“This is the End”

Realism, Myth and Propaganda in the Vietnam War Films
*Apocalypse Now, Platoon and The Green Berets*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Daði Óskarsson

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Thesis abstract

The ideology behind certain Vietnam War films is a fascinating subject, and often within these films are their directors’ very different agendas. This essay is meant to examine three very distinct Vietnam War films: *The Green Berets*, *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now Redux* from the perspective of realism, mythology and propaganda.

First is the analysis of John Wayne’s *The Green Berets*, a film about a few well trained special operatives in the U.S. Army that are sent to Vietnam to help with the building of a South Vietnamese camp in a hostile territory. This chapter focuses on the lack of realism in the film and its blatant use of propaganda to try and win over the hearts and minds of the American public in a time of war.

The second main chapter is an analysis of Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*. Stone himself served in Vietnam and his vision was to make a film that gave an accurate account of the life of the infantry grunt in the Vietnam War. In this chapter Stone’s interpretation of realism comes under close scrutiny.

The third and final main chapter is a close study of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now Redux*, the mythology of the characters and the film’s atmosphere. The link between *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is an integral part of this section of the essay whereas the message of anti-imperialism resonates in both works.

Finally, I conclude that the elements of realism, mythology and entertainment value are all integral parts of the creation of war films. Realism is necessary to give the viewer a brief look at the horrific experiences of combat. Mythology creates the larger-than-life heroes we want to see because they make us believe in ourselves and our ability to overcome obstacles. The creation of mythology can also lead us down a road of untruthfulness and persuade us to believe in a message that serves as a propaganda tool. The central theme regarding realism, mythology and propaganda, however, is that all these points are moot if the film doesn’t have entertainment value, because without entertaining the viewer the film is lost.
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Introduction

The Vietnam War was probably the most controversial of America’s wars until the invasion of Iraq in 2003. People all over the world criticized and protested against the brutal maltreatment of the Vietnamese people, and the draft of young disenfranchised minorities into the U.S. military was also a subject of debate.

The Vietnam War was the first televised conflict even though the reports given by the authorities often proved inaccurate. The public was allowed a glimpse into the real horrors of war as it occurred for the very first time. The images left behind have been etched in the viewers’ minds for eternity: the monk who set himself on fire, the naked Vietnamese girl running from a napalmed area with fear in her eyes, or the emotionless execution of a Vietnamese insurgent by a high-ranking officer of the South Vietnamese Army.

The unpopularity of the war, the queasy live coverage and the disastrous war effort of the United States halted the making of Vietnam War films for a few years and it didn’t prove a fruitful venture until the late seventies. The making of Vietnam War films blossomed in the eighties due to pro-American, or at least pro-violence, powerhouses such a Chuck Norris and Sylvester Stallone. Of course Vietnam War films had been made prior to these dates but their box office success was not encouraging enough for film studios to invest large sums of money into making respectable films about the war. There are, of course, exceptions, most notably Ray Kellogg’s and John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* which was made as a propaganda film. Wayne even told President Johnson that “he could make the “kind of picture that will help our cause throughout the world.””¹ *The Green Berets* was made in the midst of the war in hope of securing a more pro-war atmosphere in America. This proved unsuccessful since the North Vietnamese Army launched the TET-Offensive which had a crippling effect on the U.S. war effort.

In 1979, a few years after the war had ended, one of the first “real” Vietnam War films was released, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. It was a gigantic endeavour with a budget to match. The film had some of the biggest stars of Hollywood and arguably the most successful director of the decade at the helm. The story, being an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, was perhaps a

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surreal approach to the war, a one-man journey up a river through the woods to the inevitable end of meeting the rogue colonel who the protagonist was meant to kill.

The dam broke in the eighties and various films about the Vietnam War were released. Historical accuracy and respect for those involved in the war was not the highest priority. It rather served as a golden opportunity for a new genre of war films and new epic heroes. A great example of this is the notorious loner John Rambo, a former POW who was deserted by his country and tortured by the enemy – a man who was hell bent on revenge.

But the eighties wasn’t only the decade of the loner hero, it was also the decade for a reality check. The need for real life experiences of the Vietnam War was prevalent. This view was galvanized with films such as Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*. These films depicted the gruesome life in the frontlines, the inadequacy of the soldiers’ training and the atrocities of war.

This paper is meant to examine three important films of the Vietnam War film genre, *The Green Berets*, *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now Redux*, and to analyze specific scenes pertaining to their realism, mythology and entertainment value. The paper will also view the element of propaganda, with a view on pro-war and anti-war messages in these Vietnam War films. How do they reflect on the reality of the war? Is their agenda to create a mythical vision of the reality of the war? Or are they simply fictional works produced for entertainment purposes?
The Green Berets

In 1968 John Wayne released his controversial Vietnam War film *The Green Berets*. The landscape of U.S. politics was at fever pitch, the anti-war movement was gaining support by the day, all while more and more American soldiers were coming home in coffins, wrapped in the beloved American flag. Soldiers, once America's ultimate heroes, were being criticized heavily for their participation in the South East Asian conflict, even though, in most cases, they had been sent there against their will.

America was losing the war, a war which many people believed they shouldn't have been fighting anyway. Supporters of the war within the U.S. government, or hawks, as they are generally referred to, wanted to win the Vietnam War so as to avoid the dreaded domino effect, even though the domino effect was widely seen as a justification for military aggression. To elaborate on the domino theory, the idea is that if one country fell under the rule of communism it would spur a domino reaction, starting with countries surrounding the new communist state and then expanding the communist ideology throughout the world.²

In America protests against the war were increasing by the week and the anti-war movement was getting stronger by the day. Its voice was getting louder and louder. The Americans who supported the war weren't very visible at the time, only "a few good men" were standing up for the war.

John Wayne was the epitome of American heroism. He had, almost singlehandedly, beaten the Indians as well as being the ultimate World War II hero, fictional that is. Wayne was a hawk. He was one of the few powerful actors in the entertainment industry who was an adamant supporter of the Vietnam conflict. While his anti-war entertainment industry colleagues openly protested against the war, most noticeably Jane Fonda, then dubbed as "Hanoi Jane" by some, Wayne wanted to use his popularity to increase support for the war and, while doing so, possibly encouraging the quiet middle classes to voice their opinions, if they were as his own that is. Wayne's weapon of choice: *The Green Berets*.

