The articulation of memory and desire: from Vietnam to the war in the Persian Gulf

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In this chapter I want to explore, within a context of culture and power, the complex relations between memory and desire.¹ More specifically, I want to connect 1980s Hollywood representations of America's war in Vietnam (what I will call 'Hollywood's Vietnam') with George Bush's campaign, in late 1990 and early 1991, to win support for US involvement in what became the Gulf War. My argument is that Hollywood produced a particular 'regime of truth'² about America's war in Vietnam and that this body of 'knowledge' was 'articulated'³ by George Bush as an enabling 'memory' in the build up to the Gulf War.

Vietnam revisionism and the Gulf War

In the weeks leading up to the Gulf War, *Newsweek* featured a cover showing a photograph of a serious-looking George Bush. Above the photograph was the banner headline, 'This will not be another Vietnam'. The headline was taken from a speech made by Bush in which he said, 'In our country, I know that there are fears of another Vietnam. Let me assure you . . . this will not be another Vietnam.'⁴ In another speech, Bush again assured his American audience that, 'This will not be another Vietnam . . . Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world. They will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their backs.'⁵ Bush was seeking to put to rest a spectre that had come to haunt America's political and military self-image, what Richard Nixon and others had called the 'Vietnam Syndrome'.⁶ The debate over American foreign policy had, according to Nixon, been 'grotesquely distorted' by an unwillingness 'to use power to defend national interests'.⁷ Fear of another Vietnam, had made America 'ashamed of . . . [its] power, guilty about being strong'.⁸

In the two Bush speeches from which I have quoted, and in many other similar speeches, Bush was articulating what many powerful American voices throughout the 1980s had sought to make *the* dominant meaning of the war: 'the Vietnam War as a noble cause betrayed – an American tragedy'. For example, in the 1980 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan declared, in an attempt to put an end to the Vietnam Syndrome, 'It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause.'⁹ Moreover, Reagan insisted, 'Let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let us win.'¹⁰ In 1982 (almost a decade after the last US combat troops left Vietnam), the Vietnam Veterans' memorial was unveiled in Washington. Reagan observed that Americans were 'beginning to appreciate that [the Vietnam War] was a just cause'.¹¹ In 1984 (eleven years after the last US combat troops left Vietnam) the Unknown Vietnam Soldier was buried; at the ceremony President Reagan claimed, 'An American hero has returned home . . . He accepted his mission and did his duty. And his honest patriotism overwhelms us.'¹² In 1985 New York staged the first of the 'Welcome Home' parades for Vietnam veterans. In this powerful mix of political rhetoric and national events, there is a clear attempt to put in place a new 'consensus' about the meaning of America's war in Vietnam. It begins in 1980 in Reagan's successful presidential campaign and ends in 1991 with the triumphalism of Bush after victory in the Gulf War.

The political and historical revisionism of the 1980s produced a mythology about why the US had been defeated in Vietnam. Moreover, it was a mythology that had more to do with preparing for the future than it ever had to do with explaining the past. As Reagan had stated, in his 1980 presidential campaign, '[The United States has] an inescapable duty to act as tutor and protector of the free world . . . [To fulfil this duty] we must first rid ourselves of the Vietnam Syndrome'.¹³ In this sense, 1980s revisionism was an enabling discourse; its aim was to enable the US to once again take up the role of 'tutor and protector of the Free World'. To achieve these aims, Bush (and Reagan before him) had to both acknowledge and limit the meaning of Vietnam. In this task of mixing memory and desire, Bush (and Reagan before him) received significant support (I will argue) from Hollywood's Vietnam. Films such as *Cutter's Way* (1981), *First Blood* (1982), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing In Action* (1984), *Missing In Action II – The Beginning* (1985),

Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985), *Platoon* (1986), *POW: The Escape* (1986), *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987), *Braddock: Missing In Action III* (1988), *Casualties of War* (1989), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and others, helped to create a memory of the war, and a desire to win the war retrospectively, that enabled Bush to say, with some credibility and conviction, that the Gulf War would not be another Vietnam.

The difficulty, of course, is in connecting Hollywood films to people's thinking on Vietnam and the war in the Persian Gulf. For some film critics the influence of Hollywood is self-evident. Robert Burgoyne, for example, points to what he calls 'the preeminent role that film has assumed in interpreting the past for contemporary [US] society'.¹⁴ He also refers to 'the central role that the cinema plays in the imaging of the nation'.¹⁵ Similarly, Robert Brent Toplin claims, without offering much in the way of evidence, that 'Historical films help shape the thinking of millions. Often the depictions seen on the screen influence the public's view of historical subjects much more than books do.'¹⁶ In a discussion of French cinema in the 1970s Michel Foucault argued that recent French films (featuring the French Resistance) were engaged in 'a battle . . . to reprogramme . . . the "popular memory"; and . . . to . . . impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present . . . So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been.'¹⁷ Although I reject Foucault's rather crude notion that films can 'reprogramme . . . popular memory', I do like the idea that memory is one of the sites where culture and power may become entangled. To explore the relations between memory, culture and power, I will build my analysis on an 'appropriation' of the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs.¹⁸ In particular, I will deploy his concept of 'the collective memory'.

