

REPRESENTATION OF WAR:
VIETNAM AND IRAQ COMPARED

by

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To Muye

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by

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Centered on the most representative and celebrated literature and films about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, this dissertation aims to conduct a comparative study of the aesthetics and politics that have been mobilized in literary and filmic representations of the two wars. Representations of Vietnam and Iraq, to a great extent, still follow the tradition of the war genre in literature and film. That is to say, in key works such as *A Rumor of War*, *All the Things They Carried*, *The Yellow Birds*, *Apocalypse Now*, *American Sniper* and more, the focus has tended to be on the traumatic experiences of the soldiers, resulting in a genre that has tended to privilege a critical stance against the horrors of war. There have been two main features among the most celebrated representations of the wars in literature and film: first, each work highlights one aspect of the war in a metaphorical way (such as when war is compared to organized butchery, a game of killing, a drug and more). Second, each work has engaged in the pursuit of higher morality and more just ideology. In other words, celebrated representations of war have been consistent with the construction of American democracy and American national identity.

This dissertation will compare literary and filmic representations of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars from three perspectives. First, four pairs of war literature (two memoirs, two collections of short stories, two semi-autobiographical fictions, and two real fictions) about the two wars will be compared. Second, four feature films about Vietnam will be compared with four feature films about Iraq. Third, four pairs of war documentary films (two concerning America's involvement, two concerning the homecoming, two concerning letters home, and two concerning war scandals) about the two wars will be compared. Each of the comparisons reveals something new about the complex relationship between the two wars. Furthermore, by drawing out similarities and differences between literary and filmic representations of Vietnam and Iraq, this dissertation demonstrates that the aesthetic representations of the two wars are influenced by the legacy of the American New Left since the 1960s on.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PTSD Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

WMD Weapon of Mass Destruction

POW Prisoner of War

IEDs Improvised Explosive Devices

SEAL Sea, Air, and Land

INTRODUCTION

The United States launched its crusade against communism in Vietnam in 1955, and the Vietnam War (1955-75) became a seemingly eternal nightmare for all involved and related. Americans called it the “Vietnam War” while the Vietnamese called it the “American War.” In 2003, the U.S. and its allies invaded Iraq as part of the larger “war on terror,” inaugurated after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in the U.S. Initially meant to dislodge the regime of Saddam Hussein, then believed to possess weapons of mass destruction, the Iraq War (2003-) is still going on with no end in sight. The similarities between these two wars, which include U.S. involvement in exotic battlefields, ideological justifications for preemptive intervention, prolonged duration, and more—have attracted the attention of experts in various fields, such as Andrew Hoskins, William Greider, Robert K. Brigham, David Fitzgerald, and more.¹

As the two most controversial wars in recent US history, Vietnam and Iraq have stimulated a great number of writers and filmmakers to tell various war stories. Journalists, historians, veterans, creators, are not only witnesses, victims, and messengers of war history. What’s more important is that they are agents of war history. The history of war is narrated and constructed by these agents of words and images. Therefore, what they tell and how they tell about the war exert significant influence upon the public’s conception of and attitudes towards the war. Different writers and filmmakers represent the war in their unique ways, they tell different war stories, reveal different meditations and expose different horrors. At the same time, these writers and filmmakers collectively continue war narratives and further explore the myths of war. In representations of the

¹ All these scholars will be discussed in the introduction.

Vietnam and Iraq Wars, on the one hand, writers and filmmakers confess the flawed nature of humanity—the darkness of the heart, the limits to self-control and the weakness of morality. On the other hand, they constantly assess and reaffirm the core characteristic of the country—American democracy in the making. Representations of Vietnam and Iraq suspend the myth of American democracy. Different from representations of other American wars, representations of Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate that American democracy is still and always in the making.

Centered on the most representative and celebrated literature and films about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, this dissertation aims to conduct a comparative study of the aesthetics and politics that have been mobilized in literary and filmic representations of the two wars. Representations of Vietnam and Iraq, to a great extent, still follow the tradition of the war genre in literature and film. That is to say, in key works such as *A Rumor of War*, *All the Things They Carried*, *The Yellow Birds*, *Apocalypse Now*, *American Sniper* and more, the focus has tended to be on the traumatic experiences of the soldiers, resulting in a genre that has tended to privilege a critical stance against the horrors of war. There have been two main features among the most celebrated representations of the wars in literature and film: first, each work highlights one aspect of the war in a metaphorical way (such as when war is compared to organized butchery, a game of killing, a drug, and more). Second, each work has engaged in the pursuit of higher morality and more just ideology. In other words, celebrated representations of war have been consistent with the construction of American democracy and American national identity.²

² I would not like to equal American democracy with American exceptionalism. I prefer to define American democracy and American national identity according to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address and the declaration of independence. That is, American government is a

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Among existing scholarship, comparisons of the Iraq and Vietnam Wars abound. Andrew Hoskins, in *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq*, compares news coverage of the two wars. He argues that instead of fulfilling their responsibility in delivering the most believable and significant moments and messages about the ongoing war to the public, 24/7 war reports turn the respective ongoing war into a "media spectacle" filled with meaningless "breaking news" which are not important at all.³ Hoskins firmly points out that television news "subverts, replaces, rewinds and mixes times and images into its own continuously moving narrative in the present that literally

government by, of, and for the people. And Americans are a people who are created equal and endowed with the "unalienable" rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

³ Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Continuum, 2004), 47.

samples and revives some past events at the expense of others.”⁴ William Greider echoes Hoskins’ opinions in *Iraq as Vietnam*, and claims that “one can begin to recognize that much of the news is actually an old story—recycled versions of the human folly committed by previous generations... Iraq is a ‘little war’ compared with Vietnam.”⁵ On the other side, Thomas Rid, in *War and Media Operations: The US Military and the Press from Vietnam to Iraq*, believes that Pentagon had learned from the “disastrous public affairs” in Vietnam, and the great innovations in media operations after Vietnam had made it possible the “strategic” “embedded media programs” in Iraq, which “portrayed the conflicts in Iraq at an unprecedented level of transparency.”⁶ Both as the televised wars, however, the news coverage turned the bloody battlefields into spectacles. Consequently, the authors suggest that the fierce wars in Vietnam and Iraq have been relegated to insignificance.

Robert K. Brigham, in *Is Iraq Another Vietnam* argues that Iraq is no more than another Vietnam because neither was supported by the public. Moreover, America destroyed Vietnam and Iraq first, then America offered to help rebuild the countries. However, neither could be done by America. Brigham points out that the core reason why America started the two wars was that the United States “knew no limits to its power.”⁷ Brigham reaffirms his ideas in *Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power*.⁸ Similar comments are also made in James H. Lebovic’s *The Limits of*

⁴ Hoskins, *Televising War*, 133.

⁵ William Greider, “Iraq as Vietnam,” *Nation*, vol. 278, no.17 (2004): 5.

⁶ Thomas Rid, *War and Media Operations: The US Military and the Press from Vietnam to Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

⁷ Robert K. Brigham, *Is Iraq Another Vietnam* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

*U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq.*⁹ Moreover, Kenneth J. Campbell, a Vietnam veteran, in *A Tale of Two Quagmires: Iraq, Vietnam, and the Hard Lessons of War* addresses the wars as two “quagmires” in which American people were deeply trapped thanks to the “deceptions” of their governments.¹⁰ Campbell argues that “both wars were constructed upon, and sustained by, a quicksand of conscious political deception.”¹¹ Campbell strongly believes that the end of Iraq would undoubtedly be identical to that of Vietnam, and Americans would ultimately leave Iraq without any meaningful accomplishments. Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, in *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, or, How not to Learn from the Past*, disagree with Lock-Pullan on the comments that Vietnam and Iraq were not militarily achievable; instead, Gardner and Young argue that the main obstacle which prevented the American Army from achieving its possible successes was the American government’s intentional ignorance and manipulation of useful intelligence. According to the authors, the American government used all means possible to convince the public that they went to Vietnam for democracy and went to Iraq to fight terrorists. However, the real reasons, according to Gardner and Young, were to contain Southeast Asia in Vietnam and to access oil and military bases in Iraq. Gardner and Young defined the two wars as colonial and neocolonial wars, and affirmed that American government had learned nothing from the lessons of Vietnam.¹² Therefore, they agree with Brigham and Campbell on the same fate of the Iraq War with that of the Vietnam War. In this perspective, Vietnam and Iraq are examples of

⁹ James H. Lebovic, *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Kenneth J. Campbell, *A Tale of Two Quagmires: Iraq, Vietnam, and the Hard Lessons of War* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

the American government's deceit and neocolonial abuse of third world countries. Further, they signaled a continuance of US foreign policy towards the under-developed countries since the Cold War on.

David Fitzgerald's *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* discussed the "interplay between military doctrine and the construction of historical narrative."¹³ Fitzgerald emphasizes that the Vietnam War has greatly influenced the American Army's discussion of "counterinsurgency" and "nation building," and observes that the American Army repeatedly refer to Vietnam in their analysis of Iraq. Fitzgerald argues that the two wars are linked "through the history of counterinsurgency doctrine within the US Army and the evolving manner in which the US Army understood the Vietnam War in the aftermath of the US retreat from Indochina."¹⁴ Richard Lock-Pullan's *US Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: from Vietnam to Iraq* traces the history of American military intervention strategies from the Vietnam War to the Iraq War, and argues that the military failure of Vietnam attributed to the "mismatch between military aims and military strategies."¹⁵ Quite different from the above scholars, Lock-Pullan believes that the American Army had learned from the lessons of Vietnam and made great innovations in intervention strategies in Iraq.

On the other hand, John Dumbrell and David Ryan, in *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts*, highlight more differences than similarities between the two wars. They

¹³ David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Richard Lock-Pullan, *US Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: from Vietnam to Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

believe that the two wars were launched with different political ideologies and advocated by different political parties. Dumbrell and Ryan disagree with the idea that Americans made the two wars out of imperial aggressions, as suggested by Gardner and Young.¹⁶ The contributors of the book also argue that there are big differences in military strategies and tactics employed in the two wars. However, they all agree that there is one significant similarity between the two wars; that is, the failure of the wars. Americans failed in Vietnam, and they are failing in Iraq. For the authors, the same outcome of the two wars overshadows all the differences. Moreover, Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill agree with Dumbrell and Ryan, and state in *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities and Insights* that “careful examination of the evidence reveals that the differences between the two conflicts greatly outnumber the similarities. This is especially true in the strategic and military dimensions of the two wars.”¹⁷ However, military failures in both Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate that the advantage of American military failed to come into play in either war. Furthermore, the repetitive failures also illustrate that winning a war must involve more factors besides military strategies.

Even though more scholars tend to compare the two wars from the perspectives of politics and military strategy, some scholars pay attention to the experiences of American soldiers. Stacey Peebles’s *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq*, is the only book comparing these two wars from the experiences and feelings of American soldiers.¹⁸ Peebles

¹⁶ John Dumbrell and David Ryan, *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Collingdale: University Press of Pacific, 2004), vii.

¹⁸ Stacey L. Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 3.

argues that the soldiers' experiences in Iraq are quite different from those in Vietnam. Accordingly, she points out that the major differences between these two wars are: soldiers in Iraq benefit greatly from the most advanced medical and communication services, they have the company of female soldiers, and most of all, these soldiers are quite aware of maintaining their identity as "in between."¹⁹ That is to say, different from Vietnam, American soldiers in Iraq are more conscious of the cultural, ideological, and social differences between Iraq and their motherland. Accordingly, they are much more capable of "subvert[ing] or transcend[ing] traditional categories and norms of behavior, gender, and ethnicity."²⁰ However, Raymond M. Scurfield, another Vietnam veteran, holds different opinions. After conducting a systematic investigation of the psychiatric impact of war on combatants, he observes in *War Trauma Lessons Unlearned, from Vietnam to Iraq: Vol. 3 of a Vietnam Trilogy*, that both Vietnam and Iraq produce heavy traumas to American soldiers, and to some extent, Iraq produces even more. What's more, Peebles even disagree with Scurfield on the reason why soldiers in Iraq suffer similarly from the war traumas, and he argues that it is the "media savvy and extensive knowledge of pop culture" rather than the war itself, that worsened the soldiers' isolation and impotence.²¹ Since the First World War, PTSD is synonymous with veterans, and American veterans from the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars are the most miserable victims of PTSD. Compared to Vietnam, American soldiers in Iraq are equipped with the most advanced weapons and live in much better conditions; however, none of these helps reduce the effects of PTSD.

¹⁹ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Despite this long-standing interest from scholars about the relationship between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, however, scholars have yet to compare the Vietnam and Iraq Wars from the perspective of aesthetic representations. That is to say, how Vietnam and Iraq are represented in literary and filmic representations, and whether the artistic representations of the two wars would open new avenues of analysis. As two of America's "bad" and "lost" wars, Vietnam and Iraq have inspired a great number of artists, who have created important works about many aspects of the two wars, and especially on Vietnam. Indeed, the high productivity of literary works on these two wars might be one of the reasons why scholars have held back from conducting a comparison between representations of the two wars. Furthermore, academia seems to have reached a consensus about the main features of representation of war, which include graphic language and horrifying depictions of bloody combats and heartbreaking scenes of death. From the *Iliad* to novels about the ongoing Iraq War, representation of war has consisted mainly of stories about deaths of different types. Men die heroically, cowardly, painfully, regretfully, and most of all, helplessly and hopelessly. Ambrose Bierce stated that war stories were mainly about "grotesqueries of war, the valor and self-sacrifice of human," and exposed the "fear, spite, arrogance, and stupidity of human conduct."²² Paul Fussell addressed war writers as "bloodthirsty novelists" and their profession as a "bloody business;" he pointed out the similarity between all forms of representation about war: "inhibited by scruples of decency and believing in the historical continuity of styles, writers about the war had to appeal to the sympathy of readers by invoking the familiar and suggesting its resemblance to what many of them suspected was an unprecedented

²² Ambrose Bierce, preface to *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians: and Other Stories*, ed. Tom quirk (New York: Penguin, 2000), xi.

and (in their terms) an all-but-incommunicable reality.”²³ Since the early 1990s, representations of war in literature and film were frequently associated with trauma studies. Three scholars from Yale University initiated and contributed greatly in the development of such ideas: Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman.²⁴ Consequently, representations of war were taken as case studies for real life trauma and psychological analyses, and the analyses of representations of war more often than not focused on the revelations of traumas and its destructive impacts on the veterans, families and the society.

By taking into careful consideration all the discussions about and comparisons of Vietnam and Iraq, this dissertation will conduct a systematic analysis that compares the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars from the perspective of their aesthetic representations in literature and film. This project, first of all, aims to fill the gap left by other scholars in comparative studies of the two wars. Second, this dissertation hopes to investigate whether the seeming consensus on representation of war are applicable to representations of Vietnam and Iraq. That is to say, this project will elaborate how Vietnam and Iraq are represented in literature and film, identify the main features and explore whether these features are similar to or different from those about previous wars. Third, since the existing discussions on representation of war usually focus on the linguistic similarities and the similar depictions of war battles and war deaths, this dissertation hopes to take a different perspective in analyzing the representations of war. That is, this project aims to see the connections

²³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 174.

²⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

between the motivations of these writers and filmmakers and representations of the wars. A corollary ambition of this project is to investigate what motivated artists in the late 1960s and the 1970s, since this period was such a watershed era in the history of the nation. A series of revolutionary changes came about at this moment in the cultural, political, ideological and social milieu of American society. Thus, this project also explores the emergence of the American New Left as it shaped literary and cinematic creations about the two wars. To be more specific, this project will make an exploration into the world of the left-wing writers and filmmakers to see why and how they made representations of war concerning the Vietnam War, and how this legacy helped shape artistic production regarding the Iraq War.

1.1. Representations of Vietnam and Iraq

There are indeed many similarities between representations of the two wars. In accounts written by journalists and historians, we tend to see that both the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars were regarded as mistakes. For example, as early as 1958, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, in *The Ugly American*, called Americans abroad the “ugly Americans.” The authors argued that Americans in Vietnam were “second-raters” because they had no knowledge of the culture nor the language regarding Vietnam.²⁵ The authors predicted that America would lose the war because America displayed no sympathy for the suffering Vietnamese. Then in 1972, Frances Fitzgerald made similar prediction as Burdick and Lederer in *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*.²⁶ As a professional journalist, Fitzgerald presented and elaborated on

²⁵ Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer, *The Ugly American* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1958), 91.

²⁶ Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

numerous televised pictures concerning the Vietnam War, and she exposed untold stories behind the deceptive pictures. She made a series of contrary comparisons between the West and the East, communism and capitalism, democracy and tradition, Buddhism and Catholics, the North Vietnam and the South Vietnam, village and city, officials and civilians. Finally, she concluded that it was not reasonable for America to get involved in the Vietnam War since America and Vietnam were so antithetical to each other. Therefore, in no way would America win over the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese in Vietnam.

Half a century later, America is still a superpower in the world. However, a sudden terrorist attack caught America unguarded and unprepared. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn from *The New York Times*, presented a very detailed and disturbing account of the “fight to survive inside the twin towers” solely from the perspective of the people inside the buildings during the 102 minutes from 8:46 when the first attack took place to 10:28 when the North Tower collapsed.²⁷ The authors spent three years collecting and analyzing materials from numerous interviews with survivors and witnesses. Thousands of pages of transcribed radio transmissions, phone messages, emails, and oral histories were scrutinized. The conclusion of this book was that the hijackers and their masters are the cruelest, unforgivable, and cold-blooded murderers of September 11, 2001, but the buildings themselves and the poor emergency preparedness and stubborn emergency response culture in New York were the weapons, which helped to kill far more innocents in that heartbreaking disaster. As a matter of fact, after the 9/11, mass public and government were busy with reprimanding the barbarism of the terrorists.

²⁷ Jim Dwyer, *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers* (New York: Times Books, 2005).

Accordingly, the delinquency of the American government and the negligence of the public were considerably ignored. Journalists such as Dwyer, Flynn and many more were keen social observers and critics, and they aimed to dig out what was wrong with their own country and people rather than the counterparts.

Similarly, historians are also indulged in exposing more truths about the war. But to some extent, they are more radical than journalists. Many historians directly put the blame on the presidents and the administrations. In 1996, Michael Hunt, in *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968*, openly criticized President Johnson for his policy in Vietnam.²⁸ This book re-affirmed all conceptions reflected in *The Ugly American* and *The Quiet American*.²⁹ In a word, Hunt believed that the Vietnam War was a result of the misconstrued ideologies of President Johnson and his administration. Similarly, in 2011, Terry H. Anderson released his book about the Iraq War. In *Bush's Wars*, Anderson narrated in detail why and how the United States launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁰ Anderson clearly declared that it was due to President Bush that the wars took place, and President Bush played the decisive role in turning the countries into the battlefields. On the whole, journalists and historians were the first

²⁸ Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

²⁹ *The Quiet American* was written by Graham Greene in 1955, and the novel was set in the early 50's Vietnam in the last century when Vietnam was then the site of a rising local insurgency against French colonialism. This novel is a parable of political combats in the World Cold War after the WWII. This novel aims to argue that American's ignorance and naiveté of Vietnam could never save the country from the chaos and disorders though the Americans are not necessarily ill-intentioned. American's funding and supporting for the South Republicans results in much fiercer combats between the South and the North as well as much heavier casualties of the innocent civilians. (Graham Green, *The Quiet American* (New York: Penguin Group, 1955).)

³⁰ Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and foremost critics of war. Due to the limit of this project, I will exclude the comparison of journalist and historical writings concerning the two wars, and save it for the research in the future.

Nevertheless, most war literature has been written by veterans, both in form of fiction and nonfiction. Veterans are important witnesses of wars, and most readers believe in the stories told by the veteran witnesses. As a witness and survivor of the Second World War, for example, Kurt Vonnegut believed that it was his duty and the only ethical choice to “testify against the crimes of humanity.”³¹ Similarly, veteran writers from Vietnam not only fulfilled their duties in testifying against the crimes against humanity, but also went beyond to ponder upon the future of the country and its people. Philip Caputo exposed the lies about Vietnam, and revealed in detail how the American government succeeded in turning men into machines of war in *A Rumor of War* (1977).³² Larry Heinemann, in *Paco’s Story* (1986), showed how the American government had done a great job silencing different voices of its people concerning Vietnam. Tim O’Brien, in *The Things They Carried*, recounted numerous anecdotes took place before, in and after the Vietnam War in the most direct, yet philosophical way. War complicated, enchanted and alienated men from their civilian lives and their true selves, he observed.³³ Karl Marlantes, in *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (2009), described the most desperate and brutal combats in the most hazardous military base in an unknown jungle in Vietnam. He wrote that the sacrifices and casualties of the American young men were insignificant and meaningless to the stubborn war-mongers in Washington.

³¹ Todd F. Davis, *Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade, Or, how a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 81.

³² Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

³³ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990), 233.

In like fashion, representation of the Iraq War reiterated similar messages. For instance, Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir* (2014) vividly displayed how American soldiers got bored, confused and frustrated in Iraq. Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) exposed the most terrifying deaths of men in Iraq, and the most shameful cover-up and scapegoat by the American military and government. Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) showcased how Iraq had drugged and poisoned the soldiers, and how men were instantly transformed by the war physically, mentally, and psychologically. Such examples abound. In a word, veteran writers tended to represent Vietnam and Iraq very similarly. They disclosed the horror and trauma of the war, and criticized the wrong decisions made by the government.

Besides the prolific fictions and non-fictions concerning the two wars, Vietnam and Iraq have also inspired a great number of filmmakers. There were two waves of Vietnam film production. The first wave ran between the end of the war and the end of the 1970s, and included such films as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (Ted Post, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Friendly Fire* (David Greene, 1979), and others. The second wave took place in the 1980s, with films like *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Gardens of Stone* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1987), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989), *Causalities of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989), *The Expendables* (Cirio H. Santiago, 1989), and more. Films regarding the Vietnam War were usually classified as horror films, and most of them were box office successes. All the horror films successfully presented the Vietnam War as the worst

tragedy ever. The films displayed how young Americans suffered in the jungles infested with leeches, tigers and booby traps. Besides, the films showed how the desperate soldiers indulged in committing atrocities after months' unproductive searching and walking in the fermenting muds. What's more, the films illustrated that the veterans' connection to the normal life had been severed permanently.

The scenario of Iraq War films is quite different from that of the Vietnam War. First, the filmmaking of the Iraq War is parallel to the ongoing Iraq War, which is a unique phenomenon in the history of filmmaking. Fewer than thirty feature films about Iraq were produced between 2004 and 2017. Only three have achieved box office success—*United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014); the rest failed to cover their budgets. Second, the films concerning the Iraq War are also called “Grunt films.”³⁴ The well celebrated films regarding the Iraq War usually centered on a heroic protagonist who voluntarily undertook great responsibility in the war. For instance, *The Hurt Locker* focused on Sergeant Will who is a super expert in bomb disposal; and *American Sniper* concentrated on a legendary American Marine in Iraq. Last, there are far more documentary films than feature films made concerning the Iraq War.

The Iraq War is also called the “YouTube War” because tons of videos shot by soldiers in Iraq are uploaded to YouTube every day. The access to the rich footages about the ongoing Iraq War provides independent filmmakers with useful materials. Therefore, the era of the Iraq War is

³⁴ Martin Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 68.

also called the “Golden Age of Documentary.”³⁵ The following are the most celebrated ones: *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, US, 2004), *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson, 2007), *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, 2005), *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (Robert Greenwald, 2006), *The War Tapes* (Deborah Scanton, 2006), *Gunner Palace* (Michael Tucker, 2004), *Occupation: Dreamland* (Ian Olds and Garrett Scott, 2005), *The Ground Truth* (Patricia Foulkrod, 2006), *Iraq in Fragments* (James Longley, 2006), *My Country, My Country* (Laura Poitras, 2006), *Voices of Iraq* (Martin Kunert, 2004), and much more.³⁶

In documentaries about Iraq, the filmmakers tended to present the war through the lens of conspiracy theories. The films revealed at least four conspiracies. First, most of the documentary films affirmed that the American government had been intriguing a war in Iraq long before the attack. That is to say, no matter with or without the 9/11 event, America would start a war in Iraq at some time. Secondly, many films presumed that there was a secret affiliation between the Bush family and the oil tycoons in Saudi Arabia. In other words, the outburst of the Iraq War involved President Bush’s personal considerations besides the terrorists’ attacks. Thirdly, many films exposed how various American profiteers benefited from the war. Military officials took war as potential paths to career advancement. Moreover, numerous entrepreneurs achieved big success in Iraq. Finally, some films disclosed how the American military tested torture techniques on the detainees in Iraq. Films concerning the Abu Ghraib prison scandal redefined the nature of the Iraq War. That is, American soldiers under the supervision of FBI took the most barbarous means to

³⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 52.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

verify the identity of the suspected terrorists. Consequently, the inhumanity of American soldiers was no different from that of the real terrorists.