*The Green Berets* is about a team of elite U.S. soldiers who are extremely well trained and therefore highly skilled in numerous fields. They are not just well equipped for combat, but they are also excellent at diplomacy, clandestine operations

and unorthodox missions. In short, the film tells the story of a team of green berets who are given the task of guarding, strengthening and rebuilding a South Vietnamese camp that the Viet Cong are constantly trying to overtake and, as a second mission, to lure a high-ranking enemy combatant into their trap.

In the midst of these green berets there’s a journalist, who at the beginning of the film shows much distaste for the U.S. involvement in the war. Encouraged by Wayne’s character, he travels with the berets to Vietnam to assess the situation for himself. As he voices his opinions about the war he is repeatedly proven wrong by very articulate members of the green berets. The sight of the atrocities committed by Vietnamese soldiers gradually changes his position and as the film evolves the journalist slowly comes to realize the necessity of American involvement in Vietnam.

The film also follows a young Vietnamese orphan who runs around the American soldiers in the camp they are protecting. He apparently represents the South Vietnamese who love America and are grateful for their generous help.

The film was received coolly by most critics, especially due to its overwhelming falsification of the true nature of the war. The Vietnam War was widely regarded as the first televised war; therefore the American public had already seen frightening and real images of the situation in Vietnam even though the government tried relentlessly to bring positive news about the war effort.

The consensus among critics at the time seems to be that the film is offensive to all parties involved. Renata Adler of The New York Times wrote the following in the first paragraph of her review of The Green Berets:

"THE GREEN BERETS" is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this country. Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane. On top of that, it is dull.3

Most scholars seem to be in agreement with Adler, finding the film a distasteful glamorization of the war and the U.S. involvement.

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John Wayne and Vietnam War propaganda

The purpose of making of *The Green Berets* is hardly a subject of debate. John Wayne himself has proclaimed that he wanted American citizens to know that American soldiers were dying in Vietnam and that they needed the support of their countrymen. All well and good; Wayne, understandably, wanted to show support for the troops. But instead of portraying the reality of the harsh environment soldiers had to fight, live and die in, he opted for a much simpler path, the thing he knew best, cowboys and Indians and Allies and the Axis. Previously, John Wayne had made a number of highly popular westerns like *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *The Alamo* (1961) as well as epic World War II films such as *The Longest Day* (1961) and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). Such films tended to glorify the American effort and Wayne became an American icon. In that context, John Wayne’s western *Back to Bataan* (1945) is conceived by Leo Cawley, in his article “The War About the War”, to bear a similar plotline as *The Green Berets*, in which “the Americans are the good guys, the Vietcong are the bad guys, and the peasants are the frightened townsfolk who need protection and the rule of law.”

The film, then, is undoubtedly a pro-war film, although not just a pro-war film. The point can easily be made that *The Green Berets* is a propaganda film since its purpose was in fact to win over the hearts and minds of the American populace, respectively. Philip Taylor of *History Today* was even more definitive in his judgement saying: “It was the most blatantly propagandist contemporaneous American feature film made about the Vietnam War.” Words that is hard to argue against.

Unbeknownst to many, *The Green Berets* film is based on a book. The book is a collection of short stories written by a man who claimed to be a trained green beret. The stories in the book are completely twisted around for the film. A short example: the book “portrayed the crack commando unit as lawless, sadistic, and racist.”

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Something the film tried even too hard not to be, as some of the dialogue is unwittingly racist.  

*The Green Berets* was a big-budget film and the producers needed the support and assistance of the U.S. military to transform the script to the screen. Since the short stories in the book didn’t reflect all too well on the elite American soldiers, the Pentagon was unsure of their position, that is until they saw the script. This film was just what they needed. The military aided the filmmakers to no small extent; and a cost estimation made by a U.S. senator revealed “the cost to the Pentagon for assistance in the making of *The Green Berets* to be over a million dollars.” The support came in many different forms such as access to the Fort Benning military base and all the equipment they needed.

**Historical inaccuracy**

The film can hardly be considered historically accurate, but the question remains as to what makes this film so controversial, enflaming, disrespectful and arrogant? Or is referring to the film as a sad and shameful part of Vietnam War film history an overstatement? A look at some of the more controversial scenes will perhaps prove illuminating on this.

As the opening credits appear on the screen, a fairly chauvinistic song about the elitism of the green berets is heard. The heroism that’s about to ensue is built up. This is not a particularly uncommon protocol when making a heroic war film, but since it premiered six months after the notorious TET-Offensive, its intended effect is lessened considerably and it comes across as pretentious.

Early on in the film the viewer is introduced to the situation in Vietnam as well as the special green berets’ forces. Without a proper explanation there are a few green berets being introduced to a number of people, journalists mostly. They are standing on a stage of sorts and their audience are seated as in an auditorium. One by one the berets reveal their special abilities in a highly robotic fashion. Their main attributes seem to be their well versed language abilities. Most noticeable in this introduction is that the green berets seem to be fluent in German, French, Danish and Norwegian. None of them mentions speaking Vietnamese or Chinese. The

7 Cawley, 74.
French language would most likely be of use in Vietnam because of France’s earlier colonial rule, but for those elite soldiers not to speak a word of the indigenous language is perplexing.

At this same theatrical meeting there are two soldiers explaining the real situation in Vietnam, as together, they’ve finished three tours in Nam. One of them implies how the North Vietnamese Army have killed every mayor in every city, every teacher has been tortured and killed, every governor, every senator and every member of their families have been tortured and killed. He continues, saying that the Vietnamese not only need their help, they want it. To add insult to injury, he refers to Vietnamese men as “little fellows”.