Memories are made of this

Halbwachs makes four overlapping claims about what he calls 'collective memory'. First, memory is as much collective as individual. Halbwachs explains this in two ways. Firstly, like Sigmund Freud,¹⁹ Halbwachs recognised that memories are often fragmented and incomplete. But whereas Freud searched for completion in the unconscious, Halbwachs argued that completion should be sought in the social world outside the individual. In other words, what is

provisional in our own memories is confirmed by the memories of others. As he explains,

We appeal to witnesses to corroborate or invalidate as well as supplement what we somehow know already about an event . . . Our confidence in the accuracy of our [memory] . . . increases . . . if it can be supported by others' remembrances . . . Don't we believe that we relive the past more fully because we no longer represent it alone . . . but through the eyes of another as well?²⁰

This is not to deny that individuals have memories, which are their own, but to point to the ways in which individual memories and collective memories intermingle. As he explains, 'the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory'.²¹ Think of what happens when a photograph album is produced at a family gathering. As the photographs are passed around, particular photographs cue memories for one family member, which are then either supported, elaborated or challenged by other members of the family. The discussions which ensue seek collectively to fix specific memories to particular photographs. In this way, family histories are rehearsed, elaborated and (temporarily) 'fixed'.

Memory is also collective in another way. We often remember with others what we did not ourselves experience firsthand. Halbwachs explains it like this,

During my life, my national society has been a theater for a number of events that I say I 'remember', events that I know about only from newspapers or the testimony of those directly involved . . . In recalling them, I must rely entirely upon the memory of others, a memory that comes, not as corroborator or completer of my own, but as the very source of what I wish to repeat. I often know such events no better nor in any other manner than I know historical events that occurred before I was born. I carry a baggage load of historical remembrances that I can increase through conversation and reading.²²

In an argument similar to Halbwachs', Alison Landsberg has coined the term 'prosthetic memory' to describe the ways in which mass media (especially cinema) enable people to experience as memories what they did not themselves live. As she explains,

Because the mass media fundamentally alter our notion of what counts as experience, they might be a privileged arena for the production and

circulation of prosthetic memories. The cinema, in particular, as an institution which makes available images for mass consumption, has long been aware of its ability to generate experiences and to install memories of them – memories which become experiences that film consumers both possess and feel possessed by.²³

Moreover, she claims that ‘What individuals see might affect them so significantly that the images actually become part of their own personal archive of experience’.²⁴

Halbwachs’ second claim about memory is to point to how remembering is not a process in which we resurrect a ‘pure’ past; memories are not veridical reports of past events; remembering is always an act of reconstruction and representation. In a study of eyewitness testimony, Elisabeth Loftus²⁵ shows how a person’s memory for an event that they had witnessed can be influenced and altered. Loftus argues that if witnesses are exposed to additional information during the period between witnessing an event and recounting the event, the ‘post-event information’ can have the effect of modifying, changing or supplementing the original memory. This results from a process social psychologists call ‘destructive updating’,²⁶ in which what was originally remembered is displaced, transformed and sometimes lost. What is true of eyewitness testimony is also true of memory in everyday life. What we remember does not stay the same; memories are forgotten, revised, reorganised, updated, as they undergo rehearsal, interpretation and retelling. Moreover, the more important the event remembered, the more it is vulnerable to reconstruction, as it will be more frequently rehearsed, interpreted and retold.

Halbwachs’ third point is to argue that remembering is always present-situated; memories do not take us into ‘the past’, rather they bring ‘the past’ into the present; remembering involves what psychologist Frederic Bartlett calls an ‘effort after meaning’.²⁷ In other words, remembering is about making meaning in the present and in response to the present. That is, in order for our memories to remain meaningful to us, they have to make sense in the context of the present. As Bartlett explains, memories ‘live with our interests and with them they change’.²⁸ Put simply, our memories change as we change. As Halbwachs explains, ‘a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present’.²⁹ To study memory, therefore, is not to study the past, but the past as it exists in the present (a past-present dialectic).

Moreover, it is the play of the past in the present which makes memory, and appeals to memory, always potentially political.