As shown above, documentary films concerning the Iraq War have made the firmest anti-war statements. So were the documentary films regarding the Vietnam War even though there were much fewer documentary films made about Vietnam. Documentary films about Vietnam mostly concentrated on two topics. The first topic was whether it was reasonable to get involved in Vietnam. *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968) and *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974) openly stated that the American government made a wrong decision to be involved in Vietnam. The second and the most important topic was My Lai scandal. Between 1970 to 2010, filmmakers kept discussing about this historical event in *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (Joseph Strick, 1970), *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm, 1972), *Four Hours in My Lai* (Kevin Sim, 1989), *American Experience: My Lai* (Barak Goodman, 2010), and more. Just like the influence of Abu Ghraib scandal upon the Iraq War, My Lai also changed the nature of the Vietnam War, and illustrated that America neither had a superior morality nor ideology over Vietnam.

To sum up the discussion on literary and filmic representations of Vietnam and Iraq, it can be inferred that writers and filmmakers have expressed the strong anti-war sentiments in different ways from different perspectives. But there is one core similarity among different aesthetic representations, that is, they all take an American way of looking at the war. On the one hand, the literature and the films all focus on the traumatic and tragic experiences of Americans in the wars. On the other hand, they unanimously re-examine the core values of American society, that is, American democracy and national identity. Instead of presuming to preserve American democracy and national identity, the literature and the films lay bare the fact that the Vietnam and Iraq Wars

best proved that American democracy and national identity are still in the making. The reason why writers and filmmakers presented the two wars in this manner, I suppose, is due to the influence of the American New Left in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

1.2. The American New Left

The emergence of the American New Left was a result of the interplay between the sophisticated domestic, international, and socially cultured political revolutions, and movements during the late 1960s. To start with, we must first look at what happened around the world in 1968. The year 1968 delineated the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies and it has been considered as a year of “miracles..., of horrors..., of the Barricades.”³⁷ The year 1968 not only witnessed the May Revolt in France, Cultural Revolution in China, a series of social movements, conflicts in other European countries and the Third World countries. There was also “a dreary catalogue of depressing events [in America],” such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, a series of civil rights movements in opposition to racism, sexism, social injustice, and the America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.³⁸ Against such radical national and international background, the core ideology of the New Left was anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-injustice, and anti-war.

In fact, the history of the United States has undergone numerous radical revolutions and reforms. To begin with, the birth of the nation was hatched by Revolutions of Independence. Next, the Declaration of Liberation unified of the North and the South. For this reason, it is safe to argue

³⁷ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

that American has been a people who are endowed with the revolutionary spirits and traditions. Then, one may ask why the radical movements and ideology were specifically highlighted in the 1960s, and why the whole society responded so vigorously. First of all, it was a chain of globalized cultural, ideological, social, and political revolutions, and what happened in America echoed what was going on in other countries. On the other hand, the accumulations of historical social problems in America finally had a perfect opportunity to stimulate and trigger radical movements nationally. That is why radical demonstrations and protests were seen nationwide in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The second and most important reason was that the 1960s saw the “coming-of-age of the baby boom generation” who encountered “a unique set of historical circumstances” and who were ready to develop their own “critical thinking,” formulate their own “moral beliefs,” resolve their “identity crisis,” and establish their own “political ideology.”³⁹

Besides, there was another significant factor which also contributed to the explosion of revolutions and movements in the late 1960s, that is, the United States had become a super power after the two World Wars. The two World Wars proved that America was the militarily, economically and politically number one in the world. However, the existing social problems in the late 1960s prevented Americans from presenting themselves as culturally and ideologically superior, such as the racism against the African Americans, the sexism against women in both the social and private spheres and the embarrassing exposures about the ongoing Vietnam War by the

³⁹ Rebecca Klatch E., *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

news coverage. The seemingly military victory— “The Tet Offensive” depressed the mass public tremendously, and My Lai Massacre brought the nation into disrepute.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, for ordinary citizens, they might be OK with their country being the most powerful one in the world, militarily and economically. However, intellectuals held higher expectations. Jeffrey W. Coker, in *Confronting American Labor: The New Left Dilemma*, claimed that “[s]ince the time of Marx, left intellectuals in the West have raised time and again the question of how an intelligentsia might play a role in a movement carried out by the working class. Lenin proposed the concept of an intellectual “vanguard,” the idea that a radicalized intelligentsia could stir the sleeping masses to action with the power of the pen.”⁴¹ Coker also expressed his high expectation for the New Left intellectuals, he asked for intellectuals to “feel engaged, to be part of a moral social movement, and ultimately to have an opportunity to improve society generally.” Consequently, he defined “Western intellectuals in the modern age” as “social critics.”⁴²

For instance, Terry Anderson’s *The Movement and The Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* and Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas’s *Encyclopedia of the American Left* listed the main organizations, movements, and the leading figures of the New

⁴⁰ On January 30, 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People’s Army of Vietnam launched a series of surprise attacks against the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the American military. Though it was a military failure for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, it firmly proved that the American Army in no way could win the war easily and quickly. On March 16, 1968, a platoon of the American Army attacked a Vietnamese village—My Lai and murdered more than 500 women, children, and innocent civilians. This event first was covered up, then exposed by a journalist.

⁴¹ Jeffrey W. Coker, *Confronting American Labor: The New Left Dilemma* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), ix.

⁴² *Ibid.*, x.

Left in the 1960s.⁴³ According to the two books, the social movements in the 1960s can be divided into two big categories, one was the political movements, such as civil rights movements, feminist movement, environmental movement, and student activism. The other was the cultural movement, such as art movement, and counterculture. The Beat Generation of the 1950s was closely connected with the founding of counterculture and the New Left.⁴⁴ The Beat opposed “militarism, racism, and economic injustice,” and celebrated “hallucinatory drugs, homosexual sex, mystical religion, and exotic experiences.”⁴⁵

Furthermore, Paul Buhle, in *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* reviewed the history of the American Left from the Civil War era to the late 1960s, and highlighted the influences of Marxism on the development of the American Leftism.⁴⁶ He divided the history of the American Left into four eras. The first era was Immigrant Socialism (1865-1900). The second era was American Socialism, Marxism and Leninism (1900-1925). The third era was Culture Critique (1925-1940). The last era was New Left (from the 1960s on). In short, the era between 1865 to 1960 was the Old Left, and the era after the 1960s is the New Left. According to Buhle, the core difference between the Old Left and the New Left was that the Old Left was mainly made up with labor-based proletariats; while the New Left was mainly composed

⁴³ Terry Anderson, *The Movement and The Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (Thetford; Norfolk: Thetford Press Limited, 1987).

of intellectuals, students, women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and immigrants.⁴⁷ In other words, the Old Left fought against American capitalism; however, the New Left are fighting for American democracy.

Henceforth, the literary creations about the social movements in the 1960s were called New Left Literature. New Left writers usually subordinated their messages into “broader perspectives demanding cultural egalitarianism, and equal access of specific constituencies to political and economic power.”⁴⁸ That is to say, the New Left literature did not have a specific system or format in terms of literary strategies. Actually, the fervor of New Left was quickly suppressed with the overall cool-down of the Civil Rights movements in the late 1970s. However, the spirits of the American Left, both the New and the Old Left, have established in the minds of American intellectuals.

Meanwhile, the ongoing Vietnam War was parallel to the radical social movements between the late 1960s and the 1970s, and anti-war movements constituted a significant part of the whole social scenario at that time. Then, it would be reasonable to argue that all literature about the Vietnam War were anti-war. So were the films about the Vietnam War. On the other hand, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the scenario of the 1960s seemed to reoccur. Intellectuals were still advocating for more egalitarian social, economic and political conditions for people of different races and gender. They were protesting against a war which had no clear strategy of winning or ending. Consequently, all the literature and films regarding the ongoing war in Iraq are

⁴⁷Mark E. Kann, *The American Left: Failures and Fortunes* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 523.

anti-war too. If all representations of war were anti-war in general, then it is meaningless to discuss or compare them. Therefore, this project aims to dig out the significant difference between representations of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars and representations of the other American wars.

Scholarship concerning representations of Vietnam and Iraq so far mainly focused on the representation of violence and horror in different aesthetic works. I agree that representations of Vietnam and Iraq made the most powerful anti-war statements. However, I want to look beyond the manifestation of the fierce protests and criticism to investigate the influence and legacy of the American New Left upon the aesthetic representations of Vietnam and Iraq. In other words, I want to make inquiries into how the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars were represented by the Left writers and filmmakers to communicate their concerns and expectations of American democracy. I presume that representations of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars by the Left artists were an act of patriotism. In fact, the American Left intellectuals have always been the thoughtful and democratic patriots. Therefore, their fierce critiques of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars were out of their love for the country. Accordingly, this project will give priority to examine the specific artistic techniques and strategies the writers and filmmakers employed to convey their democratic thoughts in the representations. Moreover, this project will also investigate how the American Left writers and filmmakers conceived of American democracy. That is, whether the American Left writers and filmmakers of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars intended to defend American democracy as the well-established values, or they intended to promote the achieving of American democracy, which is always in the making. Specifically, this project will answer the following questions: what is the history of American left? Who are the American left? What is the difference between anti-government and anti-war? What is the nature of the American Left ideology? Is the Leftist

ideology a different form of patriotism? How does the American New Left influence the aesthetic representations of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars? How do the American Left writers and filmmakers represent the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars? What do they communicate in representations of Vietnam and Iraq?

To carry out this investigation, this dissertation is composed of four chapters. The first of which entitles “representations of war and the American New Left.” As we know that representation and war belong to two independent fields of study; one is aesthetics, and the other is politics. Therefore, representation of war is an amalgamation of aesthetics and politics. The first part of this chapter will analyze why representation of war is a social necessity from the perspectives of sociology, philosophy, psychology, literary and film study. I will argue that representation of war is entertainment, and representation of war is superior to the real war because it concerns the universality of all human being. Next, I argue that representation of war makes good judgement and fulfills the philosophical search for the identity of self and other. Besides, representation of war begets the myths of war, facilitates catharsis and anti-war advocates. The second part of this chapter traces the history of the American New Left and the distinction between the Old Left and the New Left. Then, it will discuss why the 1970s was a watershed era in America as a result of civil rights movement, feminist movement, anti-war movement and counterculture. At the end, this chapter will bridge the American New Left with representation of war to illuminate that the aesthetic representations of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars by the Left writers and filmmakers was motivated by their thoughtful and democratic patriotism. Consequently, the American Left artists have been collectively pushing forward the constant making of American democracy and identity.

Chapter Two is “representations of Vietnam and Iraq in literature.” First, I pair Philip Caputo’s memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977) with Colby Buzzell’s memoir *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) to reveal how men’s romantic and heroic dream of war was torn to pieces by the cruelty of war as well as the hypocrisy of the war-mongers. Moreover, Caputo and Buzzell both highlight the ferociousness caused by the uniqueness of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. That is to say, the American military are competent for neither the guerrilla war in the Vietnamese jungles nor the armed insurgency in Iraq. Despite the invincible challenges in Vietnam and Iraq, Caputo and Buzzell spare no efforts in delineating the courage, the brotherhood, and the redeemed personality of Americans in the war. Second, I discuss how Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and Phil Klay’s *Redeployment* (2014) demonstrate different ways of telling war stories. O’Brien is soft and thoughtful while Klay is growling and cynical. But both believe in the revealing power of storytelling. Ultimately, O’Brien asks for peace and forgiveness, and Klay looks for productive self-adjustment after the war. Third, I include Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* and Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012) to expose the fates of the veterans. Paco’s homecoming is humble and arduous. In contrast, the homecoming of Billy and his fellow soldiers is grand and ceremonious. However, Billy and his friends are just pawns used by the government to sell the Iraq War. The fate of Paco is representative of the ultimate fate of all veterans. Both Heinemann and Fountain boldly criticized the hypocrisy of American society, and portrayed veterans as the most cool-minded social observer and critics. Finally, I read Karl Marlantes’ *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (2009) alongside Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2012) to expose the most horrifying scenes of death in the war. Moreover, both works reiterated the myth of the American Marines that they were the bravest and the best-behaved men in the nation, and they would cherish

the fraternity under all costs. Most war literature is written by veterans, both in the form of fiction and nonfiction. Veteran writers from Vietnam and Iraq not only fulfilled their duties in testifying against crimes against humanity, but also went beyond to ponder upon the future of the country and its people. In a word, veteran writers tended to represent Vietnam and Iraq very similarly. They disclose the horror and trauma of war, and criticize what they perceive to be erroneous decisions made by the American government.

Chapter Three is “representations of Vietnam and Iraq in films.” First, I will discuss *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989). The four films were the most celebrated ones regarding the Vietnam War. They were horror films, but also big box office successes. Each film represented Vietnam in a uniquely powerful way. Nevertheless, they all highlighted the victimization of American soldiers in Vietnam, and their desperate courage back at home. The films, to a great extent, contributed to the collective post-war healing process. In the second part, I will discuss *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009), *Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass, 2010), and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014). These four films were grunt films, because they focus on an idealized, low-ranking soldier/hero who is super competent, responsible, and moral. The argument of the chapter is Vietnam war films provide the public with a cathartic experience by displaying how American soldiers were victimized and what Americans lost in Vietnam—innocence, dignity, morality and justice. And Iraq war films manifest the dominant ideologies of the anti-war public concerning the war who felt that the Iraq War was wrong and unjust by highlighting what American society value in a soldier—healthy masculinity, competence, responsibility and morality.

Chapter Four is “representations of Vietnam and Iraq in documentaries.” First, I pair *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968) with *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, US, 2004) to anatomize why and how America entered the wars. Second, I analyze *A Face of War* (Eugene Jones, 1968) and *The War Tapes* (Deborah Scanton, 2006) to display how American soldiers lived and fought in the battle zones. Third, in Bill Couturie’s *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987) and *Last Letters Home: Voices of American Troops from the Battlefields of Iraq* (2004), I read letters written by American soldiers regarding their experiences in Vietnam and Iraq. Last, I include *American Experience: My Lai* (Barak Goodman, 2010) and *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007) to expose scandals concerning My Lai Massacre and Abu Ghraib Prison. In documentaries about Iraq, filmmakers tend to present Iraq through the lens of conspiracy theories. In my opinion, Iraq documentaries reveal at least four conspiracies. First, well-known films like *No End in Sight*, *Why We Fight*, *Breaking the Silence* claim that that the American government had been planning a war in Iraq long before the attack. Secondly, as in the Michael Moore’s acclaimed *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Uncovered: The War on Terror*, many films presumed that there was a secret affiliation between the Bush family and the oil tycoons in Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, films such as *Iraq For Sale*, *The War Tapes* expose how various American profiteers benefited from the war. Finally, films like *Taxi to the Dark Side*, *Standard Operating Procedure*, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* disclose how the American military tested out torture techniques on the detainees in Iraq.

Finally, a short conclusion summarizes the contributions of this project and scrutinizes the constantly changing and developing nature of the Leftist ideologies.

CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR AND THE AMERICAN NEW LEFT

The history of war is actually as old as the history of human civilization. So is the history of representing war. Even though human beings in prehistoric times could not speak nor write, they started to record and present the battle scenes in the artistic way. Rock-paintings which anthropologists and archaeologists unearthed in southern France and northern Spain depicted in detail the Spanish Levant during the late Upper Paleolithic (about 10,000 to 5,000 BC).¹ In fact, the initial archaeological study of prehistoric wars was based on the discovery of cave art. Later on, with the invention of language and development of art, war became one of the most abiding subjects in various artistic forms. Jan Mieszkowski, in *Watching War* has observed that warfare was an “entrenched part” of epic poem in ancient Rome, of lyric poetry in the First World War, of the epic novel in the Second World War, of movies in the case of the Vietnam War, and of blogs in the Iraq War.²

The purpose of this chapter, first of all, is to investigate why and how people represent war. I will observe the phenomenon of representing war from the perspectives of sociology, philosophy, psychology, literary and film study. Then I will bring in the main features of the American New Left in the late 1960s and 1970s because this dissertation intends to analyze the aesthetic representations of Vietnam and Iraq through the lens of the American New Left. Finally, in order to incorporate this new perspective into the representations of Vietnam and Iraq, I will bridge

¹ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27.

² Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 10.

representation of Vietnam with the influence of the American New Left, and representation of Iraq with the legacy of the American New Left.

To begin with, one of the most ancient and fundamental purposes of representing war is to entertain. This was especially true in pre-historic societies. Without the help of written language, traditions and cultures were preserved and passed on only through oral narrations. Since warfare constituted the most important part of history and culture, people transmitted history by telling war stories. Such storytelling was also one of the most important forms of entertainment in the pre-industrial eras since there were not many options for entertainment. People not only told stories about wars, they even performed works of art about war, such as dancing and singing. For instance, the *Iliad*, which was attributed to Homer, was first sung by epic singers from family to family to make a living. Since the publication of the *Iliad* on, war has become the most intriguing theme in literature. Furthermore, since the late nineteenth century on, with the invention of filming technology and television, war dominated screens to a great extent. Stacey Peebles, in *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq* stated that war was “the world’s second-oldest form of entertainment.”³

According to Peebles, artistic representations of war offer contemporary viewers “illicit pleasure” and viewers would “thrill to the violent and sexy spectacle of fighters like them violating social and moral taboos. They watch raucously, confident in their own agency as military men who will soon wield power and violence the same way they wield the gaze.”⁴ Similarly, Richard Holmes, in *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, comments that “[o]ne of the most savory

³ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

pleasures of war comes from the heightened sense of awareness sometimes brought on by the presence of danger... even the majority, who find battle terrifying beyond even the merest hint of pleasure, none the less relish comradeship and a sense of importance as an individual within the group.”⁵ Moreover, veterans-turned-writers, Anthony Swofford and Colby Buzzell, in their books, *Jarhead* and *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, observed that, even though war literature and film usually criticized war fiercely, they also presented a “spectacle” of violence: “fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film, you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck.”⁶ Even though the above examples are mainly observations of the latest phenomena, it is still easy to infer that from the ancient to the present, various aesthetic representations of war clearly entertain people whether the presenters mean to entertain the audience or not. In other words, representations of war inevitably sell war by aestheticizing it and amplifying the affect of war (intrigue, suspense, and power).

On the other hand, war is actually very hard to represent. Linguistically, the vocabulary which can be used to describe war is limited to synonyms of “kill” and “death” because war is indeed a game of killing and dying. Visually, war is more associated with blood and mutilated bodies since war concerns final body counts and conquest. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Literature* states:

One of the cruxes of war... is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them... logically, there is no reason why the English

⁵ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (United Kingdom: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 272.

⁶ Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronical of Gulf War and Other Battles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 7.

language could not perfectly well render the actuality of ... warfare... what listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn't have to be? We have made unspeakable mean indescribable: it really means nasty.⁷

Nevertheless, men never stop telling stories about war, drawing war pictures, taking war photos, shooting war films, producing war poems, and representing wars in whatever possible way. Why is this? First and foremost, art is not reality. And it is not the responsibility of artists to relate actual events, which is the business of historians. Aristotle, in his *Poetics* pointed out that poet's function was to relate things that "might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity."⁸ The fundamental difference between artistic representation and historical account, according to Aristotle, was that "poetry[art] is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry[art] relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars."⁹ Even though Aristotle only talked about the distinction and connection between poetry and history, it is reasonable to expand the topic to art in general. In other words, art or artistic representation of life is more philosophical than real because it cares about the universality of human nature.

Representation of war also facilitates good judgment. Longinus in his *On the Sublime* observed that:

Speaking of the common life of men, Demosthenes declares that the greatest of all blessings is good fortune, and that next comes good judgment, which is indeed quite as important, since the lack of it often completely cancels the advantage of the former. We may apply this to literature and say that *Nature fills the place of good fortune, Art that of*

⁷ Fussell, *The Great War*, 169.

⁸ Aristotle, "On Rhetoric," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 59.

⁹ Ibid.

good judgment. And above all we must remember this: the very fact that in literature some effects come of natural genius alone can only be learned from art.¹⁰

It is true that real battle fields are filled with unfairness, injustice, discrimination, abuse, hypocrisy, immorality, betrayal, cheating, and other dark sides of humanity, and they are all justified and taken for granted. However, in artistic representation of the battle fields, all the distorted values will be exposed, analyzed, and judged by the audience. Longinus claimed that “[j]udgment in literature is the ultimate fruit of ripe experience.”¹¹ Longinus believed in the sublimity produced by literature, so is the art: “[s]ublimity is the echo of a noble mind. . . . a grand style is the natural product of those whose ideas are weighty. This is why splendid remarks come particularly to men of high spirit.”¹² Normally, the criteria to evaluate art is that art resembles nature, which is also where sublimity lies. To successfully produce the sublimity in art, *phantasiai* or visualization must be employed to convey the weight, grandeur and urgency: “so that our attention is drawn from the reasoning to the enthralling effect of the imagination, and the reality is concealed in a halo of brilliance. And this effect on us is natural enough; set two forces side by side and the stronger always absorbs the virtues of the other.”¹³ Indeed, the most celebrated representations of war are all characterized by the impressive visualization of certain aspect of war, especially the horror of war. For example, the depiction of playing Russian roulette in *The Deer Hunter* is so horrifying and shocking that people frequently equal the Vietnam War with Russian roulette. What’s more,

¹⁰ Longinus. “On Sublimity,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 165-6. (Emphasis added.)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 225.

the metaphor of Russian roulette demonstrates the horror of Vietnam in the most vivid and philosophical way.

Films concerning genocide might be the best example to illustrate the influence of good judgement in representation of war. For example, Rithy Panh, a Cambodian French director, produced a series of documentary films concerning the Cambodian genocide, which took place between the 1960s and the 1970s. Panh made his first Cambodian genocide documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* in 2003, which re-enacted the prison routine by guards, interrogators, photographers, executioners, doctors and two survivors.¹⁴ In 2011, Panh released the sequel to *S-21*—*Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*, which exclusively focused on one person—Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, who was the commandant of Security Prison 21, and who trained all the murderers, supervised all the torture and executions between 1975 and 1979.¹⁵ In 2013, Panh directed *The Missing Picture*, which used clay figurines to re-enact the genocide, and won top prize at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival.¹⁶ All Panh's films expose the horror of war in extreme degrees. In *Duch*, Panh exposed Duch's invention of torturing methods by showing photos, paintings, and written records of what the perpetrators had done to the prisoners—grinding the children into mud, burning people into dust, draining the blood of live prisoners, feeding the prisoners excrement, thrusting needles under fingernails, conducting electrocution, slitting the throats of the prisoners, and other unimaginable torture. Are viewers fascinated by this portrayal

¹⁴ Rithy Panh, dir. *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (France: Institut national de L'audiovisuel First Run Features, 2003). (S-21 was a former security prison under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.)

¹⁵ Rithy Panh, dir. *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (France: CreateSpace, 2012).

¹⁶ Rithy Panh, dir. *The Missing Picture* (France: L'image Animée, 2013).

of horror? Panh believes that montage is a “politics” and a “morality” unto itself.¹⁷ He uses films to tell the truth about history. In this film, he not only wanted to expose the true face of the Cambodian genocide; but he also wanted to ask how a perpetrator like Duch who murdered so many innocent people in the fiercest way could still live a peaceful life. Why did he not commit suicide? How could he always keep a smile on his face, and from time to time, burst into laughter? How could he consider himself innocent? Last but not least, how could the cinematic techniques be employed to anatomize the soul of this master killer? In other words, besides horror, violence, pornography, representations of war investigate the ethical dimension of man’s actions in history.