This obvious disrespect for the culture of the Vietnamese people is highly offensive and stereotypical. As in most Vietnam War films the Vietnamese people are referred to as gooks, Charlies and other derogatory terms, but in most cases that particular name-calling has a meaning. It shows how the American soldier has to identify the enemy as evil and subhuman, so when in combat the enemy is dehumanized. Surely the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army did the same. But in *The Green Berets* the purpose is to pity them, to think about those poor people over there, that have nothing, and the Americans who have everything.

Now the heroes of the green berets are in Vietnam and set on their mission, to finish building a camp, deep in VC country. Our berets, as well as the representative of the liberal media, are on board a helicopter. This ride offers an immediate comparison with scenes from other Vietnam War films which include a helicopter cruising over enemy territory. In *The Green Berets* the soldiers are cheerful, asking the reporter what he will write about them, as well as enjoying and commenting on the beautiful scenery that is Vietnam. A scene of a similar nature is presented in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, but with a much more sinister tone. In *Full Metal Jacket* the helicopter flies over a rice paddy field where seemingly frightened Vietnamese people are seen running away as the helicopter’s gunner is firing aimlessly at the crowd shouting: “Anyone who runs is a VC, anyone who doesn’t run is a well disciplined VC.” He then concludes his summary of the Vietnam War with the famous line “ain’t war hell?” And laughs maniacally.

This scene is a fine example of how these two films represent the complete opposites of Vietnam War films; *The Green Berets* trying to win favour for the war in civil torn America in 1968 with an over strenuous glamorization of the war and *Full
Metal Jacket trying to introduce the inhumanity of war and how it affects the psyche of soldiers.

In many of the films in the Vietnam War genre the representation of evil plays a large role. In The Green Berets it was important to portray the Vietnamese enemy as evil to the core. In The Green Berets this is done with storytelling and instances, for example, as was mentioned earlier, when the soldiers told of the atrocities in North Vietnam where government officials and many more were slain. Another scene also implies that the VC tortured and possibly raped villagers in a small village they captured. This is of course a very realistic scenario since it is recognized that brutality such as rape, torture and murder are a part of war, not just in Vietnam. But what we don’t see are any discrepancies by the American soldiers. “The foreignness of the enemy is a sign of evil” and the “Americans themselves are better, friendlier then other nationalities.” The film paints the VC as this faceless enemy, pure evil that kills anything in their path, be it men, women or children. This strengthens the offensive stereotype that the Vietnamese soldiers are fighting the war out of pure evil when in fact it could be argued that the Vietnamese are the ones fighting for their rights in their own country while the U.S. are there to protect their imperial interests.

After Wayne’s speech about the brutality of the war he says to the journalist: “Pretty hard to talk to anyone about this country until they’ve come over here and seen it.” This actually is an accurate statement about the situation. Veterans of the war mostly agree that you had to be there to understand. Wayne’s words ring true, but the context he uses them in is seemingly inappropriate, because there were many more controversial incidents to be seen in Vietnam than the brutality of the VC, especially for reporters as is well documented through famous film clips and photographs.

Pro-war messages

To create a hero who eventually gets the better of evil enemies one must have something good and bright that needs saving. The Green Berets does this in a highly clichéd manner by introducing the poor, helpless Vietnamese orphan whom the American soldiers have bonded with. The child’s parents were killed by the VC and

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8 Cawley, 70.
9 Cawley, 70.
he runs around the camp cheering the soldiers up with his hopeful spirit and knack for honesty.

The kid has been Americanized and presumably his purpose is to give the idea that there’s a reason for all the fighting. This corresponds exactly with Cawley’s idea that “‘foreignness’ needn’t be evil if the foreigners have acquired the cultural traits of Americans.”10 The kid’s use of the military’s recruitment slogan “We want you!” is offered as comic relief in these harsh conditions.

One of the soldiers, Peterson, strikes up a special friendship with the boy and as the film goes on one could probably predict that an adoption is a likely prospect. But things don’t always end up as little boys would like and in the real world soldiers die, regardless of their kind nature. Peterson is killed and doesn’t make it back to the base with John Wayne. The kid is seen running around the helicopters calling frantically for Peterson. This is perhaps the only scene in the film that could possible incite emotions from the viewer, regardless of its realism. That feeling is soon destroyed by John Wayne’s final words that could easily be seen as revolting and offensive for American civilians, American soldiers and the Vietnamese people. As Wayne walks along with his arm around the kid, heading towards the setting sun the kid asks what will happen to him. Wayne utters, in his cowboy-style manner, the words supposed to make Americans believe in the war effort: “You let me worry about that. You’re what this is all about.”

Possibly the strongest pro-war message of The Green Berets is that of the journalist who gets entangled up with the berets. Due to his disagreements with U.S. policy in Vietnam he is invited into the berets entourage and to report on what he encounters. Wayne’s character is annoyed with journalists slamming the brave soldiers who are fighting a just and necessary war in his opinion, and therefore invites him to follow them to Vietnam.

The journalist represents the strong anti-war movement in America at the time, which presumably does not understand what is going on in South East Asia and why U.S. military involvement is so necessary. He also serves as criticism of the world media, particularly the U.S. media, that were thought to be, by John Wayne and the military establishment, biased when reporting on the war. Renata Adler writes in her New York Times review, not without emotion: [The Green Berets] “is completely

10 Cawley, 70.
incommunicado, out of touch. It trips something that would outrage any human sensibility, like mines, at every step and staggers on.”11 This gives an example of the negative effect the film had and how it was justifiably deemed offensive to a number of people.

Understandably the character of the journalist is a controversial one. He creates an image that journalists are sitting at home and judging without being properly informed about the state of affairs in Vietnam. When the character has finally learned the true nature of the war and how American assistance is desperately needed, he signs up for a tour of duty.

Conclusion

When analysing the Vietnam War film genre, *The Green Berets* is in a league of its own. Produced in the midst of war it serves its own agenda. The film makes a mockery of the reality of war and doesn’t have a base to stand on. While viewing the film with the information we have today one couldn’t even make the argument that *The Green Berets* can serve as thoughtless entertainment to be enjoyed over a bowl of popcorn. It’s just dreadful, any way you look at it.

