds of American soldiers and could forever ruin the lives of those fortunate enough to return home. Hollywood was searching for a way to present the war in the box office, by expressing its insignificance, and giving their viewers what they wanted and expected the war to be on the big screen.

Another version showed that a movie about the war could be political and improve the image of the Vietnam veteran. In the movie *Coming Home*, the main character Luke was not a rampaging or violent man, nor was he a loner. He was a symbol that was present to remind the American people about the legacy of Vietnam. He used his wounds and suffering to help others and reinstate himself into society.

Hollywood also put a spin on the way Vietnam veterans were depicted. They were portrayed as products of war, which had no background, home, parents, or life before their term of service. This made it seem as if all they knew was war. If he was fortunate to return home, "sometimes he joins an outlaw motorcycle gang in which violence is a way of life and a reason for being" (Mintz/Roberts 286). Veterans were almost always shown to be violent. It seemed as if in the movies even those who wanted to escape and avoid violence were unable to do so, and thus were finally forced back into the fire.

But by the late 1970s views toward the aging image of Vietnam veterans was drastically beginning to change. Veterans are finally being represented as caring individuals with the ability to love and care for others, and not just as trained killing

machines. The film industry finally starting to get the respect and dignity that they deserved for their service in Vietnam.

The transformation of veterans from evil to good was a result of the increasing popular image of the United States military. The military was no longer being looked upon as a sinister and blood thirsty institution. "Instead of being an institution that kills boys, it is viewed as a place where boys become men, or in the case of *Private Benjamin*, spoiled girls become independent women" (Mintz/Roberts 290). Pro-military films were due in large part to the way the economy was in the 1890s. The scarcity of high-paying jobs and lack of money to the uneducated made the military seem as a great place to get ahead in life.

Hollywood also had to deal with the meaning and reasons for the war. During the 1960s and 1970s, Historians examined pentagon papers and tried to understand the war itself. These historians cleared the military of all guilt. And "not only did these historians believed that the united States should have fought in Vietnam, they argued that the military could have won the war. Hollywood countered this by releasing the movie *Platoon*. It did not address the causes or results of the war, but revolved around a conflict of good and evil. Hollywood searched for ways to present what the war symbolized, while at the same time maintaining public interest and turning a profit.

Another movie that dealt with meanings and reasons of the war was Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, in which he tried to translate them it into a narrative film. "The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now*," Coppola wrote in the program notes for film, "was to create a film experience that would give the audience a sense of horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of

the Vietnam War” (Mintz/Roberts 291). These are just some examples of how Hollywood was able to capitalize on the war, and play on the emotions and fears of the American people.