What’s more, representation of war facilitates the search and investigation of identity and subjectivity. This is also one of the most important purposes of representing war in different aesthetic forms. It is a common belief that war is brutal, dirty, and ugly. But representations of war through various forms of art have been appealing to the mass public since the very beginning. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who has been compared to be “Plato of modern Continental philosophy,” argued that art in nature was a significant philosophical project, which aimed at assisting human beings in fulfilling their own identity as thinking beings since artistic representation was tied to spirit or Ideal.¹⁸ To better understand the connection between artistic representation and the investigation of human identity and subjectivity, let me briefly review the history of the human philosophical search of self, identity, and subjectivity from Rene Descartes to Hegel.

¹⁷ Deirdre Boyle, “Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell,” *Video Recording Review*, vol. 39 2013.

¹⁸ Vincent B. Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 536.

First, it was Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) who, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*—Meditation II (1641), initiated the exploration of self or the question of 'what/who am I.' Descartes meditated on all the attributes which belonged to man, and found that thought was the only character which was inseparable from the nature of human beings. Descartes' formula, "I think therefore I am," emphasized the priority of man's mental substance over his physical substance — that is, man doubted, therefore man thought, therefore man existed.¹⁹

Later, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) published one of his most influential works—*Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in which he divided self into two parts—a phenomenal self and an un-phenomenal self. The former actually was representation of 'I' in the society, or who I was in the eyes of the others. The definition of 'I' could only be done through categories—man/woman; rich/poor; pretty/ugly; smart/stupid; and so on. Such categorization was definitely phenomenal. The latter was the thinking self, and the thinking self "is not and cannot be an object of sensible intuition; thus, it cannot be known; thus, it must be noumenal."²⁰ In other words, Kant disagreed with Descartes on the intelligibility of self. Descartes believed that thinking being was self, and thinking was the way we knew we were living. However, Kant believed that the "I" who thought was unknowable because neither inner intuition nor outer intuition was capable of perceiving the thinking thing. The phenomenal self, or the representation of I, was knowable in terms of categories which were governed by pure reason. To be more exact, Kant

¹⁹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method: Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Donald A Cress, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1998), 51.

²⁰ Patricia Kitcher, *Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 124.

equaled selfhood with consciousness: “[f]or Kant, subjectivity can only have content through awareness of the world.”²¹

Even though Hegel agreed with Kant on the consciousness of self, he further explored the intersubjective relationships between human beings. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel assumed that human beings were not born with the sense of who I am; “self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another.”²² In other words, the existence of self is defined by the existence of an other, which Hegel compared to the master-slave dialectic. Hegel compared the self-consciousness with the Lord-Bondsman or Master-Slave relation, that is, self-consciousness is divided into two opposing types—independent consciousness and dependent consciousness. The former is Master “whose essential nature is to be for itself” or “being-for-self”; the latter is Slave “whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another” or “being-for-other.”²³ On the one hand, the self enjoys his dominant status as Master; on the other hand, he has to objectify the other and negate the consciousness of the other in order to maintain the hierarchy. Just as Hegel stated that “the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle.”²⁴

Hegel agreed with Descartes on the superiority of spirit over matter, and he also explored the possible paths to fulfilling people as thinking beings. In *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel stated that “a work of art is a product of human activity, ...being the conscious production of an external

²¹ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 19.

²² Leitch, *Anthology*, 630.

²³ *Ibid.*, 633.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 632.

object,” and “[t]he forms of art are nothing but the different relations of meaning and shape, relations which proceed from the Idea itself and therefore provide the true basis for the division of this sphere.”²⁵ The reason why human beings need art universally is that both art-making and art-evaluation fulfill the discovery journey of man’s search for his true self, “[t]he universal need for art, ... is man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.”²⁶ To synthesize the above mentioned theory about self and Hegel’s elaboration on the correlation between self and other, and apply them into the field of artistic representation of war, we can infer that representation of war is seemingly about “Others,” but in fact it is about “Self.” All artistic representations, not only of war, but also of all subjects, project our own existential conditions as well as the apprehension of our identity and subjectivity.

Furthermore, Hegel also explained that the artistic creation started with the external workmanship since art was closely related to the skill of handicraft. However, the ultimate mastery of a piece of art (no matter in what form) should “display the depths of the heart and the spirit; these are not known directly but are to be fathomed only by the direction of the artist’s own spirit on the inner and outer world.”²⁷ That is to say, Hegel agreed with Longinus on the sublimity of art, “[i]n the light of this sublimity, the natural phenomena and human forms and events are accepted, it is true, and left as they are, but yet they are recognized at the same time as incompatible

²⁵ G. W. Friedrich Hegel, “Lectures on Fine Art,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 547-551.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 549.

with their meaning which is raised far above all mundane content.”²⁸ Therefore, we can see that Hegel also agreed with Aristotle on the superiority of art over the natural phenomena in the sense that art generated a much deeper meaning out of the mundane routine.

To be sure, representation of war has created the myth of war genre. Northrop Frye, influenced by the theory of psychologist Carl Jung, argued in *The Archetypes of Literature* that each genre was actually a myth, which derived from a long history of unconscious acts of narrating a similar subject. Frye observed that:

By the time we get them, in the form of proverbs, riddles, commandments, and etiological folktales, there is already a considerable element of narrative in them. They too, are encyclopedic in tendency, building up a total structure of significance, or doctrine, from random and empiric fragments. And just as pure narrative would be unconscious act, so pure significance would be an incommunicable state of consciousness, for communication begins by constructing narrative. The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say “myth” only when referring to narrative, and “archetype” when speaking of significance.²⁹

That is to say, the genre of war actually is a myth. Accordingly, war has been narrated and represented in an unconscious way even though each narration and representation is conscious of why, how, and what to represent. As a matter of fact, each representation usually focuses on one specific aspect of war, it nevertheless adheres to a network of norms in representing both consciously and unconsciously.

Then what are the norms of war genre? First of all, one of the most productive and effective subjects in the war genre is the fighting spirit of mankind. Man’s fighting spirit and his capability

²⁸ Hegel, “Lectures on Fine Art,” 552.

²⁹ Northrop Frye, “The Archetypes of Literature: ‘Forming Fours,’ ‘Expanding Eye,’” *Jungian Literary Criticism* (1992): 23.

in spheres of non-peace and insecurity has always been considered as the decisive criteria to evaluate masculinity in society. All representations of war illustrate how men prove their fighting spirit and manhood, and how they suffer in war. War has always been considered a necessary initiation process for men to achieve manhood. Consequently, most representations of war are men's stories. When women are involved in the representations, they are normally sufferers and mourners.

The representation of war is not only gendered, but also tragedy-oriented. In fact, the genre of war only produces tragedies. There are several reasons why the genre of war is tragedy-centered. First of all, the tragic nature of war determines that representation of war can only be tragic. Secondly, tragedy is arguably the most appealing power of art. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, argued that the public was in need of observing tragedies in various forms of art in their daily lives to keep a balance between the dire reality and the hope to exist and survive: "here the Dionysiac [tragedy] shows itself, in comparison with the Apolline [comedy], to be the eternal and original power of art which summons the entire world of appearances into existence, in the midst of which a new, transfiguring semblance is needed to hold fast within life the animated world of individuation."³⁰ In other words, tragedy resembles the existential conditions of mankind more than the comedy does. Even though life is made up of both happiness and suffering, the latter always constitute the majority. Furthermore, war is a constant state of human society. Ambrose Bierce, a Civil War veteran and the author of *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians and Other Stories*, observed that "War, n. A by-product of the arts of peace. The most menacing political condition

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 784.

is a period of international amity... War loves to come like a thief in the night; professions of eternal amity provide the night.”³¹ That is to say, compared with comedy and peace, tragedy and war are the more constant characteristics of human society.

Nietzsche also pointed out that the evolution of art was actually closely related to the perpetual interchange and conflict between comedy and tragedy. Art represents life, but it must surpass the superficiality and triviality of life:

The higher truth, the perfection of these dream-states in contrast to the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world, together with the profound consciousness of the helping and healing powers of nature in sleep and dream, is simultaneously the symbolic analogue of the ability to prophesy and indeed of all the arts through which life is made possible and worth living.³²

Art generates feelings of different types, but the most significant function of art may be its helping and healing powers, which provides “the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition of unity restored.”³³ This is especially true in artistic representations of war. In the different forms of arts about war, people experience countless tragic illusions of life in the sphere of war, but at the same time people obtain hope and courage with which their earthly struggle can be continued.

Additionally, representations of war make possible a necessary and efficient catharsis for veterans, war victims, and the public in general. Many influential war accounts are created by the veterans. Veterans feel that it is their responsibility to share with the public what they experienced in war and reveal the truth about war. For example, Kurt Vonnegut, a survivor of the Second World

³¹ Ambrose Bierce, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians: And Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2000), vii-viii.

³² Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 776.

³³ *Ibid.*, 783.

War and the author of best-seller *Slaughterhouse-Five*, believed that it was his duty and the only ethical choice to “testify against the crimes of humanity.”³⁴ Veterans also expect to find a way out of the trauma and guilt caused by their participation in war. For veterans, war means trauma. The term PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) came into use by the end of the First World War, but PTSD was most often related to Vietnam War veterans because there was an eruption of mentally disordered soldiers both in and out of the battlefield.³⁵ Philip Caputo, in *A Rumor of War* stated that

The war was starting to take a psychological toll...in the late summer the phrases *acute anxiety reaction* and *acute depressive reaction* started to appear on the sick-and-injured reports sent out each morning by the division hospital. ...it was partly caused by grief, grief over the deaths of friends. ...feel an emptiness, a sense of futility. They seemed to have died for nothing; if not for nothing, then for nothing tangible. ...it made me feel guilty to think about them, guilty about my own comparatively safe life on the staff, guiltier still about being the one who had translated their deaths into numbers on a scoreboard.³⁶

Portrayals of the mental states and changes in battle weary men vividly revealed how traumatic encounters on the battlefield impacted them physically and emotionally. As a result, the PTSD-impacted soldiers were trapped in an evil cycle. Moreover, the homecoming of veterans was so tough that their connection with the social community was severed, and in no way could they resume their former lives.

In reality, we know that a great number of veterans attempted and committed suicide after the Vietnam and the Iraq wars, and many continue to do so. In 2013, more than 8,000 veterans

³⁴ Todd F Davis, *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade, Or, how a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 81.

³⁵ Gorm Harste, “The Haunted Road: Failed Transformations and the Return from War or, a Historical Sociology of War Veterans,” in *Transforming Warriors: The Ritual Organization of Military Force*, ed. Peter Halden and Peter Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 212.

³⁶ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 201.

(mostly veterans from the Vietnam War) committed suicide, and 28,000 attempted to do so; and there were more than 800,000 soldiers from the Iraq War considering committing suicide.³⁷ Besides suicide, many would succumb to the use of drugs, violence, and isolation. For this reason, recounting war experiences is an important part of the healing process. In *Trauma Narratives and Remaking of the Self*, Susan J. Brison claimed that even though recounting traumatic experiences could not really heal the trauma, the process of trying to recount the traumatic experience in a more sensible way was beneficial for victims of trauma:

The problem of the undoing of the self in trauma and the role of trauma narratives—what I call “speech acts of memory”—in remaking the self. . . . working through, or remastering, traumatic memory (in the case of human-inflicted trauma) involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s (the perpetrator’s) speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one’s own. The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates this shift, not only by transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world, but also by integrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood. The study of trauma provides support for a view of self as fundamentally relational—vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others.³⁸

Brison extended J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts to the narrative of trauma. That is to say, the act of narrating traumatic experiences by the participant is purposeful and functional. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* that “survivors of trauma did not only need to survive in order to tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive.”³⁹ By and large, many veterans write books

³⁷ Harste, *Haunted Road*, 210.

³⁸ Susan J. Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 39-40.

³⁹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78.

regarding their war experiences; on the other hand, few films about war have been directed by veterans even though some might act as playwrights.⁴⁰

For example, in 2007, the documentary film—*Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* (Richard E. Robbins) invited a group of famous actors such as Robert Duvall (starred in *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Gods and Generals*), Blair Underwood (starred in *A Streetcar Named Desire*), and others to read aloud journals, letters, poems, and essays written by veterans who participated in the Iraq War and Afghanistan War. Authors such as Tim O'Brien (author of *The Things They Carried*), Anthony Swofford (author of *The Jarhead*), Paul Russell (author of *The Great War and Modern Memory*) were interviewed to share their experiences of writing war stories.⁴¹ All the veteran writers disclosed that in the process of presenting wartime experiences in a sensible way, they restored their sense of identity and humanity. What's more, writing helped heal the trauma. In 2011, Ron Capps founded the Veterans Writing Project in Washington, D. C. to help veterans to heal the trauma generated by their war experiences.⁴²

Recounting traumatic wartime experiences also offers a cathartic experience for war victims and their families. Duong Van Mai Elliott, author of *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, tells a biographical story of four generations in the life of her Vietnamese family from the late nineteenth-century to 1975. Duong was a victim of the Vietnam War. She was raped and abused by the Viet Cong. She lost many loved ones and suffered in the

⁴⁰ The only film directed by veteran is *Platoon*.

⁴¹ Richard E. Robbins, dir. *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* (New York: Documentary Group, 2007).

⁴² Veterans Writing Project, <https://veteranswriting.org>

most unimaginable ways. But on reflecting her life miseries, she chose to forgive and let go of all the tragic past. At the end of her memoir, she states:

As my plane took off one fall morning from Hanoi, I looked out of my window and felt a sense of peace and closure. I had renewed family bonds unbroken by time and war, and I had reconnected with my roots and my native soil. I had seen my relatives put the past behind them and move on, stirred once again by hope rather than by fear of bullets and bombs. I had seen Vietnam, the land of two million war dead, become once again the land of the living. And I was taking back with me not the deafening explosions of weapons, but the gentle sound of the monsoon rain.⁴³

For the general public, reading or watching war stories also acts as a cathartic process. In fact, the societal sphere to some extent is analogous to the battlefield represented in books and films. Consequently, life is frequently compared to war.

Besides discussing aesthetic representation of war in general, we need to pay special attention to filmic representation of war in particular. Even though the history of visual media is comparably young, it has been developing with unprecedented speed. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), in *What Is Literature?* echoed Hegel's elaboration on form and art, stating:

One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world. If I fix on canvas or in writing a certain aspect of the fields or the sea or a look on someone's face which I have disclosed, I am conscious of having produced them by condensing relationships, by introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things.... The creation becomes inessential in relation to the creative activity.⁴⁴

That is to say, no matter what forms artists employ in their representations, the goal is to explore the relationship between human beings and the social order. Writers use language. Painters use

⁴³ Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 474.

⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, "What is Literature?" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 1200.

canvas and paints. Photographers use lenses. And so on. But all artistic representations reveal the shared humanity of social beings, that is, what we are, and why we are what we are. Nevertheless, the core value of the arts lies in their appealing power to call into question our existential conditions. As Sartre claimed, “[e]ach of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a ‘revealer’, that is, it is through human reality that ‘there is’ being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations.”⁴⁵

Finally, representations of war, ultimately, are aimed at stopping war or ending violence, even if this is an impossible mission. Differently from the pessimistic Horkheimer and Adorno, Sartre was quite confident in the power of art, and he believed that art would renew the world: “Each painting, each book, is a recovery of the totality of being. Each of them presents this totality to the freedom of the spectator. For this is quite the final goal of art: to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom...”⁴⁶ Sartre agreed with Hegel, art-making was a philosophical project searching for true self, and he further argued that art-making ultimately was a journey for recovering the totality of self. That is to say, art creation facilitates the achieving of true self.

⁴⁵ Sartre, *Literature*, 1199.

⁴⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, define modern art as culture industry: “The culture industry does not sublimate; it represses. By repeatedly exposing the objects of desire, breasts in a clinging sweater or the naked torso of the athletic hero, it only stimulates the unsublimated forepleasure which habitual deprivation has long since reduced to a masochistic semblance... works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.” (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 1108.); Sartre, *Literature*, 1209.

Similarly, Thomas Gardner, in “War as Mediated Narrative: The Sextet of War Rhetoric” claims that “[m]ost Americans experience war as a mediated phenomenon. When war is a mediated narrative, it becomes linked to its own dramatized, mediated, and represented narrative. It seeks, in the representation of itself and even in its very real playing out, to replicate the mediated narrative it has come to project about itself through its mediated representations.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Peter Halden, in *Transforming Warriors: The Ritual Organization of Military Force* echoed Sartre’s understanding of war, and he also defined war as “an existential experience.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, representations of war help men search for the meaning of existence under certain circumstances. To sum up, war has been aestheticized to entertain the public, to encourage good judgement, to fulfill a philosophical search for self, to facilitate catharsis, to create myths, and to call for the end of war.

The second part of this chapter centers on how war has been represented in literature and film. In other words, what is the conventional rhetoric about war? What are the factors defining the nature of the genre of war? To answer these questions, I propose the following scaffolding to explain the dominant characteristics of representations of war: representations of trauma, satire, sexuality, and values (see Figure 1.1).

⁴⁷ Thomas Gardner, “War as Mediated Narrative: The Sextet of War Rhetoric,” in *Constructing America’s War Culture: Iraq, Media, and Images at Home*, ed. Thomas Conroy and Jarice Hanson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 109.

⁴⁸ Peter Halden and Peter Jackson, *Transforming Warriors: The Ritual Organization of Military Force* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 223.

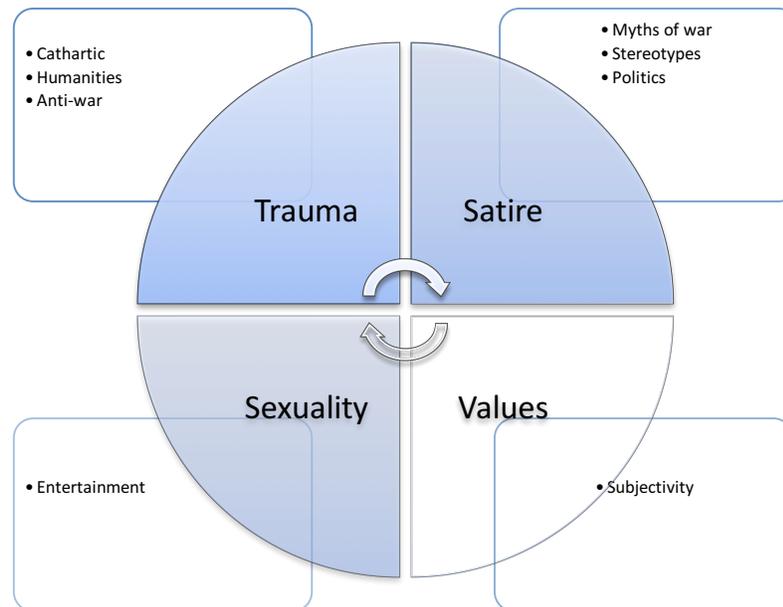


Figure 1.1. Representation of War

Obviously, representations of war focus on traumatic experiences, usually of soldiers. I prefer the word “trauma” to “horror” because horror relates to the tragic and fatal progression of warfare; while trauma connects to the fundamental changes of man’s mental and physical condition. Horror and trauma are two sides of the same coin of representation of war. In other words, horror is what war looks like and trauma is what war feels like. For example, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *American Sniper* (2014) are two blockbuster films about Vietnam and Iraq respectively that demonstrate the power of napalm bombs and GPS-aided sniper rifles to a degree of surreal-ness, even glorification. Other examples include the scene of pig-eating-dead-men, which first occurred in Ambrose Bierce’s *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891), then appeared again in Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977), and recently in Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2012). Another example is Karl Marlantes’ *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*. In this novel, Marlantes talked about how a leech entered a soldier’s penis and tortured him to the verge of dying, and how another soldier was attacked and eaten by a tiger at night. Generally, if a book

or film does not tell horrors of war and trauma of the soldiers, then it cannot be considered as war literature nor a war film. The representation of trauma is the defining feature of representations of war. To a great extent, the degree of horror and trauma in representation determines the success of the book and the film about the war.

The second core component of representations of war is the use of satire. Oxford English Dictionary defines satire as “a poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary.”⁴⁹ Indeed, many war writers and filmmakers employ the technique of satire to counter-argue against the clichéd statements about war, such as the mythical connection between heroism and war, government’s propaganda, and the public’s blind enthusiasm. In representations from the Civil War to the present, representations of heroism are far from popular. Explicit praises of heroism are rare. One example might be a series of war novels created by the Shaara’s about the heroic image of General Robert Lee.⁵⁰ A second would be *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), which centers around the “legendary” American sniper Chris Kyle. The rest often lay bare the belief that war can’t make heroes, but only crazy killers. Representations of war before the Vietnam War usually suggested that there were no heroes in war. However, representations since the Vietnam War tend to emphasize that war turns men into crazy killers. For example, there were no heroes in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, and

⁴⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171_207?rskey=nZ2xgg&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid (accessed on August 29, 2018).

⁵⁰ Jeff Shaara, *Gods and Generals*, ed. Michael Shaara (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996); Jeff Shaara, *The Last Full Measure* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998); Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1993).

the soldiers even killed their own family members or the family of their fellow soldiers by mistake. Men were not heroes but “mule drivers” in *The Red Badge of Courage* (Stephen Crane, 1895). Besides rejecting heroism in war, representations of war also deny the myth that war is a necessary initiation for men. *A Rumor of War* (Philip Caputo, 1977) argues that war cannot teach men how to be men, but only to be bad men. *Born on the Fourth of July* (Olive Stone, 1989) demonstrates that war wastes men rather than initiates them. *The Thin Red Line* (James Jones, 1962) openly declares that war poisons men; and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009) echoes that and claims that for some soldiers, war is a drug.

Besides dissecting myths about war, representations of war often satirize people’s stereotypes about *us* and *them*. Even though representations of war are mainly done from the perspective of an “us,” in no way do they display the superiority of “us” over “them.” Soldiers, no matter if they are American soldiers or their counterparts, are human beings in common, and they share all characteristics of human beings, such as love, fear, hatred, prejudice, and more. Representations of the Civil War and two World Wars highlight the courage, fear, and frustration of the American soldiers, such as *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Naked and the Dead* (Norman Mailer, 1948), and others. However, representations of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars underscore the brutality and absurdity of American soldiers, such as *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *The Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1978), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Casualties of War* (Brian de Palma, 1989), and others. In other words, representations of war, on the one side, characterize American soldiers as universally flawed human beings; on the other side, put into question the arrogance fostered by “us” and the prejudice against “them” which are defined by the differences in race and nationality.

Moreover, representations of war satirize the politics of the American government. *Catch-22* is definitely a classical war satire, which anatomizes the absurdity and hypocrisy of the bureaucracy in the American military in the most cynical way. Concerning the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, writers openly blame their presidents for starting the war, Michael H. Hunt says that the Vietnam War is *Lyndon Johnson's War* and Terry Anderson says the Iraq War is *Bush's Wars*.⁵¹ Similarly, *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk* and *The War Tapes* expose the chain of profits behind the Iraq War.⁵² In film and literature pre-Vietnam, the focus of the anti-government argument was that there were no so-called "great" wars at all. In other words, American soldiers were utilized and sacrificed by their government to mobilize in the world politics. However, representations of Vietnam and Iraq tend to focus on government deception. That is to say, the American government deceived the mass public about the origins, the necessities and the consequences of the wars.

The third component that shapes representations of war is a focus on social values, usually the conflicting values guarded by people of different social backgrounds. Most representations of war focus on the perspective of the soldiers, who usually are from the underprivileged classes. Accordingly, the conflicts between the poor and the rich are emphasized in the representations. What's more, conflicts between liberals and conservatives are shown from the Civil War to the ongoing Iraq War. William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha county witnessed both the irreversible changes of the South and the struggles between conservatives and radicals with

⁵¹ Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵² Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (New York: Ecco, 2012).

conservatives wanted to preserve the slavery and radicals wanted to abolish it. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) presented the great social divide between the affluent and the poor after the Second World War. Partisanship is a feature of practically all literature and films about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. Republicans are for the wars; while Democrats are against the wars. After all, representations of war are, by nature, judgements on morality and ideology.