The film’s agenda was obviously to make a pro-war film, propaganda if you will, to win over the hearts and minds of the American people. In that sense its meaning was to create a mythical belief of the situation in Vietnam, but it wasn’t a prolonged or lasting myth. The purpose of the myth was deception, to make the American public believe a lie about a war that wasn’t necessary or simple. Propaganda films are usually produced through unity and the ideology of its makers, in a state where public knowledge of a situation and the flow of information is restricted, for example Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, produced in Nazi-Germany. Producing such a film is considerably harder in an enlightened society. In this transparent attempt *The Green Berets* tries to confuse its viewers regarding the situation of the Vietnamese people and their desire for American involvement. Propaganda films have to have quality, dazzle the viewer and make him believe its message. *The Green Berets* fails miserably in this attempt.

11 Adler, NYTimes.com.
Platoon

Oliver Stone left Yale University after only a year of studies and took a teaching position in Saigon in 1965. That same year the first U.S. infantry troops were sent to South Vietnam and were for the most part welcomed by the Vietnamese people. After his return to the States he gave his academic prospects another chance, but soon quit due to his writings of a massive novel. The novel he wrote failed to be picked up by a publisher.  

In 1967 a confused and disillusioned Oliver Stone joined the U.S. Army, requesting combat in the Vietnam War. Stone served a 15-month tour in Vietnam where he was injured in battle only two weeks after his arrival. He fought courageously throughout his tour earning a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster. This experience would influence his filmmaking a great deal.

Oliver Stone and the reality of the Vietnam War

The experience of the Vietnam War changed Stone, and his military career had a lasting effect on his life. Stone’s fascination with the subject of Vietnam could be deemed by some as an obsession, but he himself has described the process as therapeutic, as a part of his being was ruined in Vietnam. Stone’s filmography reflects his interest in Vietnam, the military personnel serving in the front lines, the politics surrounding the war and the civilians that became tangled up in the web of war.

The subject of analysis here is Stone’s gritty, realistic and award winning motion picture Platoon. Platoon is the first film in Oliver Stone’s trilogy about the Vietnam War. It deals with the day-to-day life of the infantry grunt, battles between forces of good and evil, and the absurdity of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The film that followed in the trilogy was Born on the Fourth of July, where the viewer follows a U.S. Army veteran who has been crippled in the Vietnam War and his

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struggle to come to terms with his place in the post-war world. The last film of the trilogy was *Heaven and Earth*, a true story about a Vietnamese woman who has lived a life full of hardship, fighting for survival in Vietnam. She falls in love with an American soldier and they move to America. As well as having made this trilogy about Vietnam, Stone also co-wrote and directed the biography of Richard Nixon, *Nixon*, where the viewer gets a glimpse into the political side of the war during Nixon’s presidency.

*Platoon* was based on Stone’s personal experiences on the frontlines and therefore many critics, as well as veterans of the Vietnam War have dubbed the film as an accurate depiction of the life of the grunt, the jungle warfare and the unfamiliar climate and surroundings they had to live, fight and die in. Platoon is not about politics of the war, it’s not about the anti-war movement or the strife of the Vietnamese people. It’s about the grunt. It’s about the soldiers who fight on the frontlines. It’s also a battle between good and evil, fighting with one’s mind, morality and how it can become twisted in horrific circumstances, and how people have different ways of coping and dealing with them.

At an opposite end of the spectrum from *The Green Berets*, *Platoon* is perceived by many to be at the pinnacle of realism on the subject of the Vietnam War. The respected film critic Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film that Oliver Stone “tried to make a movie about the war that is not a fantasy, not legend, not metaphor, not message, but simply a memory of what it seemed like at the time.” And that’s what many believe Stone accomplished.

The film begins with a fresh group of soldiers arriving in Vietnam and among them is the protagonist, Chris Taylor. The first thing he witnesses upon departing from the plane are body bags containing fallen U.S. soldiers. He realizes at this point that war is not as his previously romanticized ideas suggest, but far more cruel and unforgiving. As he walks on he meets a group of soldiers going home. They look tired and aged.

In the next scene the viewer is immediately sent into the jungle. Chris is exhausted from the heat, the bugs and the humidity. The viewer is introduced to the

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representatives of good and evil, Sgt. Barnes and Col. Elias. Barnes, the representation of the pro-war element, tells Chris to toughen up and keep moving. The free-wheeling Elias, representing left-wing liberals in a way, is kind and supportive to the young newcomer. This is the premise for how the story will unwind.

Stone makes a point that the soldiers were mainly identified in two separate groups. On one hand there were the beer gulching, poker playing military toughs led by Barnes, and on the other hand were Elias and his followers, who smoked marijuana, listened to music and danced. At this point the soldiers are divided up into two different categories and the point of political divide is driven home.

The drug scene is somewhat characteristic of the drug use in the Vietnam War and the problems that ensued. But at the time Oliver Stone was serving, in 1967, drug use was not considered a big problem, but more of an escape. “The freaky behaviour of the fire bases – smoking joints in bunkers – was accurate for the period. It was later on in the war that drugs became a really serious problem in Vietnam. In ’67, it was still a way to unwind rather than a destroyer of entire combat units.”17 With the rise in heroin consumption, the drug use of American soldiers became a serious problem for the armed forces.

Realism and the importance of the My Lai incident

Possibly the most controversial scene of Platoon is when Bravo Company goes into a small village they suspect is under VC control. Two of their men have just been killed; one by the hand of a booby trap and the other strung up for display just outside the small Vietnamese village as a warning for the Americans. This disrespect for the lives of their fellow soldiers incites fury in the troops. Barnes and his crew take it personally.

The crew arrives at the village angry and vengeful. There they find weapons and food rations that can only imply that this is a village which has been infiltrated by the Viet Cong. Our protagonist is particularly unsettled, losing his temper with a villager and eventually weeping tears of a distorted sense of reality. Afterwards he

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shoots rounds of ammunition at the villager’s feet, making him dance in a Wild West fashion; then retreats shamefully. In steps a young, angry, gung-ho soldier and kills the Vietnamese man with the butt of his gun. He’s out for blood and suggests they slaughter everyone in the village.