Halbwachs' final point is that collective memory is embodied in mnemonic artefacts, forms of commemoration such as shrines, statues, war memorials and so on – what French historian Pierre Nora calls 'sites of memory'.³⁰ I think we can add to Halbwachs' list of mnemonic artefacts what I will call the 'memory industries', that part of the culture industries concerned with articulating the past. Heritage sites and museums are obvious examples, but we should also include the mass media (including cinema). The memory industries, like the culture industries of which they form a part, produce representations ('cultural memorials'), with which we are invited to think, feel and recognise the past. But these representations do not embody memory as such, they embody the materials for memory; they provide the materials from which 'collective memory' can be made. The process is not of course monolithic or uncontested; there is always in circulation and potential contestation both dominant and subordinate memories and traditions and mythologies. It is my claim, however, that Hollywood in the 1980s produced compelling materials out of which could be made memories of the Vietnam War. As Marita Sturken observes,

survivors of traumatic historical events often relate that as time goes by, they have difficulty distinguishing their personal memories from those of popular culture. For many World War II veterans, Hollywood's World War II movies have subsumed their individual memories into a general script.³¹

Again, as Sturken notes (more specifically related to my argument), 'Some Vietnam veterans say they have forgotten where some of their memories came from – their own experiences, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies?'³² For example, Vietnam veteran William Adams makes this telling point,

When *Platoon* was first released, a number of people asked me, 'Was the war really like that?' I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how graphic and realistic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what 'really' happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also testimony to the way our memories work. The Vietnam War is no

longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves.³³

History lessons: you must remember this

Memories do not just consist of what is remembered but also of what has been forgotten. The memory industries, therefore, do not just circulate things to remember, they also, and significantly, fail to articulate that which might also be remembered. I want to consider briefly four examples of what Hollywood ‘forgot’ about America’s war in Vietnam.

Forgetting Vietnam

Nowhere in Hollywood’s discourse on Vietnam are we informed about the extent of the resistance to the war. The counterculture, and the anti-war movement in general, has been given little visual space in Hollywood representations of the war. Yet, according to US Justice Department figures, between 1966 and 1973, 191,840 men refused to be drafted.³⁴ This has never been represented. One can of course respond by pointing out that these are war films, and therefore the anti-war movement is peripheral to their narrative project. To a certain extent this is of course true. But can the same argument be used to exclude representations of the opposition to the war which existed within the American armed forces? Between 1966 and 1973, 503,926 members of the US armed forces engaged in what the US Defense Department described as ‘incidents of desertion’.³⁵ The extent of the problem is made clear by the fact that 28,661 deserters were still at large in 1974.³⁶ By 1970, according to Pentagon sources, there were 209 verified ‘fraggings’ (killing of officers by their own men) in Vietnam. Michael Klein suggests that ‘the death toll from fragging by soldiers disaffected with the war may be as high as 5 per cent of the total loss of life in combat sustained by the US armed forces during the war’.³⁷ There is also the known instances of mutinies. Perhaps the most famous example is the mutiny of marines at Da Nang in 1968. Finally, to counter the optimism and propaganda of the very official newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, it has been estimated that something like 144 alternative newspapers were in circulation on American bases in Vietnam.³⁸

Hollywood also ‘forgets’ the details of the gender and ethnicity of those Americans who fought in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1972, the US sent between ten and fifteen thousand³⁹ women to the war in Vietnam; 75 per cent of whom were exposed to combat and hostile fire. Watching only Hollywood representations of the war, one would get no sense of this at all. African-Americans have suffered a similar exclusion. As Wallace Terry points out,

black soldiers were dying at a greater rate, proportionately, than American soldiers of other races. In the early years of the fighting, blacks made up 23% of the fatalities . . . [In 1969] [b]lack combat fatalities had dropped to 14%, still proportionately higher than the 11% which blacks represented in the American population.⁴⁰

Similarly, once drafted and in Vietnam, the likelihood of seeing heavy combat makes interesting reading when related to ethnicity: white Americans 29 per cent, African-Americans 34 per cent, Hispanic-Americans 41 per cent.⁴¹ Again, relying only on Hollywood representations of Vietnam, one would get no sense of the extent to which African-American and Hispanic-American soldiers were fighting and dying in the war.

Hollywood also ‘forgets’ the extent of US firepower deployed in Vietnam. Put simply, the US deployed in Vietnam the most intensive firepower the world had ever witnessed. Hollywood narratives do not feature the deliberate defoliation of large areas of Vietnam, the napalm strikes, the search-and-destroy missions, the use of Free Fire Zones, the mass bombing. For example, during the ‘Christmas bombing’ campaign of 1972, the US ‘dropped more tonnage of bombs on Hanoi and Haiphong than Germany dropped on Great Britain from 1940 to 1945’.⁴² In total, the US dropped three times the number of bombs on Vietnam as had been dropped anywhere during the whole of the World War Two.⁴³ In a memorandum to President Johnson in 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote ‘[the] picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week [his estimate of the human cost of the US bombing campaign], while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not pretty’.⁴⁴ The bombing only intensified as the war continued for another six years. Daniel Ellsberg, who worked for McNamara, was equally damning about US involvement in Vietnam. He described America’s war in Vietnam as a ‘crime . . . a brutal

fraud, a lawless imperial adventure'.⁴⁵ The destructive power and the perverse logic of the war is captured perfectly by a US officer's comment on the destruction of Ben Tre: 'It was necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.'⁴⁶ The documented American atrocities (My Lai being the most reported example) committed during the course of the war tend to be presented (when presented at all) as isolated moments of understandable madness or as individual acts of sadism, and never as the inevitable result of the logic of America's prosecution of the war.