The last core component of representation of war is the representation of sexuality. Sex is a basic instinct of all human beings, and sexuality is a feature of many different genres. But it is also true that most representations of war represent sexuality in certain ways. In novels and films about the Civil War and two World Wars, sexuality was represented in the romantic ways. Representations of the three wars showed that men suffered on the battlefields for the safety of their family, and war romance took place between the official and a nurse in literature and films about two World Wars. However, after 1945, sexuality was represented in more violent and tragic ways. Many wounded soldiers totally lost their sexuality thanks to the destructiveness of modern weapons. One ugliness in Vietnam was that American soldiers frequently patroned brothels and raped Vietnamese women. Prostitution and rape were commonly seen in representations of Vietnam. Such sexual abuses are not common in Iraq, but many books and films show the impotence of men after the war due to PTSD.

Besides analyzing the representations of Vietnam and Iraq in literature and films in general, this dissertation also intends to introduce the perspective of the American New Left in discussing how and why Vietnam and Iraq were represented as they were. Chronologically, the major creations about the Vietnam War were made after the prime time of the American New Left. Ideologically, the politics of the American New Left were reflected in the celebrated novels and

films about the Vietnam War. Even the movement of the American New Left was heavily suppressed by the government after the end of 1970s and the early 1980s, its core values have never been extinguished. Instead, the spirit of the American New Left keeps evolving and developing with the changes of the time. By comparing representation of Vietnam with representation of Iraq, this dissertation will show the resonance of the American New Left in literature and films about the two wars. But before we bridge the representations of Vietnam and Iraq with the lens of the American New Left, let me briefly review the history of the American New Left.

First, we need to distinguish between the American Old Left and the New Left. Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* made clear that the era between the 1860s to the early 1960s was the Old Left which was strongly influenced by Marxism and Leninism; the era between the late 1960s to the 1970s was the New Left, which was influenced mainly by the American domestic social, political, and cultural movements.⁵³ According to Buhle, the Old Left was mainly composed of American laborers who were fighting against the oppressions of American capitalism. However, the New Left was composed of African Americans, women, immigrants, students, veterans, artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals who were fighting against injustice and discrimination, and fighting for democracy. In other words, the American New Left during the 1970s was evolved out of the American Old Left, but it extended its influence over the most underprivileged classes in American society.

⁵³ Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (Thetford; Norfolk: Thetford Press Limited, 1987).

Different from Buhle in distinguishing the Old Left from the New Left, Richard Rorty categorized American radicals—communists, socialists and radicals with no parties before 1964 as “reformist Left” who fought the “framework of constitutional democracy;” and he addressed all who questioned the possibility of social justice within the current social system as the “New Left.”⁵⁴ He affirmed that the American New Left is the “party of hope” in the United States, and called for the New Left to learn from the Reformist Left. He advocated for the New Left to take responsibility as agents rather than spectators in society. As messengers of democratic ideology and philosophy, the American Left has always been the “invisible man” of American politics.⁵⁵ As a result of their efforts and activism, the rights of the underprivileged—workers, women, African Americans, immigrants, and others have been written into law. The corruption of the government has been exposed. Most significant, the anti-war movement in the late 1960s helped end the Vietnam War and save the nation from losing basic standards of morality.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, in *One Nation, Two Cultures*, argues that the 1960s featured a unified America with two opposing cultures—the conservative Right and the liberal Left.⁵⁶ After reviewing the socio-economic-political context of the 1950s, Himmelfarb believed that the affluence and stability brought about by the end of two World Wars nurtured revolutionary ideas among American intellectuals. First, the end of two World Wars guaranteed the position of America being the political and military super power in whole world. Accordingly, American economy and American culture also began to develop at an unprecedented speed. The development

⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 43.

⁵⁵ Kann, *The American Left*, 7.

⁵⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

of science and technology after the wars transformed the country rapidly and dramatically. That is to say, after the Second World War, the United States quickly developed from a military super power into an economic super power. Second, the 1950s also witnessed the coming-into-age of the baby-boomers, and they were entitled to take the benefits of the G.I. Bill, government funds to finish higher education in universities. Accordingly, the well-educated baby-boomers became spokesmen for the injustice and inequality of the time. Third, the revolutionary movements in Europe, China, and other Third World countries stimulated the counterculture movements in American society.

And yet, the counterculture during the 1960s was also frequently associated with “moral decay,” such as the dramatically increasing rate of illegitimate births, extramarital affairs, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, AIDS, and crimes of various types. Himmelfarb, however, did not believe that all the moral disorders were necessarily resulting from the counterculture movement. She further pointed out that the social pathology of the 1960s was the core reason for moral decay— “the loss of parental authority, the lack of discipline in schools, the escalating violence and vulgarity of TV, the ready accessibility of pornography and sexual perversions on the Internet, the obscenity and sadism of videos and rap music, the binge-drinking and “hooking up” in the college campuses, the “dumbing down” of education at all levels.”⁵⁷ Ultimately, Himmelfarb concluded that American society of the 1970s was encountering an interaction between “deviancy down” and “deviancy up,” that is, what was once categorized as

⁵⁷ Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, 25.

abnormal and deviant were considered normal; at the same time, what was once regarded normal were considered abnormal. Consequently, the definition of deviancy and morality was revised.

What was the core motivation for the radical ideological revolutions and social movements during the 1960s and 1970s? Simon Hall, in *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, declares that American patriotism was the very fundamental reason why Americans protested against social injustices in the 1960s.⁵⁸ That is to say, American intellectuals believed that the social injustices of the 1960s were incompatible with America's status as the superpower of the world. According to the Declaration of Independence, all people are created equal, and endowed with the rights of "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness," rather than the sexism, racism, militarism, and capital excess.⁵⁹ Particularly, Hall concluded that the radical opposition to the sexism, racism, and the Vietnam War was an act of patriotism: "patriotism in a democracy consists of criticism of bad policy and making of good policy by the people themselves."⁶⁰ Follow Hall's logic, in this project I extend the connection between American patriotism and critiques of Vietnam and Iraq, arguing that the reason why representations of Vietnam and Iraq highlight the immorality and inhumanity of the American government and the individuals is due to the thoughtful patriotism of the writers and filmmakers who constantly assess the construction of American national identity and democracy.

As early as 1838, the French diplomat, political scientist and historian Alexis de Tocqueville published his most influential book on American society—*Democracy in America*,

⁵⁸ Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

after his visit to America between 1831 to 1832. In his first letter to home, he told his family that, “these [American] people seem to me to stink of national pride; it pokes through all of their politeness.”⁶¹In the book, Tocqueville divided patriotism into “instinctive patriotism of monarchy” and “thoughtful patriotism of the republic.”⁶² He explained that the instinctive patriotism was the ancient patriotism, which was based on obedience without coercion; thoughtful patriotism was the democratic patriotism, which was generated by enlightenment. According to Tocqueville, the history of pre-Independence, or the history between 1600 to 1770, featured the instinctive patriotism by the colonists towards their monarchy. However, since the 1770s on, these colonists were no longer consent with the governing of the Parliament, and they strived for separation and independence. Therefore, the history since the 1770s featured thoughtful or democratic patriotism. All together, we can see there are three major revolutionary eras in the short history of this country. The first one was the American Revolutionary Wars between 1775 to 1812. It took almost four decades for the United States to fight for its independence from the British monarchy. The second one was the American Civil War between 1860 to 1865, which ultimately unified the South and the North. The third one was the revolutionary 1960s, which still called for basic human rights, equality and justice, although now for a wider range of citizens.

Similarly, the historian Nelson Lichtenstein, in *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*, declared that “all of America’s great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery to the labor upsurge in the 1930’s, defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterposed to the

⁶¹ Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*, 388.

⁶² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 386.

parochial and selfish elites which stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society.”⁶³ Richard Rorty, in *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, defined the United States as the “paradigmatic democracy,” which should pride itself as a model for the rest of the world in terms of the relationship between the individuals and their experiences in the existence of the nation.⁶⁴ Rorty emphasized that all American citizens should and must be proud of their identities as Americans; but at the same time, all Americans need to understand that this country’s moral identity was still to be achieved and in the making, rather than something done or needing to be preserved. What’s more, the difference in perceiving the status of American national identity divides American citizens into Right and Left. Both parties are proud of being Americans, but the Right believes that they have done the best job preserving the core values of the country. However, the Left holds that they have done a better job of improving the morality of society, but they still have a long way to go to obtain true American “liberty and justice for all.”

Then what is the connection between the spirit of the American New Left and the representations of Vietnam and Iraq? Writers and filmmakers who made art about Vietnam and Iraq, first of all, were typically anti-war. Even though we may argue that all representations of war are anti-war in general, only Vietnam and Iraq have been defined as “bad” wars or “mistakes.” In other words, when the Civil War was launched to unify the South with the North, and the two World Wars were considered the “Great” wars, the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars were fought with no sound rationality. The Vietnam War was initially assumed to get rid of Communism, but it

⁶³ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 383.

⁶⁴ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 30.

ended up killing whoever looked suspicious in Northern Vietnam. Similarly, the Iraq War targets terrorism in Iraq, but the main commitments of American soldiers in Iraq turn out to dispose IEDs and snipe the insurgents. Why did the United States invade two countries which both are thousands of miles away with no clear strategic military purposes? Most of the examples included in this dissertation highlight the confusing origins of the wars from the perspective of the soldiers. In this aspect, representations of Vietnam and Iraq can be considered the manifestos of the anti-war sentiment.

Next, representations of Vietnam and Iraq fiercely attack the wrongdoing of the American government. Novels and films about Vietnam and Iraq not only clearly state that it was wrong for the American government to get involved in Vietnam and Iraq, but also vehemently criticize the incompetence and stupidity of the government for dragging the wars into deeper plights. The superiority of American weapons and technology did not prevent the American military from suffering increasing casualties in Vietnam and Iraq. What's more, instead of generating practical military strategies and goals, the American government only cared about body counts in Vietnam and IED counts in Iraq. Consequently, the Vietnam War was passed over from President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), President Richard Nixon (1969-1974), to President Gerald R. Ford (1974-1977); and the Iraq War has also experienced the administrations of two American presidents so far, President George W. Bush (2001-2009) and President Barack Obama (2009-2017). Actually, the Iraq War is not officially ended now even the American government withdrew the majority of the troops, but the insurgencies and military conflicts are still going on.

Besides criticizing the indecisiveness and incompetence of the American government, representations of Vietnam and Iraq also disclose the stupidity of the government in cheating on the mass public. The American government deceptively publicized the progression of the Vietnam War. Through media and propaganda, the government convinced the public into believing that they were going to win the war in Vietnam quickly and painlessly. Even after the battle of Tet Offensive and My Lai massacre in 1968, the American government tried to whitewash the defining military overturn and the worst war scandal. Likely, the American government lied about the existence of WMD to invade Iraq. Then after the initial fierce bombing and attacking in 2003, constant insurgencies took place in Iraq between 2003 and 2008. Even so, the American government still announced that their mission in Iraq was “accomplished.” Meanwhile, to press the suspicious insurgents and terrorists, the American government set up secret detention centers and prisons in Iraq. The prisoner abuse and torture were commonly used, such as in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo. The American government tried every means to cover up these scandals until they were exposed by the journalists. Novels and films about Vietnam and Iraq disclose all these dirty tricks played by the government as well as their stupidity in doing so. In this perspective, representations of Vietnam and Iraq are the manifestos of an anti-authority statement.

Representations of Vietnam and Iraq put blame on the American government, but show great sympathy to the underclass. The Vietnam War was the first war in which the black soldiers fully integrated with the white soldiers. Besides, other minorities such as Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and women served in the war too. The composition of American soldiers in Iraq is similar. Novels and films about the two wars show that many innocent young men enlisted in the

war to escape the monotony of their everyday lives, but for the majority of the enlisted, they either had no choice to dodge the war, or war was the only choice for them to temporarily reduce their financial crisis. In the era of the Vietnam War, the American government endorsed the policy of Selective Service through which the young people from rich families could choose to study certain subjects in universities to defer the enlistment. However, those from poor families had no choice but be conscripted. Decades later, the military recruiters for the Iraq War try their best to sell the service to those who are in need of money. The examples included in this dissertation vividly demonstrate the desperation and frustration of the underclass both on the home front and the frontline. In this respect, representations of Vietnam and Iraq are the manifestos of the underclass.

Last but not least, representations of Vietnam and Iraq are humanistic and idealistic in essence. That is to say, they tend to represent people as human beings with merits and flaws. On the one hand, representations of Vietnam and Iraq highlight the brotherhood and comradery among the soldiers as well as the basic humanity of the individuals. On the other hand, the representations expose the immorality and inhumanity of the soldiers in graphic detail. The misdeeds of American soldiers in Vietnam turned the war unbearable ugly. They not only killed the suspicious Viet Cong, but also innocent civilians—the elderly, women, and children. What’s more, they committed numerous notorious gang rapes. American soldiers killed many civilians in Iraq too. They tortured and abused many suspects and detainees. Novels and films about the two wars displayed how poorly behaved these soldiers were; but more importantly, the novels and films showed how regretful and sorrowful the soldiers were towards their mistakes. Nevertheless, these novels and films ultimately call for a compassionate humanism—the promotion of humanity and morality of

humankind in general. All of these, in my opinion, resonate with the politics of the American New Left.

To better illustrate all the above-mentioned resonances between the spirit of the American New Left and representations of Vietnam and Iraq, in the following chapters, I will investigate literary creations, feature films, and documentary films about Vietnam and Iraq. I will scrutinize how Vietnam and Iraq were represented in literature and films similarly and differently. I will discuss what these representations tell us about the changing nature of war genres as well as the influence of the American New Left.

CHAPTER 2

REPRESENTATIONS OF VIETNAM AND IRAQ IN LITERATURE

Vietnam and Iraq have inspired a great number of writers.¹ Statistics show that there are more than two thousand works of fiction created regarding the Vietnam War.² The calculation of works about Iraq hasn't been completed since both the war and its literary representation are still in the making. Nevertheless, as the most popular online book review website, the *Goodreads* lists two hundred and fifty-three best literary works about the Vietnam War and fifty about the Iraq War.³ What's more, scholarship on literature about Vietnam abounds. For example, Stewart O'Nan classifies literature about Vietnam into three groups: early works (1965-73), the first wave of major works (1976-78), and the second wave of major works (1982-87).⁴ According to O'Nan, the early works mainly examined "individuality and the consequences of conformity," and authors "used the impact of war on the body to prompt a visceral rather than intellectual response."⁵ Next, the first wave of major works aimed to change the public's stereotypes about veterans and reveal the truth about America's role in Vietnam. Finally, during the second wave of major works, both veteran and non-veteran writers "used the Vietnam experience as either backdrop or backstory."⁶

¹ In this dissertation, I use Vietnam and Iraq to refer to the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars in order to reduce repetition and redundancy.

² Stefano Rosso, "Making Violence Visible in Vietnam War Narratives: The Case of *A Rumor of War*," in *Plots of War: Modern Narratives of Conflict*, ed. Isabel Capeloa and Adriana Martins (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 168.

³ https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/208.Best_Literature_About_the_Vietnam_War; <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/iraq-war> (accessed on May 16, 2018)

⁴ Stewart O'Nan, *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

Moreover, Kevin Hillstrom also discusses all the works included in *The Vietnam Reader* concerning when and how each work was created, and the public's reception of the work.⁷ By contrast, no scholars have yet done any intensive study of literature about the Iraq War. In this chapter, I argue that, similar to literature about Vietnam, literature about Iraq also focuses on recounting soldier's experience and investigating America's role in Iraq.

To begin with, most literature about Vietnam and Iraq continues the traditional theme of war-as-initiation. For example, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), James Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978), Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), Gustav Hadford's *The Short-Timers* (1979), Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War* (2011), Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), to name just a few, are all about the disillusioned and painful initiation processes of men from the pre-war, in-the-war, and the post-war period. Both literature about Vietnam and Iraq unanimously illustrate that soldiers enter the war passionately and blindly; then, after witnessing the horror of the war, they quickly lose their innocence; and finally, they come out of war a changed person mentally, physically, and psychologically. Thereupon, Tobey C. Herzog summarizes that literature regarding Vietnam features a "recurring three-part structure of innocence, experience, and consideration."⁸ So too, does the literature about Iraq. The manifestation of the loss of innocence is best represented in memoirs and semi-autobiographical

⁷ Kevin Hillstrom, *The Vietnam Experience: A Concise Encyclopedia of American Literature, Songs, and Films* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).

⁸ Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

fictions, which constitute a major part of the literary representation of the two wars. The examples listed above are either memoirs or semi-autobiographical fictions.

In the second place, literature concerning Vietnam and Iraq continues the narration of war horrors. In almost every example, readers will be impressed and haunted by the most horrifying scenes of facing danger, injury or death. Different from the war horrors represented by literature before the Vietnam War, the horrors of Vietnam and Iraq focus on two layers. In the first layer, as in all war literature, the horrors of Vietnam and Iraq resulted from the atrocities executed by soldiers who had received orders from representatives of the American government. In the second layer, the horrors of Vietnam and Iraq resulted from the ferocities of the war itself. In other words, American soldiers in Vietnam and Iraq were also the victims of the ferocious wars. For example, literature about Vietnam inevitably highlights the mysterious jungle, the unique Vietnamese guerrilla tactics, and tunnel war. Similarly, literature about Iraq shows that the American soldiers are shrouded with the constant fear of IEDs and the threat of ambushes. In a word, the wars in Vietnam and Iraq have been mostly portrayed as *different* and *unconventional* than those that came before. War is both a predictable and yet unique experience for each soldier who experiences it.

Next, literature about Vietnam and Iraq fiercely criticizes the perceived hypocrisy and incompetence of the American government. This is also the biggest difference between war literature before and after the Vietnam War. American war literature from the Civil War to the Second World War mainly criticized the bureaucracy of the American military, but seldom directly targeted the American government. For example, the most cynical and bitter satires about the two World Wars—Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1938) and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) mainly criticize the American military's indifference and arrogance to the sacrifice and suffering

of the soldiers, as well as shameless war profiteering. However, literature about Vietnam and Iraq focuses more on the deceptions of the government in making the war and their inability to end the war properly. Most literature about Vietnam and Iraq illustrate that men are lured into the war by their belief in American democracy, but very quickly they come to realize they are cheated by the government. In the view of many veteran writers, such as Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, Karl Marlantes, Ron Kovic, Kevin Powers, the American government tried every means possible to convince the public that they went to Vietnam for democracy and went to Iraq to fight terrorists. However, the real reasons were to contain Communism from entering Southeast Asia by way of Vietnam, and to access to oil and military bases in Iraq.⁹

Last but not the least, literature about Vietnam and Iraq further carries on the myth of American exceptionalism. John Hellmann observes that both literature and films about Vietnam “explore the war as a symbolic landscape inverting America’s frontier mythos.”¹⁰ By taking Vietnam and Iraq as adventures into the unknown frontiers, the atrocities and inhumanities of the American soldiers are contextualized and legitimized, and the courage and comradery become more significant. Furthermore, Thomas Myers agrees with Hellman on the perpetuating myth of Americanism in war literature in general. Besides, he argues that: “the war novel makes the leviathan of the national cultural paradigm sound and surface, and as a meaningful social ritual, the novel announces its value in two ways: it is a significant record of immediate history as it renders the aspects of experience that evade other varieties of historical writing; and it is a lasting

⁹ All of these veteran writers will be discussed in this chapter.

¹⁰ John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 222.

cultural document as it responds to the rending and reconstituting of national mythos.”¹¹ In other words, Myers defines the most popular war literature as the “fully realized” ones and the “component of the master national narrative,” and they all consciously, unconsciously “consistently” emphasize Americanism and the superiority of American democracy.¹²

I agree that the well celebrated war literature in general contributes greatly to the grand narrative of American national identity and democracy. But literature about Vietnam and Iraq relates to the grand narrative of Americanism and American democracy in different ways. Instead of emphasizing the superiority of core American values and American democracy, literature about Vietnam and Iraq put into question the so-called grand narratives about the superiority of America as well as American beliefs in democracy, equality, justice, and freedom. What’s more, in this chapter, I want to argue that the literary representations can be considered the manifestos of the core spirits of the American New Left because the literary representations of Vietnam and Iraq make the strongest anti-war arguments, fiercely attack on the incompetence and stupidity of the American government, show great sympathy to the underclass, and call for a promotion of humanity and morality of mankind in general.

In this chapter, I pair Philip Caputo’s memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977) with Colby Buzzell’s memoir *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005), which both reveal how authors represent soldiers whose romantic and heroic dreams of war were torn to pieces by the cruelty of war as well as the hypocrisy of the war-mongers. Caputo and Buzzell both try to define Vietnam and Iraq as the

¹¹ Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

unconventional wars. Next, I will discuss how Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) illustrate different ways of telling war stories, and both believe that the act of retelling war stories facilitates revealing the truth of the war. In Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), I explore how authors narrate the fate of the war survivors back at home and their experiences with PTSD. These two novels tear into pieces the perceived hypocrisy of American society, and portray the veterans as the most rational social observers and critics. Finally, I read Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (2009) alongside Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) to explore how authors the ugly side of war and the myth of masculinity and honor that defines the American Marines.

2.1 *A Rumor of War* and *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*

Philip Caputo (1941-), who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1966, started to write about his war experience in 1967. Ultimately, he published his memoir—*A Rumor of War* in 1977, which has been widely considered a classic about Vietnam.¹³ In this memoir, Caputo recounts his personal experience at the age of twenty-four as a Marine in Vietnam, and reveals in detail the loss of his innocence. What's more, Caputo openly criticizes America's attrition policy in Vietnam, and defends against the mass public's demonizing of the veterans. Colby Buzzell (1976-) served in Iraq between 2003 and 2004, and during his tour of duty, he started to post a blog under the title "CBFTW" (Colby Buzzell Fuck The War). In 2005, Buzzell published his blog-turned-book *My*

¹³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996).

War: Killing Time in Iraq.¹⁴ This memoir chronicles Buzzell's tour of duty in Iraq, and it consists of practical tips on living in Iraq, blog entries made by the author, and the replies of the netizens.

Scholarship on *A Rumor of War* mainly argue that this memoir is a good realist representation of Vietnam. For example, Stefano Rosso argues that "the narrative and thematic modes of most Vietnam War fiction are closer to the realistic-mimetic mode of which *A Rumor of War* is one of the most valuable examples."¹⁵ To be more exact, Rosso even classifies *A Rumor of War* as a "literature of witness" by which he means this memoir represents the violence and horror of Vietnam in the most believable way, and this is important because violence and horror are the most important aspects of Vietnam.¹⁶ Furthermore, Tobey C. Herzog compares *A Rumor of War* as another *All Quiet on the Western Front*, concluding that *A Rumor of War* centers on the loss of men's innocence. Meanwhile, Herzog observes that, different from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Caputo does not give up "the daydreams of John Wayne heroics, a feeling of immortality, and romantic expectations of high adventure."¹⁷ And this is interesting because, different from other authors, Caputo believes that the brotherhood and comradeship among American soldiers outweigh their mistakes in Vietnam.

Scholarship on *My War* focuses on the novelty of the style. *My War* initiated a totally different form of memoir: the *military blog*. Matthew Hill calls *My War* as the "finest and most genuine writing to come so far out of the war in Iraq, uncompromising in both its criticism and its

¹⁴ Colby Buzzell, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005).

¹⁵ Rosso, "Making Violence Visible," 175.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (New York: Routledge, 1992),

praise, willing to admit the ugliness of violence and the exhilaration that it breeds.”¹⁸ In a similar manner, *Kirkus Reviews* concludes that Buzzell “does a good job of capturing the daily absurdities and occasional terrors of life on the front.”¹⁹ What’s more, Tara Pepper argues that this military blog offers “a view that I don’t think we’ve ever had of war before. And from these fresh-from-combat narratives, a Homer or a Hemingway might emerge for the Internet age.”²⁰ And all of this is important because Buzzell adopts a most fashionable way to represent the violence and absurdities of Iraq.

However, other scholars tend to argue that both memoirs still adhere to the tradition of American war literature, and both continue the themes of heroism and masculinity. Stefano Rosso believes that Caputo purposely characterizes the victims of war in feminine terms in order to amplify his masculinity and that of his fellow soldiers: “[i]t is not accidental that Caputo’s constant references to sexuality do not evoke any tenderness, but rather extreme sensations very close to violence, brutality, sadism, masochism, excess and perversion, escape from daily life, and presents predicaments in which the victim almost always takes feminine form.”²¹ Similarly, Jenna Pitchford believes that *My War* displays “a desire to return to the physically strong and inspirational warrior hero of the post-Vietnam period.”²² Furthermore, Pitchford compares Buzzell as Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore from *Apocalypse Now*, and he believes both figures harbor “a distinct likeness

¹⁸ Matthew Hill, “My War: Killing Time in Iraq,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol.18, no. ½ (2006): 334.