The scene cuts to the exterior where Sgt. Barnes starts to interrogate one of the Vietnamese men about the rice and the weapons he’s hiding. Frustration levels keep on rising in the U.S. ranks and eventually they reach a boiling point. When the Vietnamese matriarch of the village keeps on complaining in Vietnamese, Barnes loses control and shoots her with his M-16 assault rifle. The soldiers are either shocked, disgusted, scared or out for blood. It’s not until Elias arrives at the scene that the situation with the Vietnamese villagers is neutralized. The American troops burn down the village, take prisoners and evacuate the rest of the villagers, most likely in accordance with the Strategic Hamlet Program.

The scene is a perfect example of the reality of war and how controversial matters can escalate beyond a point of no return. H.D.S. Greenway, a reporter for *The Boston Globe*, was a war correspondent in Vietnam at the same time as Oliver Stone served. He wrote in an article comparing the film to his experiences that “the film caught the way fear and anger in combat troops could suddenly build up to gratuitous and dangerous violence against the defenceless.” It is then safe to say that tensions were wild and good men often lost control of difficult situations, represented in a relatable manner in *Platoon*.

While Taylor is moving along he comes upon a couple of his fellow soldiers trying to rape a Vietnamese woman and stops them. The battle between good and evil has reached a high point and Chris Taylor has taken sides. This confrontation of the protagonist with his own morality doesn’t quite fall under a depiction of realism, but it rather says more about the multifaceted meaning of the film. Its point is not just to reveal the reality of war, which is done splendidly, but to delve deeper into the human condition.

The U.S. soldiers are then seen walking away from the burnt village holding young Vietnamese children in their arms. This scene does not seem realistic. They’ve just finished burning down the village and Stone makes them look as triumphant heroes. It could just be a way to affirm Elias’ intentions; help the poor and work

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18 Greenway, Highbeam.com.
against evil, but Michael Klein says in his article “Historical Memory and film” that he feels the scene to be “elegiac and self-congratulatory.” He then goes on to say that the scene “is reminiscent of some of the worst moments of British and French colonialist cinema or of the cinema of Coca Cola imperialism.” These are strong words and it’s difficult to completely agree with them even though it has merit. Indeed the scene celebrates the U.S. hero saving the Vietnamese people, but it rather strengthens the idea that not everyone feels the same as Barnes. Even though this is the army, fighting in extremely difficult circumstances, there is still something good as well. This scene can be compared to the final scene of The Green Berets when John Wayne walks into the sunset with the Vietnamese orphan, as both scenes seem self-congratulatory and possibly misleading. The difference is that it serves a purpose in Platoon as a part of the story of the war between Barnes and Elias and how factions within the platoon are fighting amongst themselves. It is Elias’ war torn face that is seen prior to the evacuation, he seems appalled and ashamed.

The whole village scene in Platoon can easily be linked to the famous My Lai incident that occurred in Vietnam. To elaborate, the My Lai incident was a massacre of Vietnamese villagers by a U.S. Army unit led by Lt. William L. Calley. The village was an alleged VC stronghold. Between two hundred to five hundred South Vietnamese are estimated to have been killed in the massacre. Of course the taking of the village in Platoon is not of the same magnitude as the reality of the My Lai incident, but it shows how fragile the mind is and how easy it is to put oneself over the edge in a gruesome game of war.

In the aftermath of the village scene allegiance in the group is split between Barnes and Elias. Taylor has chosen which side he represents. If this scene is meant to refer to the My Lai incident the effect is minuscule. Two Vietnamese are killed and the point could be made that the killings are evened out since two American soldiers had just been killed. The scene though can serve as a reminder of what happens in war: the losing of minds, ever changing morality and the blurred vision between right and wrong.

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20 Klein, 27.
It has also been proclaimed that Oliver Stone wasn’t just criticizing the My Lai incident, but was in fact insinuating that the massacre at My Lai wasn’t a one-time thing, but that it had been happening all over Vietnam. Leo Cawley is among those who support this theory saying that “With Platoon there is the suggestion that a hidden history of ‘offensive incidents’ lies like a lost continent under the waters of the media images of the war.” A reasonable conclusion is that Stone’s agenda is not just to link the scene in the film to the My Lai massacre but to create awareness about all atrocities of war, not just the Vietnam War.

In Platoon the explosions, the wild gunfire, the rain, the forests, the mist and the fog are all a part of the scenery aimed at the distortion of the senses. At times the viewer can hardly keep up with the sudden movements and shifting of angles while being spiralled in different directions with the constant loud noises of the battlefield. The fighting scenes in Platoon are not easy to follow; in fact it is quite difficult. This element of confusion plays a large role in the film’s success as a realistic account of the Vietnam War. “Platoon is a riveting two-hour recreation (by one who lived it) of the alternating boredom, terror and madness of combat in Vietnam. Platoon’s power is that it is all fog.”

It is believed by most Vietnam veterans who have been interviewed about the film, that in respects to the surroundings and confusion, Stone’s grasp of that particular reality is exactly right. Myra MacPherson, a journalist for The Washington Post, wrote that “for those who weren’t there, Platoon shatteringly transports us into a jungle war of horror and confusion.” She also revealed that “Grunts who fought on the ground…are finding much that underscores their Vietnam-as well as distortions of reality.” This indicates that while being realistic to the approach, it cannot represent every soldier’s experience of the war. Such emphatic need for an accurate account would require the timeline of the film to stretch over a decade since the war changed continuously throughout its lifespan. “The only war they knew is the one they fought. There is, simply, no way to capsulize Vietnam.”

After the dramatic slaying of Elias, the men of Bravo Company are split. Taylor is out for vengeance as he knows Barnes is accountable for Elias’ death. The

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22 Cawley, 79.
confusion continues as a battle breaks out in their new location, supposedly in neighbouring Cambodia. Most of the men the viewer has come to identify with throughout the film are killed in what can only be the TET-Offensive.