Hollywood also 'forgets' the human costs of the war. If our knowledge of the war was derived solely from Hollywood's Vietnam, we would be forgiven for thinking that America suffered an enormous number of both casualties and fatalities in Vietnam. 58,191 dead is the figure recorded on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial ('The Wall'). Without wishing to diminish the suffering that this number represents, it has to be placed in the context of a figure of at least two million Vietnamese dead.

Remembering Vietnam

I want now to examine the other side of memory. That is, what Hollywood 'remembers' about America's war in Vietnam. To see Hollywood's power as not (or not only) about forgetting but also as about remembering differently, I take as my guide Foucault's work on 'power'.⁴⁷ From the perspective of a Foucauldian reading of Hollywood's Vietnam, it does not really matter whether Hollywood's representations are 'true' or 'false' (historically accurate or not), what matters is the 'regime of truth' they put into circulation. From this perspective, Hollywood's power is not a negative force, something which denies, represses, negates. On the contrary, Hollywood's power is productive. Foucault's general point about power is also true with regard to Hollywood's power: 'We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.'⁴⁸

I want now to briefly describe three narrative paradigms, or 'rituals of truth', that feature strongly in Hollywood's Vietnam in the 1980s. I have chosen these particular 'rituals of truth' because of the way they inform and underpin the comments made by Bush in the political and military build up to the war in the Gulf.

The first of my chosen narrative paradigms is ‘the war as betrayal’. This is first of all a discourse about bad leaders. In *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing In Action I*, *Missing In Action II – The Beginning*, *Braddock: Missing In Action III* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, for example, politicians are blamed for America’s defeat in Vietnam. When John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) is asked to return to Vietnam in search of American soldiers missing in action, he asks, with great bitterness: ‘Do we get to win this time?’⁴⁹ In other words, will the politicians let them win? Second, it is a discourse about weak military leadership in the field. In *Platoon* and *Casualties of War*, for example, defeat, it is suggested, is the result of an incompetent military command. Third, it is also a discourse about civilian betrayal. Both *Cutter’s Way* and *First Blood* suggest that the war effort was betrayed back home in America. Again, John Rambo’s comments are symptomatic. When he is told by Colonel Trautman, ‘It’s over Johnny’, he responds,

Nothing is over. You don’t just turn it off. It wasn’t my war. You asked me, and I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn’t let us win. And I come back to the world and see these maggots protesting at the airport, calling me baby-killer. Who are they to protest me? I was there, they weren’t!

Interestingly, all the films in this category are structured around loss. In *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action I*, *II*, and *III*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *POW: The Escape*, it is lost prisoners; in *Cutter’s Way*, *First Blood* and *Born on the 4th of July*, it is lost pride; in *Platoon* and *Casualties of War*, it is lost innocence. It seems clear that the different versions of what is lost are symptomatic of a displacement of a greater loss: the displacement of that which can barely be named, America’s defeat in Vietnam. The use of American POWs is undoubtedly the most ideologically charged of these displacement strategies. It seems to offer the possibility of three powerful ‘truth effects’.⁵⁰

First, to accept the myth that there are Americans still being held in Vietnam is to begin to retrospectively justify the original intervention. If the Vietnamese are so barbaric as to still hold prisoners decades after the conclusion of the conflict, then there is no need to feel guilty about the war, as they surely deserved the full force of American military intervention. Second, Jeffords identifies a process she calls the ‘feminization of loss’.⁵¹ That is, those blamed for America’s defeat, whether they are unpatriotic protesters, an

uncaring government, a weak and incompetent military command, or corrupt politicians, are always represented as stereotypically feminine: 'the stereotyped characteristics associated with the feminine in dominant U.S. culture – weakness, indecisiveness, dependence, emotion, nonviolence, negotiation, unpredictability, deception'.⁵² Jeffords' argument is illustrated perfectly in the MIA cycle of films in which the 'feminine' negotiating stance of the politicians is played out against the 'masculine', no-nonsense approach of the returning veterans. The implication being that 'masculine' strength and single-mindedness would have won the war, whilst 'feminine' weakness and duplicity lost it. There can be little doubt that this aspect of Hollywood's discourse provides support for Bush's claims about the lessons to be learned from America's war in Vietnam. Third, perhaps most important of all is how these films turned what was thought to be lost into something which was only missing. Defeat is displaced by the 'victory' of finding and recovering American POWs. Puzzled by the unexpected success of *Uncommon Valor* in 1983, the *New York Times* sent a journalist to interview the film's 'audience'. One moviegoer was quite clear why the film was such a box-office success: 'We get to win the Vietnam War'.⁵³