¹⁹ “My War: Killing Time in Iraq,” *Kirkus Reviews*, vol. 73, no. 14 (2005).

²⁰ Tara Pepper, “My Life in Combat,” *Newsweek* (Atlantic Edition), vol. 146, no. 23 (2005).

²¹ Rosso, “Making Violence Visible,” 173.

²² Jenna Pitchford, “From One Gulf to Another: Reading Masculinity in American Narratives of the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars,” *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, no.5 (2012): 364.

to maverick heroes.”²³ Moreover, Pitchford firmly believes that *My War* is reminiscent of depiction of the Vietnam War in the sense that *My War*, like other literature about Vietnam, features phantom-like enemies who would appear and disappear without any traces. William V. Spanos also points out the similarities between these two representations of Vietnam and Iraq. He argues that both representations of Vietnam and Iraq highlight American exceptionalism, “[h]owever subdued in his rhetoric, it is this perennial, culturally inscribed polyvalent American ethos, so prominent in the representational history of the Vietnam War, that, as we shall see, Caputo will bring with him to the wilderness of Vietnam and that will resonate subliminally throughout his narrative.”²⁴

While I agree that both memoirs represent Vietnam and Iraq in a realistic way. I do not think that these two memoirs mainly emphasize heroism and American exceptionalism. It is true that both writers are more conservative than other writers about Vietnam and Iraq in the sense that, they both try to legitimize the atrocities that American soldiers made in the wars, and they tend to put all the blame on the misjudgment of the American government and the indecisiveness of the battles. Nevertheless, both works are indeed anti-hero, anti-war, anti-hypocrisy, and anti-injustice.

To begin with, *A Rumor of War* and *My War* both follow the tri-part structure of innocence, experience, and reflection mentioned by Herzog. But different from many war memoirs which focus on a recount of war experience in a chronological order, Caputo and Buzzell are more thoughtful, and they put their emphasis on reflecting on their war experiences. Caputo’s recounting of life stories and war experiences clarify and expose a number of rumors about war in general,

²³ Pitchford, “From One Gulf to Another,” 365.

²⁴ Spanos, “*A Rumor of War*: 9/11 and the Forgetting of the Vietnam War.”

and lies about the Vietnam War in particular.²⁵ By contrast, as a big fan of war books and war films, Buzzell seems more detached even before the Iraq War. He has been the first and the only one who addresses the war as “My War,” and openly defines his war experience as “Killing Time.” In his dairy-like book, he not only chronicles his daily deeds, but also frequently compares Iraq with America, Iraq with Vietnam, his father (a Vietnam vet) with himself and his fellow soldiers.

Even though Caputo and Buzzell live in two different eras and fight in two different wars, they share similar expectations and feelings about war. Both writers take war as a shortcut to a different life. Stimulated by Kennedy’s challenge to “ask what you can do for your country” and by “the missionary idealism he had awakened in us,” Caputo takes war as “the most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary.”²⁶ Caputo wants to prove his courage, toughness and manhood in war. He even believes that “enlisting was an act of rebellion, ... an opportunity for personal freedom and independence.”²⁷ Similarly, Buzzell takes war as an adventure, “I didn’t necessarily enlist in the military because I was a product of the suburbs and was afflicted with self-induced poverty or anything dumb like that, and I didn’t join the military because I was all traumatized over September 11. I joined because, like they say in the old recruiting commercials, I wanted to “Be all that you can be,” and more importantly, “It’s not just a job, it’s an adventure.”²⁸ As a typical representative of the working class, Buzzell does not go to college; often gets drunk;

²⁵ Altogether, Caputo exposes at least six rumors of war in general and of Vietnam in particular.

²⁶ Caputo, *Rumor*, xii-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ Buzzell, *My War*, 20.

frequently changes jobs and moves; has no stable relationship; and takes drugs. He joins the military just to avoid everyday boredom and lifelessness.

Comparatively, Caputo seems to be more naïve and ideal when he joined the war. He, like the mass public at the home front, firmly believes in the superiority of both American values and military power: “Asian guerrillas did not stand a chance against U.S. Marines... If he [Kennedy] was the King of Camelot, then we were his knights and Vietnam our crusade. There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever we did was right.”²⁹ However, the Vietnam war turns out to be “fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists...”³⁰ As a consequence, the presumed quick success of the war is repeatedly delayed and extended. What’s more, his experiences in Vietnam quickly approve that whatever was shown on TV and newspapers is no more than “illusion partly created by the ever-optimistic reports issued by higher headquarters or printed in the *Stars and Strips* and partly by our persistent belief that we would win quickly.”³¹

Moreover, influenced by the two World Wars, Caputo still harbored the traditional idea that war created heroes when he first arrived in Vietnam. He believed that both fighting in the war and even sacrificing oneself on the battlefield were heroic acts. However, after witnessing his friend Sullivan who has been shot to death while filling canteens, he finally realizes that dying in the war is “nothing sacrificial or ceremonial.”³² Actually death in war is neither respected nor

²⁹ Caputo, *Rumor*, 69-70.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

³² *Ibid.*, 161.

appreciated. In Vietnam, soldiers only used the word “wasted” instead of “dead.”³³ Finally, Caputo realizes that “we were all beetles, scratching for survival in the wilderness. Those who had lost the struggle had not changed anything by dying. ...thousands of people died each week in the war, and the sum of all their deaths did not make any difference.”³⁴ The war is just an “organized butchery.”³⁵ Furthermore, a decade after the war, the country these men made sacrifices for tried to forget the war: “Its very name is a curse. There are no monuments to its heroes, no statues in small-town squares and city parks, no plaques, nor public wreaths, nor memorials.”³⁶

Different from Caputo, Buzzell, took war merely as a profession from the very beginning. Accordingly, *My War* reads very much like one of the most practical handbooks for potential soldiers and new recruits. But Buzzell is quite cynical when he explains in detail the possible benefits by enlisting. To be more exact, Buzzell describes those benefits offered by the American Army as *baits* which lures the innocent young underclass to get hooked. Buzzell reveals how the military erases all the stains on his personal record: “I told him my rap sheet (a couple of assault-and-battery charges, drunk in public, shoplifting, open containers, that kinda crap), and he said, “No problem, tomorrow I’ll go to the courthouses and take care of them.”³⁷ To further his irony, Buzzell even shares how he takes advantage of the policies of the military to make some extra money: “I told her [Buzzell’s ex-girlfriend] all about BAH and how it worked and hinted to her that if we were going to be together for the long haul, we might as well get married and I’d save

³³ Caputo, *Rumor*, 220.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁷ Buzzell, *My War*, 14.

up all the BAH money for us, so that when I got out of the Army, we'd have a nice chunk of change for us to start over with. So, she agreed to get married.”³⁸ Buzzell even declares that “Army was the best job in the world, and by far the best job I'd ever had. I didn't have to worry about a lot of the things that I worried about when I was a civilian...”³⁹ However, after eleven months in Iraq, he went back and said “New York just looked completely unreal to me. It's been a while since I'd seen people wearing “normal” clothes and makeup, and the billboards and cars and buildings; it all felt like sensory overload to me again.”⁴⁰ Consequently, Buzzell yelled to one recruiter outrageously that “DON'T FUCKING DO IT! DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT! IT'S ALL A BUNCH OF LIES! LIES, I TELL YOU! FTA BABY, F-T-A!”⁴¹

As a thoughtful observer and writer, Buzzell constantly compares Iraq with Vietnam. *My War* tends to indicate that Iraq is different from Vietnam in the sense that the Iraq War is more intelligence and technology-assisted than Vietnam. Not only the weaponry is the most advanced and accurate ever, but also, more attentions are paid to the cultural differences and taboos. Besides, soldiers are treated better than before: “everybody gets a medal, the guys that did a kick-ass job, as well as all the guys that were below standard.”⁴² Every soldier has both cell phone and laptop. They have access to internet, phone-call, and mail. Even censored, they could post comments online or upload self-made war videos. The benefits are better than before. The family could

³⁸ Buzzell, *My War*, 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 343.

receive up to \$250,000 if the enlisted is killed in war. However, the experiences of the soldiers are no different from that of Vietnam:

We were driving down Route Tampa when all of the sudden all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys, edge of buildings, out of windows, everywhere, just came out of fucking nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPCs were flying at us from every single fucking direction. IEDs were being ignited on both sides of the street. I freaked the fuck out and ducked down in the hatch and I yelled over the radio, “HOLY SHIT! WE GOT EUCKIN’ HAJJIS ALL OVER THE FUCKIN’ PLACE!!! They’re all over goddamnit!!!”⁴³

It can be inferred that Buzzell actually compares Iraq as another Vietnam. He records with great relief every escape from the IEDs and ambushes: “driving around Mosul in the back of a Humvee would be like Russian roulette.”⁴⁴ A similar sense of fear and terror abounds in *A Rumor of War*. Caputo addresses himself and his fellow soldiers “an incendiary mob”: “the burning of Ha Na had arisen out of some emotional necessity. It had been a catharsis, a purging of months of fear, frustration, and tension. We had relieved our own pain by inflicting it on others. But that sense of relief was inextricably mingled with guilt and shame.”⁴⁵

Indeed, Caputo is a spokesman for the misunderstood veterans. Caputo disagrees with most of the scholars who tend to identify American soldiers with the atrocities they executed in Vietnam. Instead, Caputo argues that evil is not inherent in human beings, but in the “circumstances under which they had to live and fight.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, Caputo puts all the blame on the American

⁴³ Buzzell, *My War*, 250.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁵ Caputo, *Rumor*, 304-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

government to turn American soldiers from “good, solid kids” to savage killers.⁴⁷ In fact, Caputo openly calls himself as a radical democrat. He writes in his postscript:

as the citizens of democracy, the noisy patriots and protesters had a right to their opinions about Vietnam but not, it seemed to me, to the smug righteousness with which they voiced them, because they hadn't been there.... I want *A Rumor of War* to make people uncomfortable—in effect, to blow them out of their snug polemical bunkers into the confusing, disturbing emotional and moral no-man's-land where we warriors dwelled.... Above all, I wanted to communicate the moral ambiguities of a conflict in which demons and angels traded places too often to tell one from the other.⁴⁸

Accordingly, Ty Hawkins, in *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror*, states that “Caputo is America in *Rumor*, and because they identify with the Caputo character, Caputo's Vietnam war becomes *the* Vietnam War for readers. What Caputo really is claiming is the “truth” of the war, a bold and intensely political argument if ever there were one.”⁴⁹ That is to say, Caputo demonstrates that Vietnam is ambiguous in all aspects. In other words, how could a democratic country get involved and fight a war with huge ambiguities in every aspect? How could the government and the people start a war before they had a clear understanding of the situations? How much did the American government and soldiers know about Vietnam and what the Vietnamese really wanted before launching the war in the jungles on the opposite side of the world? Did the American government really know what they wanted from the war? Could they even distinguish the enemies from the innocents? With Vietnam, the American society become uncertain of what were used to be certain of, especially of American democracy.

⁴⁷ Caputo, *Rumor*, xviii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁴⁹ Ty Hawkins, *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 33.

We may argue that in *My War*, Buzzell makes a “bold and intensive political argument” about Iraq too. Buzzell’s language is much dirtier and cynical, and he uses his “abject frankness” to expose the unbearable pressure and helplessness of American soldiers who are surrounded by constant tensions in Iraq.⁵⁰ Buzzell also challenges his “established system of domination” through language.⁵¹ Barney Warf and Johnny Grimes, in “Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet,” argues that cyberspace features “counter- hegemonic discourses, challenging established systems of domination and legitimating and publicizing political claims by the powerless and marginalized.”⁵² Buzzell’s political blog entries and the netizens’ replies in this memoir challenge the conventional power structure of discourse, which is usually controlled by the authoritative class. As an experienced reader and reviewer of Vietnam, Buzzell makes “hundreds of references to books, magazines, paintings, music, films, and television shows throughout the text” to conjure up more thoughtful contemplation of the ongoing war and American democracy.⁵³ That is to say, Buzzell, as a representative of the “powerless and marginalized,” expresses his desperation and frustration by displaying Iraq as the most despised of all wars.

2.2 The Things They Carried and Redeployment

Among all the writers about Vietnam, Tim O’Brein is one of the most productive and influential ones. He served in Vietnam between 1969 and 1970, and he published many books about Vietnam. In 1973, he published his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship*

⁵⁰ Hawkins, *Reading Vietnam*, 333.

⁵¹ Brandon Lingle, “Colby Buzzell’s *My War*: An Outsider’s Voice from Inside Iraq,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 21, no. 1/1 (2009): 17.

⁵² Barney Warf and Johnny Grimes, “Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet,” *Geographical Review*, 87.2 (1997): 260.

⁵³ Lingle, “Colby Buzzell’s *My War*,” 14.

Me Home. In 1978, he published *Going After Cacciato*, which won the National Book Award. In 1990, Tim O'Brien published his collection of short stories—*The Things They Carried*, which has been deemed as a masterpiece of Vietnam by both scholars and ordinary readers. Among the twenty-one short stories included in this collection, seemingly independent, is actually closely inter-related with the others—all center on the experiences of the narrator and his comrades in the Vietnam War. There exist many obvious overlaps between the narrator and the author, and this collection has been widely considered semi-autobiographical.⁵⁴ More than thirty years later, Phil Klay served in Iraq between 2007 and 2008 after he joined the U.S. Marines in 2005. Klay published his collection of short stories, *Redeployment* in 2014, which won the National Book Award. *Redeployment* is composed of twelve stories concerning the American soldiers' deployment in Iraq as well as the homecoming of the to-be-redeployed. Klay employs a multi-first-person narrator whose identity differs in each story. The multi-perspective, in turn, offers readers a more complete scenario of what Iraq is like, and what the public, both the Americans and the Iraqis, think of the war.

After all, most writers prefer novels over short stories to tell war stories. William Faulkner, in writing *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, argued that short stories were much more challenging and demanding than novels thanks to the length limit. Consequently, short stories about war are not only disadvantaged in terms of quantity, but they are also ignored somewhat. Nonetheless, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians: And Other Stories* (Ambrose Bierce, 1892), *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (William Faulkner, 1950), *The Things They Carried*, and

⁵⁴ Ann M. Genzale, "Joining the Past to the Future: The Autobiographical Self in *The Things They Carried*," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2016): 495–510.

Redeployment are four exceptional and unusual collections about the Civil War, the First World War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War respectively.⁵⁵ All the stories in the collections can be read both independently and collectively.

To begin with, *The Things They Carried* has always been considered as a war classic and often included in the textbooks in American high schools. Two decades later, the publication of *Redeployment* evoked instant comparison with *The Things They Carried*. Grace Howard argues that these two works are both partially facts and partially fictions.⁵⁶ All the stories are both independent and intertextual, and both explore the meaning of truth and the function of storytelling. Furthermore, Howard argues that *Redeployment* does imitate *The Things They Carried* in some ways, such as the self-contradiction of the narrator, the retelling of the same story, and the discussion about how to tell war stories. Howard concludes that *Redeployment* demonstrates that “Iraq is a different war on numerous fronts, including setting, stiff boundaries between military personnel and civilians, complications regarding truth and storytelling, and depictions of varied perspectives and opinions.”⁵⁷ It is true that the Iraq War is different from the Vietnam War in many aspects, certainly producing different personal experiences and the accordingly different representations. In the following analysis, I will go beyond the comparison made by Howard, and focus on how the moral dilemmas and conflicts of the soldiers are expressed

⁵⁵ In this collection, Faulkner included a series of short stories under the title “Wasteland” focusing on the First World War, which were, “Ad Astra,” “Victory,” “Crevasse,” “Turnabout,” and “All the Dead Pilots.”

⁵⁶ Grace Howard, “A Lesser Imitation (?): How *Redeployment* Recalls, Expands, and Departs from *The Things They Carried*,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 29 (2017): 1-19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-7.

in these two different collections and the reasons why the two authors choose to tell war stories in different ways.

First, who are the narrators in these two collections? In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator constantly declares that, “My name is Tim O’Brien. I am forty-three now. And I am a writer.” The exact repetition of the narrator’s name, age, and profession with the author’s, on the one hand, fuses the fictionalized life experiences of the narrator with the author’s real experiences. On the other hand, the overlap puts into question the authenticity of the stories told by the narrator. Readers understand that this is a collection of fictional short stories rather than nonfiction as the title of the book indicates “*The Things They Carried: A Fiction*” and the author’s clarification in the Prologue. In this collection, the narrator keeps admitting that he lies in previous stories. In other words, it does not matter either who narrates the story, or whether the narrator lies in telling the story. What matters is why the narrator lies, how he lies, and what the consequences of such lies might be. Would such lies totally change the nature of the story? Are lies really worse than truths? What are the lies and truths about the war? Are they quite different? In O’Brien’s words, first, it is hard to distinguish real and un-real war stories. Secondly, even in ‘true’ war stories, and especially in the true ones:

It’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ O’Brien, *Things*, 67-8.

That is to say, the true story might not be real; and the seemingly not real story might be true. The author O'Brien is real, but he might be not telling true stories; the narrator O'Brien is not real, but he might be telling the truth about the war. In other words, it does not matter at all who tells the story. What matters most is the very act of telling. Ginger Jones believes that for O'Brien, "the only way for his 'memories' to be taken seriously is for him to make them up, yet the moral dilemma, the emotions O'Brien explains are real."⁵⁹ Janis E. Haswell agrees with Jones, "O'Brien consciously crafts a unified narrator to articulate an explicit moral message: that the pre-war and post-war self are in fact one unified person, despite the psychological, emotional, and moral calamity brought on by violence and trauma."⁶⁰ In a word, both Jones and Haswell believe that the focus of *The Things They Carried* lies in creating a simulacra in which the reader would feel how confused and chaotic Vietnam was, and how confused and traumatized the soldiers were.

On the other hand, in *Redeployment*, the narrator addresses himself "I," yet that I does not remain stable. In "Redeployment," "I" have wife; but in "After Action Report," "I" even don't have a girlfriend. In "OIF", "I" have a girlfriend; but in "Money as a Weapon System," "I" only have an ex-wife. Not only does the narrator have different social relationships, but he also has different professions and different educational backgrounds. In "Unless it's a Sucking Chest Wound," the narrator is a NYU law student after returning from the Iraq War. In "Psychological Operations," the narrator is an Arabic American who deploys to Iraq as a specialist in

⁵⁹ Ginger Jones, "Unreliable Memoirist: The Tim O'Briens of *The Things They Carried*" in *Narrative Being vs. Narrating Being*, ed. Armela Panajoti and Marija Krivokapic (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 189.

⁶⁰ Janis E. Haswell, "The Craft of the Short Story in Retelling the Viet Nam War: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *The South Caroline Review*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2004): 97.

Psychological Operations. In “Prayer in the Furnace,” the narrator is a dogmatic chaplain in Iraq. It is obvious that Klay is telling stories of others both based on his own war experience as well as his research.⁶¹ Donald Anderson believes that Klay’s own experience in Iraq helps “bring[s] a special visceral authority to his work.”⁶² Nevertheless, why does he not just refer each narrator differently? Is “I” no longer the subject that philosophers have debated since antiquity? Could *I* be anybody and at the same time nobody? For example, in “Ten Kilks South,” the soldiers finally have their long expectant first kill in the war. After the job done, they have a talk:

“It feels good, we just killed some bad guys.”

“If we used a howitzer to kill somebody back in the States, I wonder what crime they’d charge us with.”

“Murder.”

“But we got the ammo from the ASP, shouldn’t they be responsible, too, the ASP Marines?”

“Why not the factory workers who made the ammo? Or the taxpayers who paid for it? You know why not? Because that’s retarded.”

Sergeant Deetz thumps his fist on the table. “Listen to me. We’re Gun Six. We’re responsible for that gun. We just killed some bad guys. With our gun. All of us. And that’s a good day’s work.”⁶³

In this case, who I am is determined by where I am, what I am doing, whom I am doing it for, and when and where I am doing it. Accordingly, the I-narrators in both collections are everyone in America and every American in Vietnam and Iraq. The ambiguous identity of the narrators in these two collections demonstrates that identity is no more than a social construct. Both *The Things They*

⁶¹ Klay admitted in his acknowledgement that his writing project did benefit from referring to many other war fictions, and he made a list of the books which did not mention *The Things They Carried*.

⁶² Donald Anderson, “You Can’t Come Home Again: Phil Klay’s Redeployment,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 26 (2014): 1-8.

⁶³ Klay, *Redeployment*, 274-5.

Carried and Redeployment clearly state that the American government is in full charge of defining who a subject is, and whether he/she is a good moral citizen or not.

Unlike many depictions of Vietnam, in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien emphasizes the contradiction and uncertainty of Vietnam. In his stories, the identity of the narrator and whatever the narrator says in each story is constantly contradictory and inconsistent, which, in turn, projects the slippery nature of the Vietnam War as well as the public's understanding of Vietnam. On the one hand, the narrator tells of the most horrifying and heartbreaking death on every page: "...right then Ted Lavender was shot in the head on his way back from peeing. He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye. The cheekbone was gone."⁶⁴ On the other hand, the narrator, from time to time, makes seemingly philosophical remarks, "a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen."⁶⁵ The contradiction and uncertainty of the narrator in the stories best illustrates the contradiction and uncertainty of the Vietnam War itself. That is to say, the narrator is too confused to tell the stories consistently and clearly. So are the soldiers who experienced the war themselves.

Among the different stories about the deaths of different soldiers, the death of Kiowa is told repeatedly by both the narrator and Norman Bowker who blames himself for not saving Kiowa from the shit field. This story best illustrates the absurdity of Vietnam. One night, Lieutenant

⁶⁴ O'Brien, *Things*, 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

Jimmy receives an order to camp beside a sewage field. When it starts to rain heavily, the platoon is attacked by sudden mortars. Kiowa, a Native American soldier, gets hit and sunk into the muck. Norman Bowker tried to save Kiowa, but he gives up after his first try because he is disgusted by the stench, and afraid of getting hit himself. Finally, Kiowa dies, and Bowker does not get a Silver Star which he expects. The narrator keeps recounting the death of Kiowa in different stories, so is Bowker who is another fellow soldier of the narrator. Both the narrator and Bowker feel guilty for Kiowa's death. But at the same time, the narrator explains in "Notes" that Kiowa would have died anyway whether Bowker had saved him from the field or not. To a great extent, the excrement field represents everything about Vietnam. The ignorance and arrogance of the American government guided them to the "shit field" of Vietnam, which was the result of centuries of colonization by the Chinese, French, and Japanese respectively, as well as decades of civil war between the South and the North. By voluntarily marching into the stinky mess, Americans would never get rid of the stench. So are the deeds of the Americans in Vietnam.

The only story about love and loss in *The Things They Carried* is the ending story, "The Lives of the Dead." This story starts with the narrator's fourth day and his first encounter with death in the Vietnam War, which reminds him of his first encounter with death in his whole life as well as his first crush on a girl. The story of his first love is interrupted frequently by his recounting of the interactions between him and his comrades in Vietnam. There are two narrations going on simultaneously in the last story, one is the death of Linda; the other is the deaths of his comrades in Vietnam. By juxtaposing the images of an innocent girl who has nothing to do with war with the ghosts of war, the author presents two types of the most heartbreaking tragedies in the world: the death of a beloved who is still too young to die, and the unpredictability of war which blindly

kills anyone at will. By exposing such unbearable pain and death, O'Brien tends to point out that the feelings about the war and death are more real and important than the so-called truth of war and death. He also comforts other survivors via the mouth of Linda who says, "Once you're live, you can't ever be dead" since the shared memories of your existence would stay in the mind of those alive.⁶⁶

Linda plays a significant role in *The Things They Carried*. Benjamin Mangrum criticizes that "[i]n literature of wars like O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a view of collective violence emerges in which soldiers find pleasure in feminizing the enemy, sexualizing the images and actions of battle, and thus couching their entire enterprise as an attempt to find pleasure in violating the feminine."⁶⁷ Pamela Smiley partially agrees with Mangrum, and she argues that O'Brien creates an ideal female reader in his stories in order to "giv[e] the male protagonist's experience validity, reality and redemption—through paradox as well."⁶⁸ But Susan Farrell disagrees. Farrell takes Linda in "The Lives of the Dead" and Mary Ann in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" as examples that prove on the one hand, that "the soldiers' relationships with women are not based on hard and fast realities, but are largely products of their own imaginings and socialization."⁶⁹ On

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *Things*, 231.