After the obliterating raid of the Vietnamese, Taylor and Barnes are seen as two of the few survivors. Taylor has the chance to avenge his mentor’s death and so he does. As the film draws to a close the viewer is subjected to the images of the Vietnamese people being buried in mass graves, while the U.S. personnel are cleaning up the area, helping the wounded and collecting the fallen. The mass graves give a realistic account of the vast number of Vietnamese killed in the war, mounting to twentyfold of the U.S. casualties. The final view from the helicopter shows scattered bodies surrounding a bomb crater as a final reminder of the coincidental deaths of war. This scene respectively is viewed by H.D.S. Greenway, a former war correspondent, as lacking in realism saying: “the bodies would not all have been intact after airstrikes and artillery. There would have been a lot more bits and pieces to bulldoze up; but mercifully Stone didn’t take realism that far.” So Stone is not just making frightening images to scare the viewer, but rather trying to create awareness. His point was illustrated throughout the film so the need for scattered body parts in the end wasn’t any.

**Conclusion**

It is not uncommon for films of the Vietnam War genre to create heroes out of individuals, where one man, against all the odds, saves the day. This is especially relevant to the films of the so-called Reagan era. Such films as *Rambo Part II*, starring Sylvester Stallone, and Chuck Norris’s *Missing in Action*, were created as a source of entertainment only. The idea wasn’t to give a reasonable and realistic perspective on the war, but rather be a source of pure entertainment. These action-packed films did relatively well at the box office and this seemed to be the general direction the Vietnam War film genre was taking in the early eighties. This direction created the illusion that the United States had actually accomplished something spectacular in Vietnam. The unknowing viewer was sold a story.

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With the premiere of *Platoon* the casual entertainment view on the Vietnam War was challenged. Here was a dangerous film that challenged convention and brought to life horrific images of war which subsequently minimized the glamorization of war. The film stirred up a lot of feelings in American society and brought closure to many veterans of the Vietnam War. Many agreed that finally there was a depiction of the war that was as real as a film could be. Myra MacPherson referred to the words of a Vietnam veteran in her article: “It’s a film for people who weren’t there,’ he said—an attempt to make the vast majority of Americans who remained untouched by this class war understand.”

The films realism can’t be denied, but it also has entertainment value. The de-glamorization process makes it entertaining as well for the layman viewer. Brutal fighting scenes and bombings are all there, just as in *Rambo*, but the difference is the sad beauty of *Platoon*. For example, the scene where Elias is killed can likely stir up the viewer’s emotions, the majesty of the falling soldier left behind, raising his hands to the sky as if it was Jesus Christ himself being crucified with machine gun fire. *Platoon* leaves us with such haunting images throughout the film, making the viewer descend into the madness *Platoon* portrays. The words of Sgt. Barnes tell all: “I am reality.”

*Platoon* is unique; it’s one of a kind, the reality of jungle warfare. Oliver Stone’s film has to be one of the best and most realistic films made about the Vietnam War.

**Apocalypse now**

It was sarcastically dubbed Apocalypse When? by the media prior to its release because of its constant delays and endless problems during production. The story behind the psychedelic Vietnam War classic *Apocalypse Now* is one of drugs, fear, near bankruptcy and paranoia, but it is also a story of principles, anti-war sentiments, pro-war ideas and modern imperialism.

*Apocalypse Now* was eagerly awaited in Hollywood and was expected to be an integral part of the young and developing Vietnam War film genre. The year before *Apocalypse Now* was released, two films on the Vietnam War had caught the

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attention of moviegoers. These films were Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* and Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*. *Coming Home* was thought to be a, perhaps, superficial anti-war film and “could only have convinced those already converted.”\(^{29}\) Still, the point of objection to the war was a good enough message to begin with. *The Deer Hunter*, a beloved classic, had a different feel to it. It was conceived to be patriotic and also it depicted a negative stereotype of the Vietnamese people, displayed in the notorious Russian roulette scene. These were big shoes to fill for *Apocalypse Now* director, Francis Ford Coppola.

**Francis Ford Coppola’s Vietnam War and His Larger-Than-Life Characters**

The pressure on Coppola was mounting by the minute. The film he made prior to *Apocalypse Now* was the second part of the Mafia family trilogy *The Godfather*. *The Godfather Part II* earned Coppola three Oscars: best picture, best director and best adapted screenplay. He had secured Marlon Brando, arguably the biggest movie star at the time, to play the role of Colonel Kurtz and a young Martin Sheen to play the lead role of Captain Willard. Many other famous, or coming to fame, actors starred in the war epic, most notably Robert Duvall as the fearless Colonel Kilgore, obsessed with surfing, and Dennis Hopper as a journalist gone astray, living with Col. Kurtz. This star cast created problems of epic proportions for Coppola, most notably Martin Sheen’s heart attack during shooting. Marlon Brando had also gained several pounds before he arrived at the set and therefore his scenes had to be shot with him in the shadows, which ultimately enhanced the mystique surrounding the elusive character of Colonel Kurtz.

Adapting Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* proved quite fitting to the situation in South East Asia at the time, raising similar difficult questions concerning imperialism and colonialism as *Heart of Darkness* did in regards to Africa at the height of European imperialism. The message of colonialism was emphasized in a far stronger way with the re-release of *Apocalypse Now* in 2001 under the title

\(^{29}\) Terry Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (New York: Basil Blackwood, 1987), 154.
Apocalypse Now Redux. In Redux Coppola uses the French plantation sequence, a highly political scene, to change the pace of the film and to focus on the idea of imperialism in Vietnam.

“Apocalypse when?” became Apocalypse Now in 1979 and received mostly positive reviews even though the stories from its production were by some thought to be even more interesting. Indeed it is a masterpiece of imagery, mysticism and surrealism, but it still tells an important story of the reality of this particular war, be it an unconventional storytelling. Coppola had, according to Roger Ebert, turned “Conrad’s journey up the Congo into a metaphor for another journey up a jungle river, into the heart of the Vietnam War.” Ebert goes on saying that he believes that this is an epic tale that will stand the test of time and it is hard to disagree with that statement.

An in-depth analysis of some of the key scenes of this widely proclaimed masterpiece is better served with the 2001 Apocalypse Now Redux edition which gives the film a more political edge and a grander connection to Heart of Darkness and its critique of imperialism in the 19th century.