The second narrative paradigm is what I will call 'the inverted firepower syndrome'. This is a narrative device in which the US's massive techno-military advantage (as discussed earlier) is inverted. Instead of scenes of the massive destructive power of American military force, we are shown countless narratives of individual Americans fighting the numberless (and often invisible) forces of the North Vietnamese Army and/or the sinister and shadowy men and women of the National Liberation Front ('Viet Cong'). *Missing In Action I, II and III*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Platoon* all contain scenes of lone Americans struggling against overwhelming odds. John Rambo, armed only with a bow and arrow, is perhaps the most notorious example. *Platoon*, however, takes this narrative strategy onto another plane altogether. In a key scene, 'good' Sergeant Elias is pursued by countless North Vietnamese soldiers. He is shot continually until he falls to his knees, spreading his arms out in a Christ-like gesture of agony and betrayal. The camera pans slowly to emphasise the pathos of his death throes. In Britain the film was promoted with a poster showing Elias in the full pain of his 'crucifixion'.⁵⁴ Above the image is written the legend: 'The First Casualty of War is Innocence'. Loss of innocence is presented as both a realisation of the

realities of modern warfare and as a result of America playing fair against a brutal and ruthless enemy. The ideological implication is clear: if America lost by playing the good guy, it is 'obvious' that it will be necessary in all future conflicts to play the tough guy in order to win. Such a narrative of course gives credence to Bush's Gulf War boast that this time America would not fight 'with one hand tied behind [its] back'.⁵⁵

The third narrative paradigm is 'the Americanisation of the war'. What I want to indicate by this term is the way in which the meaning of the Vietnam War has become in Hollywood's Vietnam (and elsewhere in US cultural production) an absolutely American phenomenon. This is an example of what we might call 'imperial narcissism', in which the US is centred and Vietnam and the Vietnamese exist only to provide a context for an American tragedy, whose ultimate brutality is the loss of American innocence. And like any good tragedy, it was doomed from the beginning to follow the dictates of fate. It was something which just happened. Hollywood's Vietnam exhibits what Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud call a 'mystique of unintelligibility'.⁵⁶ Perhaps the most compelling example of the mystique of unintelligibility is the opening sequence in the American video version of *Platoon*. It begins with a few words of endorsement from the then chairman of the Chrysler Corporation. We see him moving through a clearing in a wood towards a jeep. He stops at the jeep, and resting against it, addresses the camera,

This jeep is a museum piece, a relic of war. Normandy, Anzio, Guadalcanal, Korea, Vietnam. I hope we will never have to build another jeep for war. This film *Platoon* is a memorial not to war but to all the men and women who fought in a time and in a place *nobody really understood*, who knew only one thing: they were called and they went. It was the same from the first musket fired at Concord to the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta: they were called and they went. That in the truest sense is the spirit of America. The more we understand it, the more we honor those who kept it alive.⁵⁷

This is a discourse in which there is nothing to explain but American survival. Getting 'Back to the World' is everything it is about. It is an American tragedy and America and Americans are its *only* victims. The myth is expressed with numbing precision in Chris Taylor's (Charlie Sheen) narration at the end of *Platoon*. Taylor looks back from the deck of a rising helicopter on the dead and dying of the

battlefield below. Samuel Barber's mournful and very beautiful Adagio for Strings seems to dictate the cadence and rhythm of his voice as he speaks these words of psycho-babble,

I think now looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. The enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there for the rest of my days. As I'm sure Elias will be, fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called "the possession of my soul".

Time magazine's review of the film echoes and elaborates this theme:

Welcome back to the war that, just 20 years ago, turned America schizophrenic. Suddenly we were a nation split between left and right, black and white, hip and square, mothers and fathers, parents and children. For a nation whose war history had read like a John Wayne war movie – where good guys finished first by being tough and playing fair – the polarisation was soul-souring. Americans were fighting themselves, and both sides lost.⁵⁸

Platoon's function in this scenario is to heal the schizophrenia of the American body politic. The film's rewriting of the war not only excludes the Vietnamese, it also rewrites the anti-war movement. Pro-war and anti-war politics are reenacted as different positions in a debate on how best to fight and win the war. One group, led by the 'good' Sergeant Elias (who listen to Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' and smoke marijuana), want to fight the war with honour and dignity, whilst the other, led by the 'bad' Sergeant Barnes (who listen to Merle Haggard's 'Okie from Muskogee' and drink beer), want to fight the war in any way which will win it. We are asked to believe that this was the essential conflict which tore America apart – the anti-war movement, dissolved into a conflict on how best to fight and win the war.⁵⁹ *Platoon* reduces the war to an American psychodrama. As Klein contends 'the war is decontextualized, mystified as a tragic mistake, an existential adventure, or a rite of passage through which the White American Hero discovers his identity'.⁶⁰