⁶⁷ Benjamin Mangrum, "Violating the Feminine: War, Kristeva, and *The Things They Carried*," *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas*, vol. 40 (2010): 33.

⁶⁸ Pamela Smiley, "The Role the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*: Why Should Real Women Play?" *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2002): 609.

⁶⁹ Susan Farrell, "Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of "The Things They Carried,"" *CEA Critic*, vol. 66, no. 1 (fall 2003): 11. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Mary Ann, the girlfriend of the medic Mark Fossie, has come to Vietnam in a helicopter. After spending several days in the battlefield, she is enchanted by the war, and she changes quickly from an innocent American blond into a warrior-like guerrilla. Fossie wants to send her back, but she refuses. After getting engaged, she finally disappears into the jungle forever.

the other hand, with the example of Mary Ann, O'Brien highlights the "contradictions and paradoxes of the American experience in Vietnam" in the sense that both the American soldiers and American women in Vietnam are in sharp contrast to what they are supposed to be.⁷⁰ Back at home, Mary Ann is innocent and obedient; in Vietnam, she becomes complicated and independent. What's more, American soldiers were supposed to defeat Communism rather than just accumulating body counts. In other words, the characterization of men and women in these stories questions common gendered and national identity of the Americans.

By contrast, instead of love, in *Redeployment*, there is only sex; instead of loss, Klay talks more about the indifference of both the soldiers and the mass population towards the war. O'Brien is romantic and philosophical; but Klay is young and sarcastic. For example, in "Money as a Weapon System," Klay echoes *Catch-22* in many aspects. In this story, "I" used to be a construction worker, and become a Foreign Service Officer in Iraq. The narrator comes to Iraq as "a fraud and a war tourist."⁷¹ As a nobody back at home, he is eager to achieve something substantial. He encounters a bunch of Iraqis and fellow colleagues and witnesses a lot of crazy, yet realistic events. Ultimately, he fulfills his assignment by taking a wonderful picture of kids in baseball uniforms with soccer. With the ridiculous picture, he succeeds in mobilizing upward in the American military. So are other officials in Iraq. In this perspective, this short story exposes the absurdity of the American society in the sense that America launched a war against terror in Iraq, but the real goal of the war turns out to be profit-making and fame-chasing. As David M. Brooks summarizes that *Redeployment* is "more than just a war book about victories and defeat,

⁷⁰ Farrell, "Tim O'Brien and Gender," 14.

⁷¹ Klay, *Redeployment*, 78.

heroism and cowardice, but about the “times that try men’s souls” and the repercussions that war has on those people for years to come.”⁷²

In contrast to O’Brien, Klay employs diverse forms of narration. *Redeployment* exposes the conflicts between what American soldiers think of their presence in Iraq and what the Iraqis think of the Americans in Iraq. For example, in “Money as a Weapon System,” the narrator thinks he comes to Iraq to make peace. However, in the short story, Iraqis believe that Americans come to destroy their country. The narrator’s interpreter declares, “I was a professor before you came and destroyed this country... you have baked Iraq like a cake, and given it to Iran to eat.”⁷³ The narrator believes that the unfriendliness of the Iraqis towards the Americans would ease after an American construction company is named as “Istalquaal.” However, when the narrator discusses this name with the interpreter, the interpreter “opened his eyes a crack and looked at me sidelong. “Istalquaal? *Istiqlal* means independence,” he said. “Istalquaal means nothing. It means Americans can’t speak Arabic.””⁷⁴ Moreover, Iraqis believe that “the United States had split Iraqi ministries between political parties at the outset of the war, allowing the various factions to expel the old Baathist technocrats in favor of party hacks who carved the country up between them.”⁷⁵ In this case, Klay satirizes the perceived misunderstanding and hypocrisy of both the mass public and the American government. Neither Americans nor their so-called act of peace-keeping are welcomed in Iraq. The Iraqis define American soldiers as invaders and enemies.

⁷² David M. Brooks, “This New Book Reviews That War Is Much More Than Combat,” *Business Insider*, Aug. 1, 2014.

⁷³ Klay, *Redeployment*, 85.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

Redeployment also includes the perspectives of American soldiers and civilians from different walks of life. Klay himself replies in an interview that

I didn't want the reader looking at these characters from the outside. I wanted them inside those skulls, experiencing the things they were experiencing and seeing the decisions they were making and then living with. There's also this tradition in war writing of the veteran going to war and then coming back and testifying to the truth of war, right? But I didn't want one voice coming back and testifying to the truth of war. I wanted 12, and 12 that wouldn't necessarily agree with each other. I wanted that friction, and also I wanted it to open a space for the reader to engage not just empathetically but also critically with the things the characters are saying and the claims they're making about their war.⁷⁶

The different identities of the I-narrator indeed reveal the frictions between the different social beings concerning their experience of and attitudes towards the war. However, the difference in social backgrounds does not prevent them from feeling confused and frustrated with the war. In "Prayer in the Furnace," a soldier complains to the Chaplain that "[what's pointless?] This whole fucking thing. What are we doing? We go down a street, get IED'd, the next day go down the same street and they've IED'd it again. It's like, just keep going till you all die."⁷⁷

Klay's stories are straightforward and full of ironies and black humor. There is no philosophy or mystery about war or death, but simply disgust and impatience. In "Redeployment," the narrator starts the storytelling with a bold statement—"we shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose, and we called it Operation Scooby. I'm a dog person, so I thought about that a lot."⁷⁸ Dogs are significant symbol in American culture; to many Americans, a dog is not just an animal, but a friend, a child, and family member. Men who love dogs in America, shot dogs in Iraq. Are

⁷⁶ Douglas Watson, "Phil Klay on His Iraq War Book *Redeployment*: 'I Had to Get This Right,'" *Time.com* (Mar. 4, 2015): PN.PAG.

⁷⁷ Klay, *Redeployment*, 147.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

they dog people or not? At the very beginning of the storytelling, Klay sets the keynote for the whole collection of stories, explaining that the Iraq War would instantly change the nature of men, and turn love into hatred. In “Money as a Weapon System,” the narrator tells the most ironic stories about how the Americans “help” the locals, such as training five widows in beekeeping, constructing water vessels based on American standards, building a hospital to treat the yeast infection of the Iraqi women, operating “sport diplomacy” by “setting up matches between Sunni and Shi’s soccer teams.”⁷⁹ When the narrator doubts the effectiveness of such stupid sport diplomacy, his boss responds that “[i]t’s been very effective. [Very effective at what?] I’m not sure, but they make for some great photos.”⁸⁰ These ironic stories further demonstrate the absurdity of the war and hypocrisy of the government.

Klay also makes it clear that war fundamentally isolates soldiers from the ordinary Americans because the ordinaries are “at white” while men who experience the Iraq War could only stay attuned to the threat and danger of war “at orange and red:”

Here’s what orange is. You don’t see or hear like you used to. Your brain chemistry changes. You take in every piece of the environment, everything. I could spot a dime in the street twenty yards away. I had antennae out that stretched down the block. It’s hard to even remember exactly what that felt like. I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next. For seven months. So that’s orange. And then you go shopping in Wilmington, unarmed, and you think you can get back down to white? It’ll be a long fucking time before you get down to white.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Klay, *Redeployment*, 94.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

O'Brien often blurs the distinction between civilians and non-civilians by constantly recalling the connections between them. However, Klay severs the connection between civilians and non-civilians by detailing their contradictory psychological conditions. O'Brien and Klay take quite different approaches to sharing war experiences. O'Brien depicts the strong sense of loss of the survivors to the lost; Klay displays the hopelessness and helplessness of the witnesses of war, both Americans and Iraqis, as well as the indifference of the Americans at home.

O'Brien and Klay both believe in the importance of retelling of war stories. Klay, along with other authors, speaks of desperation and hopelessness in war; O'Brien, on the other hand, speaks of the contradictions in war. He is the only one to say that "war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty."⁸² Both O'Brien and Klay insist that people must keep telling war stories in order to reveal the truth of war. O'Brien loves telling war stories because "war is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead."⁸³ Klay confirms that "I kept telling the story. ... It was bullshit, but every time I told the story, it felt better. Like I owned it a little more. When I told the story, everything was clear."⁸⁴ O'Brien understands the very act of storytelling as a form of atonement. He says at the end of the book that: "I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come

⁸² O'Brien, *Things*, 77.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸⁴ Klay, *Redeployment*, 35.

down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."⁸⁵ Klay, on the other hand, was just fresh from the war when he began writing, and was unable to come to terms with either war or himself: "for a long time I was angry. I didn't want to talk about Iraq, so I wouldn't tell anybody what I'd seen, and if people knew, if they pressed, I'd tell them lies."⁸⁶ Klay aims to disgust the listeners by telling funny yet horrifying war stories. However, it turns out that war stories interest, rather than disgust them, which in turn, further demonstrates the hopelessness of the narrator. War stories are excruciating to tell, but sometimes necessary to hear.

2.3 *Paco's Story* and *Billy Lynn's Long Halttime Walk*

Larry Heinemann served in Vietnam between 1967 and 1968. In 1977, he published his first novel, *Close Quarters*.⁸⁷ In 1986, he published his second novel about Vietnam—*Paco's Story*, and it won the National Book Award, which caused instant debates and controversy.⁸⁸ Heinemann defines in the foreword this novel as a "ghost story" which is also a sub-genre of war novels.⁸⁹ Ghost stories usually feature an omniscient ghost character or narrator who will ultimately reveal the truth about a controversial event. *Paco's Story* starts with a story about how

⁸⁵ O'Brien, *Things*, 233.

⁸⁶ Klay, *Redeployment*, 53.

⁸⁷ *Close Quarters* centers around the war experience of Philip Dosier in Vietnam. Dosier is a boy from Chicago, and is fascinated with the myths of John Wayne.

⁸⁸ Edwin McDowell comments on the winning of *Paco's Story* as "an upset at the book awards" (*The New York Times*, November 10, 1987); Michiko Kakutani, in "Critic's Notebook; Did 'Paco's Story' Deserve its Award," states that "in fact, one of the larger flaws of this novel is that Paco never emerges as a distinct individual: he comes across as much a vague representative soldier as the generic voice that tells us his story. At the same time, Mr. Heinemann's writing is insufficiently powerful, his vision too myopic, to effectively turn him into the sort of mythic Lazarus-like figure that might otherwise engage our passions" (*The New York Times*, November 16, 1987).

⁸⁹ Heinemann, *Paco*, xii.

the dying Paco is discovered and rescued in Vietnam, proceeds as he gets back to his life in a small town in Texas, and ends with Paco's escape from the town. This book stands out because of its verbal violence, uttered through the tongue of the omnipresent narrator James, who depicts Paco's tragic survival in the Vietnam War as well as his arduous post-war struggle in a small Texas town.

Ben Fountain, a lawyer-turned-writer, published his war novel—*Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk* in 2012, and won the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. The novel mainly takes place at Texas Stadium in Dallas where a group of eight men are waiting for their turn to present themselves as war heroes during the half-time break. This war novel is unique from the other war novels in several aspects. *Billy Lynn* spans several hours, rather than months or years as in other stories about Vietnam. The novel also focuses on the contrast between the experiences of the soldiers who battle in Iraq and the public's comprehension of the war through its presentation in the media. *Billy Lynn* is also satirical and funny to read, rather than tragic and horrifying as most novels about war are. The novel exposes how war heroes are created and exploited by the American government in order to sell the war; at the same time, these “war heroes” hope to make a fortune by selling their war stories, something they fail at the end:

One nation, two weeks, eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo squad. They are Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo, but the Fox embed christened them Bravo squad and thus they were presented to the world. Now, here at the tour's end, feeling soft, sated, bleary, under-rested and overproduced, Billy grows sad and nostalgic for the beginning.⁹⁰

Joseph Darda concentrates on the controversy of Heinemann's win over Morrison for the 1987 National Book Award, and boldly argues that *Paco's Story* reflects a “new white racial

⁹⁰ Fountain, *Billy Lynn's*, 4.

project,” which is influenced by the neo-conservatism of the 1980s, in which “writers, filmmakers, and artists render white enlisted men as, at once, deracinated universals and minoritized outsiders, or “veteran Americans.”⁹¹ Darda even applies his conception of *military whiteness* to all war literature written by the veteran writers including literature about Vietnam and Iraq. He defines soldier or veteran as a “cultural identity that mirrors and subsumes racial and ethnic difference, allowing the white soldier to disavow his whiteness – and the value accrued through it – and to instead see himself as “minoritized” by his military service.”⁹² In other words, Darda believes that Heinemann purposely ignores the racial issue in the Vietnam War, which compromises its vigor in generating anti-war sentiment. However, Morrison’s work highlights the tension between the races. The representation of racism is significant in novels, but it should not be the only criteria to evaluate a novel.

Most scholars affirm that *Paco’s Story* is a good war novel. For instance, Grant F. Scott believes that Paco is “a walking representation of the Vietnam War, a living emblem of its destruction and chaos, ... a spectacle of the war’s devastation.”⁹³ Similarly, Louis Greiff argues that this novel identifies “membership in the brotherhood of Vietnam veterans” who are looking for “reconciliation” after the Cold War.⁹⁴ David Boulting praises the novel for challenging stereotypes of veterans, who were represented by the American mass media as either psychotic or

⁹¹ Joseph Darda, “The Ethnicization of Veteran America: Larry Heinemann, Toni Morrison, and Military Whiteness After Vietnam,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 413.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 419.

⁹³ Grant F. Scott, “*Paco’s Story* and the Ethics of Violence,” *Critique*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1994): 71-73.

⁹⁴ Louis Greiff, “In the Name of the Brother: Larry Heinemann’s “*Paco’s Story*” and Male America,” *Critique*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 382.

heroic; instead, Paco is a “palimpsest subject to endless ideological revision and re-use.”⁹⁵ Boulting believes that Heinemann goes beyond merely making a war narrative, and that by focusing on the themes of voyeurism and scopophilia, this book encourages the reader to “seek a renewed consciousness not only about who and what we are, but about how our attitudes to others are formed and manipulated.”⁹⁶ In a similar manner, Gregory L. Morris also focuses on the “palimpsest” nature of this novel, and categorizes its style as Bakhtin’s “Serio-Comic tradition” which features a “carnivalistic” juxtaposition of “mindscape and landscape, ...imagination and experience,... perception and expression.”⁹⁷ Besides, Tobey Herzog states that *Paco’s Story* exposes the literal and spiritual journeys of returned veterans who interact with the civilians who are still grappling with the consequences of the war.⁹⁸ I agree with all of these comments that *Paco’s Story* is a masterpiece of literature about Vietnam in the sense that it represents the ugliness of Vietnam and hypocrisy of the society in the most stomach-turning way.

In *Billy Lynn*, Fountain tells a war story in a non-conventional way. In his novel, soldiers return from the battlefield happily, and are accepted by the public with cheers and enthusiasms. This story also uses a stream of consciousness style, reminiscent of *Ulysses*.⁹⁹ *Billy Lynn* uses the violence of language, according to Mark Bresnan, to show “how ill-suited the bombast of contemporary discourse is for a true accounting of veterans’ experiences, but also how that

⁹⁵ David Boulting, “Veterans, Vietcong and Others: Enemies and Empathies In Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story*,” *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries*, vol. 64 (2010): 118.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹⁷ Gregory L. Morris, “Telling War Stories: Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* and the Serio-Comic Tradition,” *Critique*, vol. 36, no.1 (Fall 1994): 59.

⁹⁸ Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 181.

⁹⁹ Darin Strauss, “Reasons to Re-Joyce,” *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2012.

bombast stifles the very sort of reflection and dialogue that might eventually lead to catharsis.”¹⁰⁰ In *Billy Lynn*, the Iraq War is represented as a “Riotously Funny” war story instead of a horrifying one as the most war stories do.¹⁰¹

Both novels employ ghost narrators to make the most thoughtful and radical observations of the two wars. In *Paco’s story*, the eloquence of the ghost narrators contrasts with the dumbness of Paco; In *Billy Lynn*, the profanity of the ghost narrator and the soldiers contrasts the hypocritical politeness and distance of the upper-class Americans. In *Paco*, the ghosts speak the most—they are cursing all the time; in *Billy Lynn*, the ghost Shroom, speaks the least, and all his comments are sharp and philosophical: “Fear is the mother of all emotion. Before love, hate, spite, grief, rage, and all the rest, there was fear, and fear gave birth to them all, and as every combat soldier knows there are as many incarnations and species of fear as the Eskimo language has words for snow.”¹⁰² The narrators in *Paco* actually are the real Paco together with all his annihilated comrades in the war. However, the narrator in *Billy Lynn* represents the consciousness and reason of Billy himself, who seems to be the only one uncontaminated by the hypocrisy and frivolity of the American society. When everyone is busy with meaningless socializing, Billy is communicating with the dead Shroom, and they are talking about what happened in Iraq. The ghost narrators in the two novels use the most offensive language to utter the insightful comments on Vietnam and Iraq. On the one hand, the blasphemy demonstrates how the soldiers really feel about the war; on the other

¹⁰⁰ Mark Bresnan, “Bluffers and Blowhards: Speaking of Violence in Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*,” *Violence in Literature* (2014): 180.

¹⁰¹ “*Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*,” *LitLovers*. <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/8923-billy-lynns-long-halftime-walk-fountain?showall=1> (assessed on Feb. 18, 2018).

¹⁰² Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 114-5.

hand, illustrates that the cruelty of war disintegrates the humanity of soldiers who, no matter dead or alive, are actually dead in the sense that they have lost both their identity and dignity in the world. Instead of defining the war, their lives have been permanently defined by the war.

Of course, the ghost narrators in these two novels discuss two different wars. The conditions of the homecomings are different. Paco comes home permanently, would never return to the battlefield. On the contrary, the Bravo Company come home temporarily, and they only take a two-week victory tour nationwide. Paco comes back from Vietnam where America lost their war there; back home no one wants to discuss the failure: “And how many times is it, James, that people have looked over at Paco, looked down, and asked, “What war was that?” as if not one word of the fucking thing had ever made the papers. And Paco answers.... The old man squirms around on his stool and shakes his head—he has never heard of the place.”¹⁰³ The Bravo Company come back from Iraq where the war is still going on, and Americans at home believe that they are winning the war: “... we’ve removed from power one of history’s most ruthless and belligerent tyrants.... So I would ask all those who oppose the war, would the world be a better place today with Saddam Hussein in power?... This has always been America’s mission, and it’s what makes us the greatest nation on earth.”¹⁰⁴ In *Paco’s Story*, the public are so eager to forget the war, and the homecoming becomes purely an individual issue—how to survive by themselves. In *Billy Lynn*, the homecoming is a formal commercial promotion—the American government is selling the war; the businessmen are making quick money; the public are consuming; and the soldiers are being consumed. However, Billy’s homecoming is a fake one; ultimately, his homecoming would

¹⁰³ Heinemann, *Paco’s Story*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 130-1.

be no different from Paco's. In a word, the homecomings of the veterans from different wars are the same because the government will never change its way to fool the veterans.

Both novels accentuate the returned veterans' dilemma in the mundane society. In *Paco's Story*, the public takes Paco as a spectacle. However, the atrocities he committed in Vietnam refrain him from sharing his experiences with anyone:

He has become something of a public spectacle, hustling around the Texas Lunch in front of the foundry workers and dairy farmers—everyone powerfully curious about who he is and where it was he came from. Paco washes his dishes, digging his arms past the elbows into that lye-soap wash, smoking his Camels until the lip end is spit-soaked and the corner of his mouth is greased with nicotine,¹⁰⁵ with his back to the dining room and not much minding what goes on behind him...

Both as perpetrator and victim, veterans like Paco have no choice, but to resort to criticize the hypocrisy of the American government fiercely in secret. Indeed, young men like Paco are first encouraged to fight for the country; no matter if they get injured or get killed, the government would generously offer them medals of different types. Then, these men are officially discharged, essentially ignored, and quickly forgotten. Paco, along with the numerous other dead soldiers and surviving veterans, are used by the country deceptively, and later on dumped by the country shamelessly. From the silence of Paco, we get to know the depth of madness and rage in the mind of Paco towards war, the American government, and himself. He is not only a victim of the war, a killer of the country, but also a murder of the Vietnamese. In no way could he share with others what he has done in the Vietnam War, nor what the war has done to him. Silence is his only choice. Silence indicates the extreme of the damage of the war to the veterans.

¹⁰⁵ Heinemann, *Paco's Story*, 151.

Moreover, *Paco's Story* presents the veterans as a personality split. Paco is silent in front of the public; while at night, he uses all bitter words possible to express his anger, hurt, guilt, rage, helplessness, and hopelessness in the war and after the war. He curses everything, and everybody about the Vietnam War—““You goddamned bullshit fucking Bravo Company Jesus Christ, I hope you motherfuckers all die shit!” Paco whispered, and cried.”¹⁰⁶ This is not only the voice of Paco, but also the unheard and the silenced voice of those who are trapped in the Vietnam War. The veterans' verbal violence, heard or unheard, represents the violence of the war, the anger as well as the desperation of the servicemen. Furthermore, the split personality of the veterans best illustrates their plights back home, and it also distinguishes them from the indifferent government and public. The veterans are deeply bothered by their inhumane and immoral behaviors in Vietnam, which in turn proves that they still believe in the significance of humanity and morality.

Billy Lynn also features a verbal violence uttered by the ghost narrator and the soldiers. They loudly curse the war, and the perversion of whole nation: “The stadium is huge. It is deformed. It is a deformation of the human mind.”¹⁰⁷ *Billy Lynn* indicates that what's going on in the stadium is analogous to what's going on in the American society: “Texas Stadium is basically a shithole. It's cold, gritty, drafty, dirty, in general possessed of all the charm of an industrial warehouse where people pee in the corners.”¹⁰⁸ This statement reveals that everyone in the society is a greedy consumer, at the same time a commercial item waiting to be consumed and sold at a better price. As a result, *Billy Lynn* greatly blurs the demarcation between home front and

¹⁰⁶ Heinemann, *Paco's Story*, 171.

¹⁰⁷ Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

battlefield, and the soldiers feel safer in the battlefield than staying in the current society, which is filled by fakeness, cheapness, and indifference:

He [Norm] has the presence, the *verds*, plus he's mastered the wounded, vaguely petulant tone that is the style of a political speech these days. If there's a grating artificiality in the performance—Norm's awareness of himself as performer, sneaking peeks at a mental mirror off to the side—it's no worse than any other fixture of the public realm. Billy has noticed that audiences don't seem to mind anyway. All the fakeness just rolls right off them, maybe because the nonstop sales job of American life has instilled in them exceptionally high thresholds for sham, puff, spin, bullshit, and outright lies, in other words for advertising in all its forms. Billy himself never noticed how fake it all is until he'd done time in a combat zone.¹⁰⁹

The ghost narrators in both *Paco's Story* and *Billy Lynn* pose as the cynical social critics, who are empowered with a unique perspective in observing the social realities. Both novels reveal that the society does not change much after the two notorious wars, and it is just “fake.”

This fakeness especially abounds in the upper class. *Billy Lynn* spares no efforts taunting the fakeness of the public's conscience and worship of celebrity and consumerism. Even the development of the plot in *Billy Lynn* is modeled on the progression of a football game, in which the so-called eight “war heroes” are presented as the honorable guests at the end of their “victory tour.” This novel lists the topics which interest people most: strip clubs, alcohol, sex, family, sports, filmmaking, and money. *Billy Lynn* offers a portrait of the celebrities:

The men have the hale good looks and silver hair of successful bank presidents or midsized-city mayors, tanned, fit sixty-year-olds who can still bring the heat on their tennis serves. Their wives are substantially but not offensively younger, all blonds, all displaying the taut architectonics of *surgical self-improvement*. *So proud, the men say, going around shaking hands. So grateful, so honored. Guardians. Freedoms. Fanatics. TerrRr*. The wives hang back and let their men do the honors, they look on with vaguely wistful smiles and not an ounce of evident lust.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 131.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

Paco's Story and *Billy Lynn* highlight two representative classes of the American society, *Paco's Story* highlights the struggling working class; *Billy Lynn* targets the superficial upper class. But neither the working class nor the upper class really cares about the war or the soldiers. Moreover, both classes adhere to the assigned stereotypes, and no change has made.