The imagery of death, mayhem and hell is vivid in the opening scene as The Doors’ dramatic musical masterpiece This is the End brings us closer to the introduction of madness. The scene shows images of the orange smoke rising towards the trees that are subsequently bombarded with napalm explosives, all the while fading into the war torn face of Captain Willard lying in his bed contemplating the things he’s done. “The opening is as nightmarish a depiction of war as has ever been captured on celluloid.” Captain Willard is in an intoxicated state. His nightstand shows whiskey and a spoon, indicating the use of heroin.

As the narration begins, Cpt. Willard talks about his past experiences, how he’s obsessed with the war and how he couldn’t adapt to the normal life after he came home from the war. He needed to get back to the jungle. These images of a decorated soldier, entangled in an inner battle with his mind was not the norm while depicting an officer of the army, but “Coppola said he was trying to make a war movie

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that would somehow rise above conventional images of valor and cowardice."³² This perspective continues throughout the film where most of the characters do not fall under the definition of conformity or preconceived notions. The captain’s increasing madness is only sidelined for the mission, for with the mission comes a purpose.

As Captain Willard is handed his mission, his new commanding officers ask questions regarding his career; he comes over as a loner who has gone on several solitary missions. None of those will compare to the tracking and killing of the rogue Colonel Kurtz. Willard is obviously an experienced soldier who has gone on numerous missions that have had a lasting effect on his psyche. The idea of the solitary soldier is somewhat unbelievable and more of a Rambo-ish way of fighting the war. This notion gives the viewer the sense that the war is fought by individuals, not companies. This is in stark contrast with Platoon which gives the sense that the life or death of a soldier is mostly coincidental. “Every general staff in the world since 1914 has known that the bravery of the individual soldier in modern war is about as essential as whether they are handsome."³³ The need for secrecy in the operation of killing Col. Kurtz is of course vital to the army since the news of a rogue colonel could spark outrage and split legions within the military ranks. So in defence of the script, the nature of the mission allows it to be a one-man mission, conducted by a man of experience.

It was in the hands of the air mobile division to provide an escort for Willard and his crew to their entry point at the river. The unit was under the command of Colonel Kilgore, so memorably portrayed by Robert Duvall, making him one of the most famous characters of the genre. His “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” line, is so fantastic it has become a cult cliché.

“Charlie don’t surf,” says Kilgore as he has decided to take his men to a beach point controlled by the Viet Cong – a truly fearless human being. The whole character of Colonel Kilgore is so unrealistic and not relatable that in the context of the Vietnam War he’s likely to cause offence to those who fought in the war more than anything else. Kilgore is loved by viewers nevertheless. The role of Colonel Kilgore has been expanded in the Redux edition which gives him some humane characteristics intertwined with his madness. “The scene shows Kilgore ordering children saved and evacuated, along with the maniacal exhilaration of the moment when the colonel

³² Suid, 210.
³³ Cawley, 71.
insists on including a surfing interlude in the commando raid.”

Kilgore is like one of the Greek gods, seemingly untouchably, and Wagner’s
\textit{Ride of the Valkyries} underscores his godliness as the helicopter raid carries on.
These images of complete superiority challenge the opinion somewhat that this is a
strong anti-war film. “During the battle scene at ‘Charlie’s Point,’ a peaceful
Vietnamese village is destroyed, photographed as so to excite the viewer viscerally
and to glorify war and its godlike heroes.”

The victims of the bombings are faceless and the only time the viewer sees a Vietnamese person is when he is receiving
treatment by U.S. soldiers and medical teams. On the other hand “the camera moves
in to isolate the agony of one wounded American soldier. The audience is thus
cinematically implicated in the exhilarating superiority of the American attack.”

These scenes of Col. Kilgore’s heroics can easily be interpreted as a strong pro-war
message but in the grand scheme of \textit{Apocalypse Now} it underlines the absurdity of
this specific war, where the surfing mania enhances the confusion of the experience.
These scenes with Col. Kilgore depict the soldiers more as warriors in a mythical
battle between good and evil. Kilgore and his men are shown from a flattering
perspective, flying in as the great saviour, while the Vietnamese people are faceless
non-entities.

The cinematic indifference to violence and mayhem in Duvall’s scenes where
the beauty of bloodshed is spellbinding (cf. more recent works such as Tarantino’s
\textit{Kill Bill} and Ang Lee’s \textit{Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon}), is quickly turned around with
much darker images of the war, lead by the narration of Captain Willard which is
worn out and at times maniacal. Therefore the argument that \textit{Apocalypse Now} is a
pro-war film can easily be annulled. The original version seems to reveal some pro-
American messages though, but the re-release from 2001 offers a somewhat
different view. \textit{Apocalypse Now Redux} tells the viewer another story which offers the
interpretation that this just might be a film with an underlying anti-American message.


Tomasulo, 149.
It is with the added plantation scene that the viewer gets a different perspective than previously shown regarding the American involvement in South East Asia, and therein lays the original message of Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*.

**Imperialism and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness***

After a member of the boat’s crew dies, Willard and his men attempt to find an appropriate place to bury him. Cruising through the hypnotic fog of the river they stop at a seemingly deserted military outpost at the river bank. When they emerge from the boat they are shouted at in French. After they get their bearings and lay down their weapons they are greeted by a member of the French family which owns the plantation. They are some of the few French colonialists that still reside there after the Indochina War, which was waged from 1945 to 1954.

At this point in the film the journey to Colonel Kurtz is put on hold. The viewer is thrown into a completely different atmosphere then previously encountered. The subject of colonialism and imperialism is under scrutiny and the French plantation owners represent the last remaining elements of a disappearing world where most countries are under the rule of the empires of the western world. These plantation scenes are Coppola’s closest link to Joseph Conrad and the main themes of *Heart of Darkness*, being openly critical towards imperialism, even hinting that America’s aggression in Vietnam is nothing more than an imperial nation looking to strengthen its grip on the world. Here the previously toyed with idea of pro-war elements of the film are nullified and the idea of the absurdity of it all is prevalent.