Liberation from old ghosts and doubts

At one of the many homecoming celebrations for returning veterans of the Gulf War, Bush told his audience, 'You know, you all not only helped liberate Kuwait; you helped this country liberate itself from old ghosts and doubts . . . When you left, it was still fashionable to

question America's decency, America's courage, America's resolve. No one, no one in the whole world doubts us anymore . . . Let this new spirit give proper recognition to the Vietnam veterans. Their time has come.'⁶¹

When, in the build up to the Gulf War, Bush had asked Americans to remember the Vietnam War, the memories recalled by many Americans would have been of a war they had lived cinematically; a war of bravery and betrayal. Hollywood's Vietnam had provided the materials to rehearse, elaborate, interpret and retell an increasingly dominant memory of America's war in Vietnam. Although academic and Vietnam veteran Michael Clark does not use the term, he is clearly referring to what I have called the 'memory industries' when he writes of how the ticker-tape welcome home parade for Vietnam veterans staged in New York in 1985, together with the media coverage of the parade and the Hollywood films which seemed to provide the context for the parade, had worked together to produce a particular memory of the war – a memory with potentially deadly effects. He writes of how

they [the memory industries, especially film] had constituted our memory of the war all along . . . [They] healed over the wounds that had refused to close for ten years with a balm of nostalgia, and transformed guilt and doubt into duty and pride. And with a triumphant flourish [they] offered us the spectacle of [their] most successful creation, the veterans who will fight the next war.⁶²

Moreover, as Clark is at pains to stress, 'the memory of Vietnam has ceased to be a point of resistance to imperialist ambitions and is now invoked as a vivid warning to do it right next time'.⁶³

At the end of the Gulf War, Bush boasted, as if the war had been fought for no other reason than to overcome a traumatic memory, 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.'⁶⁴ Echoing Bush's comments, the *New York Times* featured an article with the title, 'Is the Vietnam Syndrome Dead? Happily, It's Buried in the Gulf'.⁶⁵ Vietnam, the sign of American loss and division had been buried in the sands of the Persian Gulf. Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome (with the help of Hollywood's Vietnam) had supposedly liberated a nation from old ghosts and doubts; had made America once again strong, whole and ready for the next war.⁶⁶

Epilogue: a note of caution

I do not want to suggest that Hollywood's Vietnam was or is unproblematically consumed by its American audiences. My claim is only that Hollywood produced a particular regime of truth. Film (like any other cultural text or practice) has to be *made* to mean. To really discover the extent to which Hollywood's Vietnam has made its 'truth' tell requires a consideration of consumption. This will take us beyond a focus on the *meaning* of a text, to a focus on the meanings that can be made in the encounter between the discourses of the text and the discourses of the 'reader'. That is, it is not a question of verifying (with an 'audience') the *real meaning* of, say, *Platoon*. The focus on consumption (understood as 'production in use') is to explore the political effectivity (or otherwise) of, say, *Platoon*. If a cultural text is to become effective (politically or otherwise) it must be made to connect with people's lives – become part of 'lived cultures'. Formal analysis of Hollywood's Vietnam may point to how it has articulated the war as an American tragedy of bravery and betrayal; Bush's comments (and the comments of others) may provide us with clues to the circulation and effectivity of Hollywood's articulation of the war; but these factors, however compelling they may be in themselves, do not provide conclusive proof that Hollywood's account of the war has become hegemonic where it matters – in the lived practices of everyday life.⁶⁷

Notes

- 1 I presented a version of this argument at the *Seventh International Seminar on Culture and Power*, University of Alcalá, Madrid, October 2001. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of the conference for inviting me and the British Council for providing funding. I would also like to thank all those who made valuable comments on my paper.
- 2 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, volume I (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); 'Questions of Method: An Interview with Michel Foucault', in *Ideology & Consciousness*, 8 (1978), 3–14. I am aware that I make the American film industry sound too monolithic.
- 3 On articulation see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971); Stuart Hall, 'The Rediscovery of Ideology: The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies', in

Veronica Beechey and James Donald (eds), *Subjectivity and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1996), pp. 23–55; Stuart Hall, ‘On Postmodernism and Articulation’, in David Morley and Chen Kuan-Hsing (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 131–50; Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on deconstructing “The Popular”’, in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edn (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), pp. 442–53.