Compared to Paco's generation, the Bravo Company are even more desperate, "life in the Army is miserable that way. You fuck up. They scream at you, you fuck up some more and they scream some more, but overlying all the small, petty, stupid, basically foreordained fuckups looms the ever-present prospect of the life-fucking fuckup, a fuckup so profound and all-encompassing as to crush all hope of redemption."¹¹¹ The war turned the soldiers into "instant heroes," therefore, the soldiers have to submit themselves to the American government. They will be redeployed to the war after they successfully sell the war. They understand their identity in war: "we're infantry, that's kind of like being a dog or a mule, we're too dumb to mind the weather. He's fine, believe me, he don't feel a thing... He's fine. He's happy. He's like a cockroach, you can't kill him!"¹¹² The soldiers dehumanize themselves as *cockroaches* to cater to the dire reality, which demands them to be willing killers in war. They declare that "we *like* violence, we *like* going lethal! I mean, isn't that what you're paying us for? To take the fight to America's enemies and send them straight to hell? If we didn't like killing people then what's the point?"¹¹³ By all means, the seemingly different homecomings for American soldiers from the two wars show that nothing has changed both in terms of the soldiers' experience of the war nor the real condition of the veterans.

¹¹¹ Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 3-4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 261.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 65.

In *Redeployment*, soldiers from Iraq are more outspoken and cynical. The American government could not silence them as they did to the generation of Paco. In *Redeployment*, the soldiers loathe the cheapness of the publicity: ““Everybody *supports the troops*,” Dime woofs, “*support the troops, support the troops*, hell yeah we’re *so fucking PROUD of our troops*, but when it comes to actual money? Like somebody might have to come out of pocket for the troops? Then all the sudden we’re on everybody’s tight-ass budget. Talk is cheap, I got that, but gimme a break. Talk is cheap but money screams, this is our country, guys.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, they loathe the commercialism of the media, especially the Hollywood movie-making: “Hollywood’s a sick, twisted place, ... Corrupt, decadent, full of practicing sociopaths, roughly analogous to, say, the court of Louis the Sun King in seventeenth-century France.”¹¹⁵ In this sense, *Billy Lynn* defines Hollywood as the most powerful and everlasting monarch which controls the vision of the mass public.

Different from most war novels, *Billy Lynn* fails to make the reader cry or angry. Rather, it succeeds in putting the reader in an embarrassing situation, unable to cry nor laugh, but to contemplate. *Billy Lynn* elaborates how the media play a defining role in our everyday life, especially in the public’s understanding of the war. After the Fox News happened to tape the three minutes and forty-three seconds of a ferocious firefight at the battle of Al-Ansakar Canal, eight American soldiers are instantly transformed into national heroes, and are worshipped by the public on their “victory tour.” This is a big satire, first of all, on the definition of hero by the American government and the whole nation. Such definition of hero is further satirized by the undisciplined

¹¹⁴ Fountain, *Billy Lynn*, 281-2.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

behavior of the “heroes” who actually hate war, and are more interested in alcohol, sex and money-making. It also satirizes the shallowness of the American government’s rationale for launching such war, and still lingering in this aimless war. The social celebrities, though supportive of the war in public, are actually ignorant of what is really going on in the war, and careless about it; what they really care are their connection with the upper class and the American government. Therefore, this book is more a satire on the whole American society about their morbid obsession with the so-called American spirit of freedom, democracy, and humanity in a ridiculous way. In other words, *Billy Lynn* lays bare the fact that the core values of American society are no more than the privileges of the upper class, and they have nothing to do with the poor underclass.

2.4 Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War and The Yellow Birds

Karl Marlantes served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970, and published his fictional novel *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* in 2010.¹¹⁶ This book became a *New York Times* bestseller. Kevin Powers, who served in Iraq between 2004 and 2005, published his novel *The Yellow Birds* in 2012. This book was a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award.

Marlantes’s book’s title *Matterhorn* has multiple meanings. “Matterhorn” refers to a deserted military checkpoint and base built by American soldiers in the jungle of Vietnam. Matterhorn literally refers to a kind of wild grass living in the jungle which is capable of surviving in the direst conditions. Besides, Matterhorn metaphorically refers to the soldier on both sides who persistently endure the war since it highlights the perseverance and determination of both American soldiers and their counterparts. *Matterhorn* centers on the formidable process of retaking

¹¹⁶ Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010).

the deserted military base as well as the most unbearable experiences encountered by the narrator Mellas and his fellow soldiers. Even though this book is a fiction, it is mainly based on the author's personal experience in Vietnam. Dudley Barlow believes that "[t]he book may be real enough that they [veterans] would prefer not to read it. It might dredge up some experiences they would just as soon repress."¹¹⁷

Similarly, Powers' *The Yellow Birds* also refers to the soldiers, but only American soldiers. Powers points out the destiny of these birds in the epigraph of the book that: "A yellow bird/ with a yellow bill/ Was perched upon/ My windowsill/ I lured him in/ With a piece of bread/ And then I smashed / His fucking head..."¹¹⁸ The epigraph warns the reader that this book will be about the doomed tragic fate of the soldiers. *The Yellow Birds* is only one third the length of *Matterhorn*, and it centers around a promise made by the narrator to protect one of his fellow soldiers: the seventeen-year-old Murphy. This specific perspective narrows down the scope of the sprawling war story to the survival of two young soldiers in the war and the narrator's struggle beyond the war. In other words, *The Yellow Birds* elegizes the inevitable death of voluntary soldiers since they already knew the truths about the war before they launched their adventurous journey in a nation where they knew nothing about it at all.¹¹⁹ In *The Yellow Birds*, the soldiers hold no illusion about war. They equal war with death. Besides death, there is only trauma. Many scholars believe that

¹¹⁷ Dudley Barlow, "Truth in Fiction: Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn*," *Education Digest*, (Dec. 1, 2011): 67.

¹¹⁸ The epigraph of *The Yellow Birds*.

¹¹⁹ The beginning of *The Yellow Birds* states it clearly that American soldiers understand that it will be very hard for them to survive the war.

this novel could be taken as a good case study of PTSD and psychoanalysis.¹²⁰ The keynote of the whole novel has shrouded in a suffocating Gothic: “The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life.”¹²¹ In this perspective, I agree with William Leith and Chris Herlinger that *The Yellow Birds* is analogous to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* in depicting the “randomness of death” and the “coldness of indifference” of the American society to both the war and soldiers.¹²²

These two books impressed readers with amazing juxtapositions of nightmarish horrors and touching brotherhood. They both emphasize the psychological toll of war. And both criticize the ridiculous logic of war. Both also purposely employ a range of literary strategies and writing skills, which illustrate the most admirable fighting spirits of American soldiers in Vietnam as well as their unspeakable trauma in Iraq. Certainly, novels about the Vietnam War emphasize the horrors of war, but *Matterhorn* takes the familiar horrors of war and presents them with unflinching

¹²⁰ John Marzillier, in his review of “The Yellow Birds” (*Psychologist*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2013): 348-49), believes that this novel will give readers “a vivid sense of what the trauma of war is like for the young men who are drawn into it. More than that, the book will bring them face to face with uncomfortable truths about the damage trauma does in a way that no statistic or theory can” (349). Joelle Mann, in “Mapping Memory: Moving Between Trauma and Terror in The Yellow Birds” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 58, no.4 (2016): 340-350), argues that this novel “charts the psychological cartography of Private John Bartle, illustrating a journey that renders both the mental and physical effects of war trauma” (340).

¹²¹ Powers, *The Yellow Birds*, 4.

¹²² William Leith, “An Exercise in Torment: The Yellow Birds,” *The Spectator* (Sep. 15, 2012): 33; Chris Herlinger, “A Question Few Seem to Consider When the US Wages War Afar,” *National Catholic Reporter* (May 10, 2013): 19-20.

rawness and excess.¹²³ *Matterhorn* depicts in graphic how the soldiers suffer in the jungles. For example, in the first three chapters of the novel, a leech entered a fellow soldier's penis, and the doctor could neither fix it nor transfer him out of the jungle. Unable to urinate for a whole day with the procession of the leech along the urethra, Fisher began to die. At last, the poorly trained doctor has to cut open the penis without the anesthesia or the standard sterilization:

Sheller pushed the blade into Fisher's penis. Fisher screamed and Fredrickson put all of his weight on him to keep him from rolling. Blood and urine streamed over the knife blade, the initial burst spraying Sheller's hands and chest. Then Sheller pushed the makeshift catheter up the smooth side of the knife into the incision and quickly slipped the blade out. Urine coursed out of the catheter flowing over Fisher's hips and crotch, filling the tent with its hot smell, running onto the mud, soaking the nylon poncho liners under Fisher's body. ... Then Fredrickson took Fisher by surprise and quickly punctured his penis again, this time to pierce the leech and kill it. ... Blood from the swollen leech was running along the flat of the knife. He pulled it out and took a deep breath. Dark blood oozed from the second cut, mixing with the redder blood and urine from the first.¹²⁴

Even though leeches are everywhere in the jungle of the Vietnam, and could be found on the body of every soldier, *Matterhorn* elaborates the most extreme possibility: a leech in a man's penis represents the utter weakness of American soldiers to the guerilla tactics of the Viet Cong. Omnipresent, the leeches in this story become an invasion, an unstoppable form of death that enters the soldier exactly at the site of his masculinity. He is blocked, stopped, penetrated and drained of life until he literally bursts open.

Another haunting scene involves a soldier named William who is attacked and eaten by a tiger: "He ate him, man, he jumped him and dragged him off and ate him. Lord God, we was just

¹²³ Carol Memmott, comments that "Marlantes doesn't tell a new story, and his characters often fit the proverbial war-story stereotypes. But he pitches us into a harrowing narrative we won't soon forget." (Carol Memmott, "Matterhorn' stands tall as a reminder of war's toll," *USA Today*, 2010).

¹²⁴ Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 38-9.

layin' there and all a sudden there's Williams screaming' and I hear this tiger bat him, like across the neck or somthin', and them crunch him right through the head."¹²⁵ When the corpse is finally found, "his legs and backside had been ripped open and partially eaten. ... Puncture wounds from long sharp teeth were sunk deeply into his face and temples."¹²⁶ The Marines wouldn't dump the corpse of their fellow soldiers, so they carry the remains through rains and long trudges until they are transported out of the battlefield by plane:

The body looked like beef in a cold storage locker, hardened blood mixed with pale skin and exposed meat. They tied the ankles, knees, elbows, and wrists closely together and then wrapped the torso in a poncho, leaving the arms and legs out. They tied the arms and legs to a long pole so they could carry the body, swinging, beneath it. Fredrickson wired Williams's head, which had been lolling loose inside the poncho, next to the pole so it wouldn't throw the carriers off balance.¹²⁷

This example not only further demonstrates the horrors of Vietnam, but also praises the brotherhood among the soldiers. *Matterhorn* actually highlights the brotherhood and comradery, while most war stories tend to present the soldiers' survival in Vietnam as a lonely battle with the invisible enemies.

The Yellow Birds also features the horrors of war, and the horror is even worse than the superlative examples that abound in *Matterhorn*. Men in Iraq age quickly: "I'd had this idea once that you had to grow old before you died. I still feel like there is some truth to it, because Daniel Murphy had grown old in the ten months I'd known him."¹²⁸ They also grow desperate much quicker. In the novel, the narrator says: "our biggest error was thinking that it mattered what we

¹²⁵ Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 158.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹²⁸ Powers, *The Yellow Birds*, 30.

thought. It seems absurd now that we saw each death as an affirmation of our lives. That each one of those deaths belonged to a time and that therefore that time was not ours. We didn't know the list was limitless. We didn't think beyond a thousand. We never considered that we could be among the walking dead as well."¹²⁹ In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers objectifies and personifies war. He actually means that war is in charge of men, rather than vice versa. Powers does not believe that men are still human being the very moment when they stumble upon the battlefield, nor men have other destinies than death:

The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life. The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman, child. But it had killed fewer than a thousand soldiers like me and Murph. Those numbers still meant something to us as what passed for fall began. Murph and I had agreed. We didn't want to be the thousandth killed. If we died later, then we died. But let that number be someone else's milestone.¹³⁰

For Powers, soldiers are yellow birds, and war is the cage in which they are trapped. In *Matterhorn*, men are always eager to leave out of the war to marry and father a child; in *The Yellow Birds*, men are doomed to be either dead or walking dead. After witnessing deaths every day and being dumped by his girlfriend, young Murph puts all his interest into a young nurse. When she was killed in front of his eyes, Murph is totally lost. He walks toward death nude, and is ultimately killed by the Iraqis in the most brutal way: they cut off his head and limbs, and gouged out his eyes. Powers states that "[He] had been imprecisely castrated. . . . had been butchered in the service of his country in an unknown corner of the world."¹³¹ In this case, *The Yellow Birds* presents an

¹²⁹ Powers, *The Yellow Birds*, 13.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

uglier war than Vietnam. I guess this might be the only way that Powers can get the public's attention towards the ongoing war by surpassing the horrors of war represented in other war stories.

Both novels are excellent examples of psychological narratives about war. The structure and diction of both novels clearly demonstrate the careful design and selection by the authors, especially with *The Yellow Birds*. *The Yellow Birds* is structured irregularly with the flashback of time and space. The seemingly chaotic structure of the narration, on the one hand, reflects the chaotic disorder in the mind of the narrator who recounts his war experiences; and on the other hand, illustrates the very nature of the destructive war; that is, the war itself is chaotic and orderless, and the war destroys the normal order of people's everyday life. War literature always features a high-frequency of four-letter words, but in *The Yellow Birds*, the author only employs poetic, proper language, which makes for a shocking contrast with the cruelty of the war. The lyrical quality of the language in this book contributes in vividly conveying the subtleness of the emotions of the characters who helplessly get trapped in the war, and wins the empathy of the reader.

Both novels are also evocative. *Matterhorn* is filled with "jungle rot, leeches dropping from tree branches, malnourishment, drenching monsoons, mudslides, exposure to Agent Orange, and wild animals that wreak havoc as brigade members face punishing combat and grapple with bitterness, rage, disease, alcoholism, and hubris."¹³² *The Yellow Birds* is moving in the sense that there is no hero in the book, just as there is no hero in the war, everyone involved suffers like "yellow birds" no matter which side you take. The novel echoes themes conveyed by other literary works discussed so far in which war is just a game of killing, meaningless, and pointless. *The*

¹³² "Matterhorn," *Publishers Weekly* (Review-Fiction) (Jan. 11, 2010): 28.

Yellow Birds also concentrates the importance of brotherhood between two young gunners. Failure to keep his promise to young Murph leaves the narrator restless, and suffering to the degree that he gives up and indulges into alcohol. He is in no way a hero; but still he wants to maintain a basic tenant of masculinity to honor the dead. Even though the narrator is ultimately misunderstood and unfairly sentenced into imprisonment, he takes the imprisonment as a means of redemption, payment for his failure to keep his promise. Thus, in contrast to many war novels, which emphasize the atrocity and inhumanity of the soldiers, these two novels are concerned with the basic humanity and threatened masculinity of soldiers.

The Yellow Birds also exposes human weakness, which makes the book more humane and realistic than others in the genre. The three characters included in this novel—the Sergeant, the narrator, and Murphy, each has his own character weakness; however, such weaknesses better define their humanity. The narrator, for example, does not pay real attention nor want to keep the promise to protect Murph at first. As they spend more time spent together and share more experiences, they became good friends. Only then does the narrator start to take seriously the promise he made. He not only fails to protect Murphy, however. He also fails to have the courage to present the disfigured corpse to Murphy's mother, and choses to lie about Murphy's death. He survived the war and went home; yet in no way could he survive the nightmare of the war nor the guilt of breaking his promise. His lack of courage and sense of guilt are his weaknesses; but they also define his humanity. Likewise, the Sergeant who conspired with the narrator to hide the truth about Murphy's death feels so much guilt that he is unable to lead a normal life, and instead indulges in more violence and alcohol, and finally commits suicide. Murphy, too, was young and weak, and lost control of himself after witnessing the darkness and cruelty of war, which ultimately

resulted in his barbaric death. War exposes the weaknesses of human beings; and in turn, exposes its own ferocity. Powers impresses the reader with his portrait of the war, and the heartbreaking friendship between the narrator and the young Murphy.

In terms of political implications, *Matterhorn* covers more grounds than the ordinary war literature. It is not only anti-war, but also anti-racism, anti-bureaucracy, and anti-government. It exposes in graphic detail the futility of war and the suffering of the soldiers. Besides, it highlights the conflicts between the white soldiers and the black soldiers, the hypocrisy of the commanders, the gaming of the politics in the military, and the arrogance and ignorance of the American government. In *Matterhorn*, Marlantes presents that by nature the Americans are racists: “you can’t grow up in America and not be a racist. Everyone on this fucking hill’s a racist and everyone back in the world’s a racist.”¹³³ This novel is the first one openly defining American’s involvement in Vietnam as an act of racism. Marlantes goes from racism against the Vietnamese by the Americans to racism against the black Americans by the white Americans, and the author explains in an interview that his depiction of tension in Vietnam just reflects the true conflicts back in the home-front between the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹³⁴ Moreover, the soldiers compare themselves as whores, the American government and the public as the customers:

¹³³ Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 431.

¹³⁴ In “The Books Interview: Karl Marlantes”, Marlantes responds to the question—how tense were the racial politics out there? —that “Vietnam was the first time that Americans of different races had to depend on each other. ...There were over 200 “fraggings” [murders of superiors] and almost all of them were racial motivated. There was an enormous amount tension. Think about what America was experiencing then. ...And there you are in Vietnam. If you think you had racial tension in America, take 19-year-olds [to the jungle], give them all automatic weapons and say, “here, live together,” when they’d never lived together before. Holy shit!”. (*New Statesman* (Aug. 30, 2010): 43).

“America uses us like whores, Simpson. When it wants a good fuck it pours in the money and we give it a moment of glory. Then when it’s over, it sneaks out the back door and pretends it doesn’t know who we are.” Mulvaney swirled the ice, watching it dissolve. “Yeah, we’re whores.” He continued, almost to himself now. “I admit it. But we’re good ones. We’re good at fucking. We like our work. So the customer gets ashamed afterward. So hypocrisy’s always been part of the profession. We know that.” Mulvaney narrowed his eyes and looked at Simpson. “but this time the customer doesn’t want he’s riding us around the room with a fucking bridle and whip and spurs.” Mulvaney shook his head. “we ain’t good at that. It turns our stomach. And it’s destroying us.”¹³⁵

This comparison exposes the true relationship between the American government and American soldiers. In *Matterhorn*, Marlantes actually argues that the American government is shamelessly consuming the loyalty and sacrifice of its subjects, and I think this argument is the most radical one made in war stories so far.

By and large, the above analyses and comparison of key works of literature about Vietnam and Iraq show that great similarities and differences exist in representations of the two wars. The selected works in this chapter emphasize the emotional impacts of war upon individuals and their families. In this perspective, representations of Vietnam and Iraq are no different from representations of the other American wars. However, representations of Vietnam and Iraq also demonstrate that the emotional impacts caused by Vietnam and Iraq mainly resulted from belief systems in crisis. Vietnam and Iraq become the touchstones in assessing the fragility of core values and basic beliefs of American society, such as equality, justice, and democracy. Throughout the novels, America’s involvement in Vietnam and her attack on Iraq are explored as misleading in nature. And yet, in both cases, America did not “win” in the two wars, which challenges American

¹³⁵ Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 262.

myths of exceptionalism and world dominance. Novels about Vietnam and Iraq consistently rebut assertions about the superiority of the American democracy and military power over the rest.

The celebrated works included in this chapter also highlight the ways that Vietnam and Iraq are two un-conventional wars in the history of human civilization. Literary representations of Vietnam and Iraq underscore the exoticism and mystery of Vietnam and Iraq. Not only were Vietnam and Iraq eccentric locations, but so were their forms of combat. Accordingly, the selected literature focuses more on the survival of American soldiers in the mysterious jungles of Vietnam and abominable deserts of Iraq, rather than the confrontations between American soldiers and their counterparts. What's more, these works tend to highlight the humanity, brotherhood, and courage of American soldiers in the two ugly wars—both as expectations and as failures. Besides being the perpetrators and victims of the two wars, American soldiers represented in these novels also displayed the courage to confess their mistakes, which was in sharp contrast with the hypocrisy of the American government.

Lastly, representations of Vietnam and Iraq challenge the status quo of American democracy. Literature about Vietnam and Iraq clearly demonstrates that both wars are mainly fought by the underprivileged, and the conflicts between different races and different classes remained unchanged. As the novels demonstrate, to a great extent, enlistment became an alternative for the underclass to temporarily escape financial challenges, yet, in turn, were subject to far greater problems as soldiers at war.

Vietnam and Iraq also emerge in distinction in these novels. First of all, these two wars result from two different political ideologies. Vietnam was the result of the Cold War philosophy and the containment imperatives of the American government. In novels about Vietnam, the East

and the West, the South and the North are constantly contrasted as diametrically opposed. Iraq was a scapegoat for the 9/11 terrorist attack, or a result of misinformation or some sophisticated political-economical conspiracy of the American government. Novels about Iraq constantly emphasize the lies about MDWs. These novels are commensurate with the evidence that Vietnam was much more complicated and barbaric than Iraq in terms of the atrocities committed by the American soldiers.¹³⁶ Literature about Vietnam, on the one hand, represents in graphic detail how that American soldiers survive the booby trapped, tiger-inhabited, and leeches-dotted jungles; on the other hand, the literature exposes the most inhumane and insane aspects of young men's lives in Vietnam—they slaughtered, abused, and raped innocent civilians. The novels also attest to the fact that more technology-assisted Iraq War generated instant destruction of equipment and severe casualties, which in turn, generates extreme trauma upon the war witnesses. Meanwhile, at home, the novels also agree that the public was more indifferent to Iraq and to the plight of American soldiers in Iraq. In the 1970s, the public decried the war in Vietnam, even as they commented on the unfavorable or shameful acts of their compatriots in war, which to some extent, helped pushing forward the fierce anti-war movement in the 1970s. However, Iraq was mostly ignored and avoided by the public which was still reeling in the early years from 9/11. Accordingly, American soldiers in Iraq were more desperate and depressed. Lastly, literature about Iraq inherits the tradition of war literature in general, whereas literature about Iraq developed new aesthetic possibilities by incorporating various new forms of media and communication, such as blogs and online platforms.

¹³⁶ Novels about Vietnam feature killing and raping of innocent civilians while novels about Iraq do not.

CHAPTER 3

REPRESENTATIONS OF VIETNAM AND IRAQ IN FILMS

The history of the literary representation of war is as old as war itself. However, the history of the filmic representation of war started only at the end of the nineteenth century. The fresh memory of the two world wars, coinciding with the maturity of the film technology in the 1950s and the 1960s, brought about not only a great many war films, but also established the basic mechanism of war films, which was the reenactment of combat and heroism. These films were made by Hollywood. Furthermore, the end of the Vietnam War generated a unique sub-genre of war film—the Vietnam film, which “change[d] the nature of the war film genre.”¹ On the one hand, the fragmentation and inexplicability of the war presented a great challenge to the filmmakers to make sense of the chaotic assemblage of the war itself. On the other hand, Vietnam films usually “borrow[ed] narrative and cinematic codes from other media and other films.”² The Vietnam War was the first televised war; accordingly, the filmic representation of Vietnam took great advantage of the televised representation of the war. Besides, the features of the Western and detective film were also common in Vietnam films.³

I argue that there were two waves of Vietnam film production. The first wave ran from the end of the Vietnam War to the end of the 1970s, and included films such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Go*

¹ Robert T. Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 96.

² Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 2.

³ Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.)

Tell the Spartans (Ted Post, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Friendly Fire* (David Greene, 1979), and others. Markedly, America's withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 signaled the end of an era during which the United States had been the most influential superpower of the world, and American ideology and democracy had been considered superior than other ideologies. What's more, North Vietnam's victory over South Vietnam seemed to defeat the purpose of America's involvement in Vietnam. Consequently, Vietnam became a shame and trauma for all Americans, "no matter where they were during the war."⁴ The domestic anti-war movement, together with the impact of social revolutions and movements internationally, turned the 1970s into a fierce arena of conflicting ideologies and politics.