The scene would seem on the surface to have very little to do with *Heart of Darkness*, but the very presence of the French colonists in the film reminds us of the Western presence in Vietnam that preceded that of the Americans, much in the same way that Marlow’s reminiscences about the Roman conquest of Britain reminds us in *Heart of Darkness* of the precursors to European expansion in Africa.37

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It is quite interesting in this scene how angry the French colonialis are with the Vietnamese. One of the French men refers to life as being cruel and unforgiving, all the while it is they that have taken the land and don’t seem to understand the position of the indigenous people. Though the whole scene appears at first to be completely out of character for the film it serves as a crucial element to drive home the corresponding themes of *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness*. “This ghostly diversion broadens the movie’s perspective, reinforces its theme of duality of man and adds new colours to its emotional palette.”38 The connection between Coppola’s Vietnam and Conrad’s Belgian Congo is strengthened to a bond unbreakable and allows *Apocalypse Now* to delve into the essence of *Heart of Darkness* making it a timeless masterpiece that can be localized to past and possibly future situations of colonialism.

“It’s the journey, not the destination that matters in this movie: everything Coppola and screenwriter John Milius have to tell us is viscerally stated on the boat ride.”39 These words of *Newsweek*’s David Ansen are reflective of the critique of *Apocalypse Now*. The final scene is thought to be anti climatic and sub-par compared to the journey. Marlon Brando is overweight and out of shape, not exactly the idea of a rogue Colonel controlling the local Montagnard people. Even though this is a widely shared opinion, it is an oversimplification. This final sequence of the film stretches out and is too long. As the viewer draws near the mouth of madness, peculiar images greet him. It’s beautiful and dangerous at the same time.

At this point *Apocalypse Now* has let go of any sense of realism and so created a mythical being of Colonel Kurtz. The connection between the film and the Vietnam War is blurred – this is the personal hell of Colonel Kurtz.

**Conclusion**

*Apocalypse Now* is in a different category than *The Green Berets* and *Platoon*. Its scope is much larger and its message is unclear and open to interpretation. The film’s visuals dazzle the senses in a unique way as it collides with celebrated views

on violence. Coppola has created a film which simultaneously represents all sides and takes no sides; its representation is open to the viewer's interpretation.

On the subject of realism, *Apocalypse Now* doesn’t hold water; it is much more surreal and ambiguous. It expects the viewer to decipher its meaning without being fed the information through obvious channels. Kilgore's character is certainly represented as a hero, but peel off the layers and his persona is quite mythical and his action can be interpreted as the macho chauvinism of the United States. In any case he is an epic hero.

Creation of myths is the core of the film. The three main heroes or villains, Captain Willard, Colonel Kilgore and Colonel Kurtz have all the characteristics of mythical beings almost. They are fearless, strong and determined. Nothing can harm them. The myth of Colonel Kurtz is built up through the entire boat ride with Willard's endless viewing of the dossier, until his meeting with Colonel Kurtz in his darkened, shadowy lair. That scene only enhances the mythical experience more than anything else.

It surely is a masterpiece, *Apocalypse Now*. It has stood the test of time, not only through the cinematography, sounds and sets, but also from a political standpoint. It is just as good a criticism of imperialism today and could easily be fitted to the situation in the Middle East. It may look like a straight forward story but it's a tough film to digest, with all its themes and symbolism and whirlwind of confusion. *Apocalypse Now Redux*, not wanting to state its message too obviously, allows the viewer to take from it the meaning he senses and feels to be right.

**Final Conclusion**

When analyzing effectively films of the Vietnam War genre the results can be somewhat different from previously conceived opinions. The films’ critiques can be superficial and most certainly a matter of taste, while a close examination of their meaning can shed a new light on the viewing experience. That is not to say that one
encounters surprises behind every scene, but the greater the film’s complexity, the greater the material that stems from it.

A realistic depiction of war in films is a necessary tool for the public to gain insight into the difficulties and horrors of war. The viewer can never expect the vision of the filmmaker to give a complete and accurate account of life at war. It can only be used as an introduction to the similarities of reality and the images that the filmmaker portrays. In most cases though, the depiction of war is heavily distorted and the road to realism is a narrow one, filled with traps set to instil ideas of a false nature. The landscape of realistic war films is barren, making it even more important to single out the ones that give accurate accounts to the best of their abilities.

It is known beforehand that Platoon has been hailed for its accurate depiction of the war as it really was, but under the microscopic view of a research paper such as this, the truth, as we have thought it to be, is tangled up with new ideas and visions that emerge. Platoon’s ability to bring us to war is what gives it its edge over other films of the genre pertaining to realism. Making the artwork of film represent reality to its fullest will never be fully accomplished though, since the experience of the reality cannot be transformed through the screen. The viewer will never experience the fear, the surroundings, the smell and the rush one would expect war to entail.

The creation of myths in films has stood at the centre of the industry which is surrounded by the ideas of making larger-than-life heroes. The viewer is hypnotized by these myths and they create the feeling that anyone can rise to the challenge and save the world. But mythical figures are complex beings, often torn between worlds of good and evil, as is apparent in Apocalypse Now.

Myths created around situations and circumstances are much more dangerous, offering a belief system that doesn’t conform to any sense of reality. These mythical depictions distort our sense of reality and we lose the focus of the real life experience. This is especially threatening in the depiction of warfare since it allows the filmmaker to work from his own agenda, be it his political view or personal opinion. This is a tool that needs to be used with caution, but is a necessary tool as well. Myths can create beauty, as in Apocalypse Now, as well as lies and propaganda as in The Green Berets. The use of the myth is what creates masterpieces, but it challenges the viewer to interpret them respectfully.
Films’ entertainment value is, when push comes to shove, the backbone of the industry, so for films to be made they have to be entertaining. The tricky part in modern filmmaking is to combine the element of entertainment with quality. When creating films that are to reflect a certain war, the filmmaker has a duty to respect his subject and create art that has meaning. War films do not have to be completely accurate in their depiction of reality, but rather be influenced by real life events and have historical knowledge on the subject. If that is the case the film can be viewed from many different angles and the viewer can dissect and interpret the work of art, taking his own meaning from it.
Bibliography