- 4 *Newsweek*, 10 December 1990.
- 5 Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 1991. The fact that Vietnam became a key issue in the build up to the Gulf War can be demonstrated by ‘A survey of 66,000 news stories that appeared in the US media between August 1990 and February 1991, found 7,000 references to Vietnam, almost three times more than the next most frequently cited phrase – “human shields”’ (quoted in Jon Roper, ‘Overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome: The Gulf War and Revisionism’, in Jeffrey Walsh (ed.), *The Gulf War Did Not Happen* (Aldershot: Arena, 1995), p. 38).
- 6 Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (London: W. H. Allen, 1986). Nixon did not coin the term, but he was a key player in giving it a particular political articulation. The Vietnam Syndrome began in the 1970s as a term to describe the psychological problems experienced by American Vietnam veterans (which also became known as ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome’). In the 1980s the term was articulated in revisionist accounts of the war: no longer a psychological problem, it was now used to indicate a reluctance on the part of successive US administrations to pursue ‘legitimate’ political and military policies out of a fear that they would lead to another Vietnam (see Harry W. Haines, ‘Putting Vietnam Behind Us: Hegemony and the Gulf War’, *Studies in Communication*, 5 (1995), 35–67)). General William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam, prefers the term Vietnam psychosis: ‘Vietnam was a war that continues to have an impact on politics. I fear that one of the big losses, in fact, probably the most serious loss of the war, is what I refer to as the Vietnam psychosis. Any time anybody brings up the thought that military forces might be needed, you hear the old hue and cry “another Vietnam, another Vietnam”. That can be a real liability to us as we look to the future’ (cited in Roper, ‘Overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome’, p. 33). Noam Chomsky’s gloss on the Vietnam syndrome is somewhat different: ‘See, they make it sound like some kind of disease, a malady that has to be overcome. And the “malady” in this case is that the population is still unwilling to tolerate aggression and violence. And that’s a change that took place as a result of the popular struggle against the war in Vietnam’ (Noam Chomsky, ‘The Lessons of the Vietnam War – An Interview with Noam Chomsky’,

- Vietnam Documents: American and Vietnamese Views of the War*, ed. George Katsiaficas (New York: ME Sharpe Inc., 1992), pp. 230–1)).
- 7 Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, p. 13.
 - 8 Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, p. 19.
 - 9 Quoted in John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, 'The Vietnam War and American Memory', in John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (eds), *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 10.
 - 10 Stephen Vlastos, 'America's "Enemy": The Absent Presence in Revisionist Vietnam War History', in John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (eds), *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, p. 69. Moreover, Reagan told Bobby Muller, a founder member of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, 'Bob, the trouble with Vietnam was that we never let you guys fight the war you could have done, so we denied you the victory all the other veterans enjoyed. It won't happen like that again, Bob. . .' (quoted in Roper, 'Overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome', p. 30).
 - 11 Quoted in Barbie Zelizer, 'Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (June 1995), 220.
 - 12 Quoted in Rowe and Berg, 'The Vietnam war and American memory', p. 10.
 - 13 Quoted in Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 91.
 - 14 Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 3–4.
 - 15 Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p. 122.
 - 16 Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. vii. It is a commonplace of Vietnam literature that Hollywood's World War Two films helped recruit the veterans of the Vietnam War. For example, Michael Herr refers to the war movies that the US soldiers carried with them into the war: 'I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good . . . [T]hey were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire; [driven by] movie-fed fantasies, [they were acting] the lowest John Wayne wet dream' (Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1978), pp. 169, 157, 24). Similarly, Vietnam veteran Thomas Bird recalls: 'It took me six months in Vietnam to wake up and turn all the World War II movies off in my mind' (quoted in Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 95)).

- 17 Michel Foucault, 'Film and Popular Memory', *Radical Philosophy* (1975), 28.
- 18 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (Harper and Row: New York, 1980).
- 19 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).
- 20 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, pp. 22–3.
- 21 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, pp. 50–1.
- 22 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, p. 50.
- 23 Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*', *Body & Society* 1: 3/4 (1995), 176. French historian Pierre Nora makes a similar point: 'Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image . . . The less memory is experienced from the inside the more exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs . . . It adds to life . . . a secondary memory, a prosthesis-memory'. See Pierre Nora, 'Between History and Memory: les lieux de memoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), 13–14.
- 24 Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory', p. 179.
- 25 Elisabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 1996).
- 26 Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the Real World*, 2nd edn (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996).
- 27 Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 227.
- 28 Bartlett, *Remembering*, p. 212.
- 29 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, p. 69.
- 30 Nora, 'Between History and memory', p. 7.
- 31 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 6.
- 32 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 20.
- 33 Quoted in Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 86.
- 34 Michael Klein, 'Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era', in Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi To Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 18.
- 35 Quoted in Klein, 'Historical Memory', p. 18.
- 36 H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993).
- 37 Klein, 'Historical Memory', p. 17.
- 38 *Ibid.* Also see David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Rick Berg, 'Losing Vietnam', in John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (eds), *The Vietnam War and American Culture*; and the journal

- Vietnam Generation* (2: 1, 1990), which contains essays on the anti-war movement in the US armed forces.
- 39 Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987). According to Sturken the figure was 11,500 women (civilians and nurses) and 265,000 women in the military (Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 67).
 - 40 Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Ballantine, 1984).
 - 41 Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 190.
 - 42 Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America*, p. 79.
 - 43 John Pilger, 'Vietnam Movies', in *Weekend Guardian* (24–25 February 1990).
 - 44 Quoted in Martin, *Receptions of War*, pp. 19–20.
 - 45 Quoted in Martin, *Receptions of War*, p. 66.
 - 46 Quoted in Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America*, p. 43.
 - 47 See note 2 above.
 - 48 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 194.
 - 49 Oliver North, often compared to Rambo, made a similar complaint when questioned by Congress (July 1987): 'We didn't lose the war in Vietnam, we lost the war right here' (quoted in Duncan Webster, *Looka Yonder! The Imaginary America of Populist Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988 p. 235)). If Rambo and North had bothered to read Nixon they would have known that America had not in fact lost the war in Vietnam. Chapter Four of Nixon's book is entitled, 'How We Won The War'. Nixon is astute enough to realise that this claim might require some defence: 'But win must be properly defined. We are a defensive power. We are not trying to conquer other countries. That is why we must have a policy in which we will fight limited wars if they are necessary to achieve limited goals. We win if we prevent the enemy from winning' (Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, p. 225).
 - 50 Foucault, 'Questions of Method'. See Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America* and Elliott Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993) for excellent discussions of what Franklin calls the 'near-religious fervor . . . [of] the POW/MIA fantasy' (xvi). Moreover, there can be little doubt, as Gruner observes, that the 'POW stories . . . delivered a victory in a lost war' (Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture*, p. 172).
 - 51 Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, p. 145.
 - 52 Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, p. 146. Hollywood's list of who was to blame for American defeat did not include those who are often blamed in the general discourse on the war – the US media. For

- example, at the conclusion of the Gulf War, Ron Nessen, who had been White House Press Secretary during the Ford administration, claimed, 'The Pentagon has won the last battle of the Vietnam War. It was fought on the sands of Saudi Arabia, and the defeated enemy was the news media . . . Never again should the press [and other news media] be allowed open coverage of America at war' (quoted in Haines, 'Putting Vietnam Behind Us', p. 41).
- 53 Quoted in Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America*, p. 141.
- 54 The Christ-Like potential of the US soldier in Vietnam is also a feature of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, a statue depicting three uniformed women with a wounded male soldier, unveiled near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in November 1993. The *Washington Post* described the memorial by saying: 'In spirit and pose the sculptor ambitiously invokes Michelangelo's "Pieta", the great Vatican marble of a grieving Mary holding the crucified body of Jesus' (quoted in Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 69).
- 55 Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 1991.
- 56 Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, 'America's Vietnam War Films: Marching Toward Denial', in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi To Hollywood*, p. 13.
- 57 Harry W. Haines, "'They were called and they went': The political rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran", in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi To Hollywood*, pp. 81–97. My italics.
- 58 *Time Magazine*, 26 January 1987.
- 59 The figure of John Rambo operates in much the same way. As Kellner points out, 'Rambo has long hair, a headband, eats only natural foods (whereas the bureaucrat Murdock swills Coke), is close to nature, and is hostile toward bureaucracy, the state, and technology – precisely the position of many 1960s counterculturalists'. See Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 65.
- 60 Klein, 'Historical Memory', p. 10.
- 61 Quoted in Haines, 'Putting Vietnam Behind Us: Hegemony and the Gulf War', p. 48.
- 62 Michael Clark, 'Remembering Vietnam', in Rowe and Berg (eds), *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, p. 180.
- 63 Clark, 'Remembering Vietnam', p. 206.
- 64 Quoted in Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking In America*, p. 177.
- 65 *New York Times*, 2 December 1983.
- 66 William J. Bennett, writing in the *National Review*, claimed that the war in the Gulf had allowed the US to 'claim a victory on the magnitude of the Vietnam defeat' (quoted in Haines, 'Putting Vietnam behind Us', p. 52). Similarly, Paul Shinoff, writing in the *San Francisco Focus*, 'on February 27, the war ended. The Vietnam War, that is'

(quoted in Haines, 'Putting Vietnam Behind Us', p. 56). Against such triumphalism, Jon Roper claims that the Vietnam syndrome had not been overcome; it had informed Bush's decision not to pursue the war to its conclusion – defeat of Saddam Hussein. 'The "Vietnam syndrome" still existed as a constraint that counselled caution' (Roper, 'Overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome', p. 40).

- 67 See John Storey, *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Arnold, 1999).