Accordingly, films about the Vietnam War, like *Taxi Driver* and *Coming Home*, addressed the dilemma of the veterans suffering from PTSD. The former tells of the insanity of a Hemingway-style veteran who struggles and endures the meaninglessness of peace-time life as a night cab driver in New York; the latter tells of the touching and tragic love affair of one beautiful lady with two servicemen—one is wheelchair-bound, and the other chooses to drown himself to escape the burden of war and a failed marriage. Films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, and *Apocalypse Now* reenact the combat and the suffering of American soldiers on the battlefields of Vietnam. *The Deer Hunter* exposes the transition of American soldiers from the hunter to the hunted; *Go Tell the Spartans* shows how a group of heroic and passionate young Americans are all killed by the sneaky Vietcong with the help of a ghostly one-eyed scout; *Apocalypse Now* reveals how American soldiers are bewitched by the power of evil in the war. These films,

⁴ Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 13.

especially the popular *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, on the one hand, fit in the overall anti-war milieu during the late 1970s by exposing the violence of the war to the public; on the other hand, they provide the public with a cathartic experience by displaying how American soldiers were victimized in the war.

The second wave took place in the 1980s, and included films such as *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Gardens of Stone* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1987), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989), *Causalities of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989), *The Expendables* (Cirio H. Santiago, 1989), and more. The second wave of Vietnam films still lingered in the smoke of the anti-war movement of the previous decade, but at the same time, they tried to gradually walk away from the nightmare of the war. These films are either about soldiers on the foreign battle field or veterans back on the home front. The series of *First Blood* created a super action movie star—Sylvester Stallone, who likely reminded the public of the mythic figure of John Wayne, the quintessential American hero. On the other hand, *First Blood* sets the tone for 1980s Vietnam films—the reconstruction of American masculinity against the fading background of the Vietnam War. *Missing in Action* continues the story of Russian roulette, but the fate of the POW is totally rewritten by a heroic veteran – James Braddock (Chuck Norris).⁵ *Platoon* and *Full Metal*

⁵ According to Oxford English dictionary, Russian roulette is “an act of bravado in which a person loads one chamber of revolver, spins the cylinder, holds the barrel to his head, and pulls the trigger.” (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169094?redirectedFrom=Russian+roulette#eid24537954>) (accessed on September 19, 2018).

Jacket achieved acclaim by presenting combat as a spectacle and praising the courage and brotherhood among the soldiers. *Gardens of Stone* and *Born on the Fourth of July* recount the inevitable loss of war—the innocence and life of the young. *Casualties of War* renders the war as typical military porn, which features brutal killing and raping. *The Expendables* mythologizes a team of Special Forces, which is unconquerable and full of courage and justice. Among all of these, *Good Morning, Vietnam* is the only one that includes the voice of the Vietnamese and demonstrates what the Vietnamese thought of Americans. In general, Vietnam War films made during and after the 1980s emphasize what Americans lost in Vietnam—innocence, dignity, morality, and justice—and push the public to contemplate how to regain these lost core values.

The first wave of Vietnam films was certainly shaped by the political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the thinking of the New Left as we discussed in detail in Chapter One. Also influential, however, was the era of the New Hollywood and the rise of the New Right. Chronologically, these three movements took place about the similar time, which was around 1965. Theoretically, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical social and political movements, both nationally and internationally, stimulated all three of these movements. The New Left mainly targeted social injustice; the New Hollywood, also called the American New Wave or the Hollywood Renaissance, challenged the authority of the film studio and traditional modes of storytelling.⁶ The New Right, comprised of libertarians and advocating for neo-liberalism, was constructed by the interaction of the following five points: “(1) the individual; (2) freedom of

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, Noel King and Alexander Horwath, *Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004).

choice; (3) market society; (4) laissez-faire; (5) minimal government.”⁷ Consequently, the interweaving of the three movements, especially the New Left and the New Hollywood, in the late 1960s and 1970s, made the representation of the Vietnam War more thematically complicated, formally experimental, and morally ambiguous.

Spanning 2004 to 2017, the scenario of the Iraq War films is quite different from that of the Vietnam war films of the late 20th century. First, the filmmaking of the Iraq War has taken place parallel to the ongoing Iraq War, which is a unique phenomenon in the history of filmmaking. Fewer than thirty feature films about Iraq were produced between 2004 and 2017. Only three have achieved box office successes—*United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014); the rest failed to cover their budgets. Because Iraq war films are considered “box office poisons” and a “toxic genre,” they receive more criticism than praise. Many scholars tend to believe that Iraq films demonstrate the typical ideology of cultural hegemony. For instance, Jeffrey Klenotic argues that “over time, Hollywood products moved into worldwide markets and became a dominant form of global culture, depicting the American century as an inevitable and beneficent form of international manifest destiny. Cultural imperialism and economic imperialism went hand in hand.”⁸ Other scholars believe that Iraq films are in service of justifying the dominant ideology of the American government. Thomas Conroy and Jarice Hanson state that “media have presented the war to us by

⁷ Ruth Levitas, *The Ideology of The New Right* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 173.

⁸ Jeffrey Klenotic, “Staying in the Moment: Hollywood, History, and the Politics of 9/11 Cinema,” in *Constructing America’s War Culture: Iraq, Media, and Images at Home*, ed. Thomas Conroy (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 102.

telling us human interest stories, supporting public policies, and crafting a narrative that supports the war.”⁹ In a similar manner, Marilyn J. Matelski and Nancy Lynch Street argue that:

One might describe the Hollywood film industry as a kind of “silent partner” to both the visible and invisible U.S. government. Through film language and images, the film industry shapes the vantage point from which we Americans see films. ...from at least World War II to the present, America has utilized film to promote patriotism, dedication to cause, recruitment and heroism.¹⁰

Indeed, the visual representation of war is strongly ideological and political. Michael A. Anderegg explains, the thing to remember about media is “they mediate: a representation of war—or any other human experience—is never the thing itself.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the cinematic representation of war not only demonstrates the mightiness of the cinematic apparatus, but also embeds the perspectives “brought to bear on the depicted events by those engaged in a given film’s production and reception.”¹² That is to say, war films tell more about how both the filmmakers and the public reflect upon the war than the war-happening itself. This tendency in war films, in turn, results in the contradictions and ambiguities of war films. But despite these contradictions and ambiguities, in this chapter, I will argue that Iraq war films also manifest the dominant ideologies of the anti-war public concerning the war who felt that the Iraq War was wrong and unjust.

Moreover, Martin Barker, in *A ‘Toxic Genre’: The Iraq War Films*, points out that films about Iraq are still modeled on the “classical Hollywood formula,” which includes: “a single

⁹ Thomas Conroy and Jarice Hanson, *Constructing America’s War Culture: Iraq, Media, and Images at Home* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), vii.

¹⁰ Marilyn J. Matelski and Nancy Lynch Street, *War and Film in America: Historical and Critical Essays* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003), 5.

¹¹ Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 13.

¹² Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 10.

narrative thread, set around a dilemma requiring solution within a constrained time; a central hero, who has to discover something about him/herself in order to meet the challenge; relatively clear moral lines; a ‘reward’ for the hero, often in the form of romantic coupling; and so on.”¹³ Barker summarizes that “after Vietnam, then, the ‘Grunt’ became a moveable feast within popular culture. In most versions, he is a soldier just desperate to survive. Fighting wars he (or she) does not believe in, invading space, alien worlds, even taking alien form, the ‘Grunt’ becomes a virtual mercenary.”¹⁴ In general, I agree with Barker’s assessment of Iraq films. But in this chapter, I intend to argue that Iraq war films call for a new kind of heroism, by which I mean an idealized image of a man who is endowed with high moral grounds and competence in the spheres of both war and peace.

First, I discuss *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. The analyses of these films center on the following questions: How is the Vietnam War represented in each film? How do these films help shape the public’s conception of the war? What are the social-political factors which make the films box office successes? In the second part of this chapter, I discuss *In the Valley of Elah*, *The Hurt Locker*, *The Green Zone*, and *American Sniper*. The analyses of these Iraq films center on these questions: How is the Iraq War represented? What do the films tell about the ongoing war? Why do these films fail to make a strong war narrative like that of the Vietnam films? What are the social-political factors behind the way the war is represented in the films?

¹³ Barker, *A ‘Toxic Genre,’* 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

3.1 Vietnam War Films

3.1.1 *The Deer Hunter*

The first feature film about the Vietnam War *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino) came out in 1978. This film centers on the traumatic life changes of three Russian American steelworkers Mike Vronsky (Robert De Niro), Nick Chevotarevich (Christopher Walken), and Steven Pushkov (John Savage) in Clairton, Pennsylvania after they enlisted in the Vietnam War. The plot of this film is very clear and straightforward—at home, the men hunt deer; in Vietnam, the men are forced to play Russian roulette (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). This film literally compares the Vietnam War with a game of Russian roulette. As the first movie about the newly ended war, *The Deer Hunter* drew great attention from the public and won five Academy Awards.



Figure 3.1. “Nick was forced to play Russian roulette with Mike.” *The Deer Hunter*, directed by Michael Cimino (1979; United States, Universal Pictures). (left)

Figure 3.2. “Mike was forced to play Russian roulette in front of a portrait of Ho Chi Min.” *The Deer Hunter*. (right)

Michael Ryan classifies this film as one of the major conservative films concerning the Vietnam War.¹⁵ According to Ryan, the conservative nature of this film mainly lies in two aspects: First, this film exaggeratedly dramatizes the image of the Vietnamese, especially the Vietcong, as

¹⁵ Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 194.

savage, vulgar, and corrupt. Secondly, this film characterizes American soldiers as either heroes (Mike) or victims (Nick and Steven). Similarly, Leonard Quart compares Mike to a “Superman” in Vietnam and warns that “it’s this ethnocentric identification with the mythic Michael and his world that makes *The Deer Hunter*’s vision of the Vietnamese both invidious and politically dangerous.”¹⁶ I agree that this film is politically and ideologically misleading in the sense that it displays in sharp contrast the inhumanity of the Vietcong and humanity of American soldiers. The focus of the film is clearly to highlight the suffering of American soldiers in Vietnam. Therefore, it purposely dramatizes the brutality of the Vietcong to amplify the innocence of the American soldiers. However, it is also important to point out that the greedy Vietnamese only appear in two sequences of Russian roulette. In the first sequence, which occurs in the beginning of the film, the greedy and barbaric Viet Cong force Nick and Mike to play Russian roulette. In the second scene of Russian Roulette, the Vietnamese, together with the French, Americans, and others with unclear nationalities, are just indifferent onlookers of the game. So are the public who watch the war at the home front and the audience who watch this film. From this perspective, I think that this film actually compares the mass public to greedy and indifferent spectators of the Vietnam War.

Moreover, I do not think this film is a typical conservative hero-centered war film as mentioned by Quart. In *The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam*, Quart argues that the focus of this film is neither to present a realistic portrait of war nor to emphasize the effect of war: “this is clearly a romanticized version of factory town reality. Cimino, however, is not interested in

¹⁶ Leonard Quart, “The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 165.

providing a complex portrait of the working-class ethos. His workers are traditional American heroes, not men frustrated with their work and angry with their employers. The world that Cimino constructs demands celebration, not criticism nor interpretation.”¹⁷ It is true that this film is free from the reenactment of any military combat, but it definitely emphasizes the destructive effect of war in the most powerful way through the metaphor of Russian roulette. This film shows how the Vietnam War totally and arbitrarily changes the fate of the young men. What’s more, these Russian Americans are not celebrating American culture, but their own immigrant traditions. Thus, I agree with Frank Burke that this film emphasizes the displacement and rootlessness of the Ukrainian Americans: “The main characters are virtually homeless.... As Ukrainians they are doubly uprooted.... Given the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, particularly in relation to Vietnam, American patriotism becomes, for the Ukrainians, rebellion from afar against Russia. Patriotism is, in short, just another sign of colonization.”¹⁸ In other words, the situation of the Ukrainian Americans in *The Deer Hunter* is a reflection of the future of the Vietnamese if America had colonized Vietnam after the war. As an Italian American himself, the director combines the theme of rootlessness with that brutality of Vietnam. Instead of narrating the inevitable assimilation of these expatriates, Cimino extends the theme of displacement and loss of values to the whole of American society. Rather than offer a stereotypical vision of a heroic soldier, *The Deer Hunter* combines an anti-war narrative with a critical narrative about the disadvantageous condition of immigrants in America.

¹⁷ Quart, “The Deer Hunter,” 164.

¹⁸ Frank Burke, “Reading Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*: Interpretation as Melting Pot,” *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1992): 252.

In contrast to Burke's positive comments on the film, Leo Cawley, in *The War About the War*, criticizes this film, together with other Hollywood Vietnam films, maintaining that it falsely emphasizes "the importance of the individual."¹⁹ Both Quart and Cawley point out how this film draws on the traditions of the genre of Western film genre and creates an analogy between the symbolic heroic figure Natty Bumppo in Cooper's *The Deerslayer* (becomes Michael in *The Deer Hunter*).²⁰ Quart describes Mike as a "man-warrior committed to a code built on loyalty and Hemingway's notion of grace under pressure. He is an indomitable, fearless figure who, when Nick and Steven become overcome with terror, is able to confront death calmly."²¹ Moreover, Michael Ryan firmly agrees with Quart, arguing that this film presents Vietnam as "a springboard for male military heroism."²² But Mike in no way commits to the traditional hero code. He is seemingly heroic but not a real hero. He looks fearless when Nick is frightened in the first scene of Russian roulette because he does not intend to do the real shot. However, in the final scene of Russian roulette, he is fearful when Nick is fearless and they are going to do the real shot (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). What's more, Mike does not stick to the loyalty code either, and he cheats on his best friend. Even presented as a John Wayne tough guy, Mike tries to save his friends, yet succeeds in saving none of them. Superficially, Mike returns to Vietnam to save Nick; innately, Mike returns to save his lost self. In his first visit to Vietnam, Mike loses everything he cherishes

¹⁹ Leo Cawley, "The War About the War," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 71.

²⁰ Quart, *The Superman*, 160; Cawley, *The War About the War*, 71.

²¹ Quart, *The Superman*, 161.

²² Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 200.

which is fully represented by Nick—innocence, passion, dignity, and brotherhood. After Nick shoots himself to death in Russian roulette, Mike loses himself in Vietnam forever. All in all, Mike looks like John Wayne, but this film demonstrates that neither John Wayne nor superman are compatible with Vietnam.



Figure 3.3. “Mike voluntarily pointed the gun to himself and looked at Nick sadly.” *The Deer Hunter*. (left)

Figure 3.4. “Nick pointed the gun to himself calmly and looked at Mike indifferently.” *The Deer Hunter*. (right)

Meanwhile, as the first movie about the most controversial war, this film is tentative and ambiguous in many aspects. First, this film totally isolates the metaphor of Russian roulette from the macro-historical narration of the event, and it purposely avoids such topics as why and how America got involved in this war. Michael Klein argues that “*The Deer Hunter* neither attempts a realistic recreation in fictional terms of the complexities of the war nor repudiates U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Its subject is not the war, or the effect of the war and the antiwar movement upon American culture from 1964 to 1973, but American culture and society after the war as the 1970s drew to a close.”²³ In other words, this film turns the conflict between two countries in terms of ideology and politics into personal and moralistic terms: “*The Deer Hunter*

²³ Michael Klein, “Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 22.

personalizes history, constructing a Vietnam that is a charnel house where good guys struggle with bad ones to survive, rather than a war determined by social ideology, Cold War politics, and nationalism.”²⁴ Consequently, the audience tends to narrowly interpret this film either as one of the traditional war films or a “Western” war movie.

Secondly, this film initiates the visual representation of the horror of the Vietnam War with its controversial scenes of Russian roulette, but the representation of the war horror does not go further than that. The major framework of this film still follows the traditional route of hero-making, that is, how a social nobody develops into an iron man under certain extreme circumstances; then this iron man fulfills his heroic commitment by risking himself to save the one in danger out of brotherhood and humane love. This film is a breakthrough in representing the horrifying perspective of war. The focus of this film, however, is more about the irreversible alienation of self and deterioration of social values due to the war, which constitutes one of the most classic and eternal philosophical and humanistic topics covered by war films. To put it in another way, Vietnam, in a metaphorical sense, is the touchstone on which to evaluate the morality and core values of American society and individuals.

Lastly, this film ends with the collective singing of the American patriotic song—*God Bless America* by Nick’s friends after the funeral. This ending might be read as a typical patriotic act, or rather as a cynical and helpless reaction to the tragedy. Michael Klein believes that “*The Deer Hunter* marks the beginning of a series of post-Vietnam films that negate the contradiction between doves and hawks and use the era as a period and a setting in order to construct parables

²⁴ Quart, *The Superman*, 166.

that interpret the Vietnam experience in the context of the concerns and developing climate of opinion of the late 1970s and the 1980s.”²⁵ However, one poll indicated that: “American viewers tended to turn even conservative war films like *The Deer Hunter* into antiwar statement: 69% felt that it portrayed the war as a mistake, and 93% said that it confirmed their opposition to the war. The ending made 27% feel patriotic, while it made 51% feel disheartened.”²⁶ Whereas critics tended to see the films as a reproduction of dominant conservative ideology, audiences still found the message they wanted to hear.

3.1.2 *Apocalypse Now*



Figure 3.5. “A montage of firebombing of the forest with an upside-down image of Captain Willard.” *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola (1979; United States, Omni Zoetrope). (left)

Figure 3.6. “A bird view of attacks launched by American military airplanes.” *Apocalypse Now*. (right)

After four years of preparation and hard work, Francis Ford Coppola presented his masterpiece—*Apocalypse Now* in 1979. The film is based on Joseph Conrad’s short novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and centers on a covert operation by a CIA agent—Captain Ben Willard (Martin Sheen) to assassinate the former Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) who retreats

²⁵ Michael Klein, “Historical Memory and Film,” 22.

²⁶ Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 205.

in madness to a mysterious compound on the Cambodian border. *Apocalypse Now* literally equates the Vietnam War with a slaughter carnival. Played famously by Marlon Brando, Colonel Kurtz insanely indulges in gratuitous killing, turning his dark corner of the jungle into a slaughterhouse.

Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulation and Simulacra*, categorizes this film as a “super film, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war”²⁷ (see Figure 3.5 and 3.6). Baudrillard believes that the fantasy created by this film surpasses the war itself, and “the war abolishes itself in its technological text, and for Americans it was primarily that: a test site, a gigantic territory in which to test their arms, their methods, their power.”²⁸ That is to say, Baudrillard believes that this film manifests the superiority of American technology and ideology over other countries. Baudrillard even claims that this film is a significant part of the Vietnam War and the war itself is a film. As the first televised war, the ongoing Vietnam War was parallel to the representation of the war on TV. But the war on TV made the Americans believe that they would undoubtedly win the war; the result was just the opposite. Baudrillard argues that Americans finally win over the Vietnamese with this film: “*Apocalypse Now* is a global victory. Cinematographic power equal and superior to that of the industrial and military complexes, equal or superior to that of the Pentagon and of governments.”²⁹ On the one hand, we might interpret this treatise as a critique of the film from the aspect of filmic representation, or the aestheticization of violence via cinematic techniques. On the other hand, we might also view this critique as a praise of the masterful employment of technology and filming strategy in this film. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Baudrillard only

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1994), 59.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

focuses on the visual grandeur of this film, and he totally ignores the linguistic and narrative features of this film, aspects of the film that cannot be ignored. After all, this movie is not only a super film, but also a masterful war movie.

Contrary to Baudrillard's remark on this film, Jonathan Lighter, in his review of *Apocalypse Now*, claims that this film "epitomize[s] the "Vietnam experience" as a vision of America foundering in Asia."³⁰ I agree with Lighter that this film is not only specifically about American's experience in Vietnam, but also tries to "create an archetypal, mythopoeic narrative applicable to every war."³¹ Lighter agrees with Baudrillard that the fantasy and spectacle produced by this film generates uncertainty and ambiguity in interpreting the war, but he does not agree that this film fails to represent the war in a reasonable way. Lighter takes such ambiguity as an inevitable consequence of a "problematic masterpiece" and calls the film "one of the bitterest and most elaborate satires ever filmed, an epic of American folly—political, military, cultural—made tangible and terrible through events in Southeast Asia."³²

It is quite obvious that Coppola goes much further than Cimino in narrating America's experiences in Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now* takes place on a fictional river in Vietnam, revealing the mysterious and eventful journey to the very heart of people's darkness and evilness. Lighter's analysis focuses on how this film "lampoons the crassness and blind destructiveness that he[Coppola] sees as the source of America's sins in Asia and as primary blots on the American

³⁰ Jonathan Lighter, "Apocalypse Now," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, no. 27(2015): 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³² *Ibid.*

character.”³³ In this film, American soldiers are charmed by the power of evil and destruction. Colonel Kurtz is the best product ever made by the war, that is, the war successfully transforms a member of the elite—a top student at West Point, a Ph.D. holder in Philosophy, and a model officer—into a bloodthirsty killer. Captain Willard is ordered to terminate the uncontrollable killer, but at the same time, he himself is deeply attracted to the mysterious power of killing and evil. The difference between them is that the former is already out of the control of the American military, and the latter is still under their control. It is just a matter of time before he evolves from being under control to being out of control. This might be considered one of the biggest satires of America’s logic in military training, that is, the American military has to kill the killers they make. Just as Kurtz says, “they call me an assassin. What do you call it, when the assassins accuse the assassin?”

Besides the military sin of murder, Lighter also summarizes another six “deadly” political sins the American government committed in Vietnam— “ignorance, excess, egoism, expediency, hypocrisy, and arrogance,” and he states that “each one of them [was] especially seductive in wartime.”³⁴ This film, like *The Deer Hunter*, is all about the horror of the Vietnam War; but *Apocalypse Now* is a carnival, and *The Deer Hunter* is an elegy. While *The Deer Hunter* mourns the loss of love and peace, *Apocalypse Now* seemingly celebrates destruction and slaughter. The keynote of the film is filled with paranoid and sick ravishment. Marguerite Valentine argues that the significance of this film lies in “its sense of a seemingly surreal attitude towards reality, although many of the events were factually based, the visual aesthetic is comprised of absurdity,

³³ Lighter, “*Apocalypse Now*,” 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

irony, an ambiguity of reality, and thus of time and space.”³⁵ This comment reminds us of a similar remark made by Karen and Charles Wood on Vonnegut’s novel’s *The Slaughterhouse-Five*: “he [Vonnegut] writes in a world beyond alienation, a world so far removed from that of James and Joyce, even of Faulkner and Hemingway, that any writer who hopes to penetrate its surface must, of necessity, approach it with a technique, even a craft, suited to this age and not the earlier one.”³⁶ In other words, both Vonnegut and Coppola use surrealism to create an effective aesthetic representation that exposes the absurdity of modern society and explores sophisticated existential questions.



Figure 3.7. “The photojournalist welcomes Willard to the compound.” *Apocalypse Now*. (left)
 Figure 3.8. “The photojournalist happily lights up the cigarette with a bottom-nude man hanging behind him.” *Apocalypse Now*. (right)

Moreover, German E. Vargas argues that this film mocks the widespread fervor of voyeurism in the American society.³⁷ All visual representations, to some extent, satisfy viewers’ voyeuristic desire. But this film is the first one to satirize the relationship between the public’s urgent demand for war films and the ambiguity of their attitudes toward the ongoing war. In the

³⁵ Valentine, “The Representation of Unconscious in *Apocalypse Now*,” 347.

³⁶ Karen and Charles Wood, “The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond,” in *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. John L. Somer and Jerome Klinkowitz (New York: Dell, 1973), 140.

³⁷ German E. Vargas, “Narrative Mode, Mixed Images, and Adaptation in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*,” *Atenea* 24, no. 2 (2004): 91-102.

early part of the film, Willard encounters a television crew passionately filming the battle scenes from the war. In Kurtz's compound, a photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) freely wanders around taking "interesting" pictures (see Figures 3.7 and 3.8). Vargas believes that Coppola's film could be understood as "a reaction or a critique of the fallacious and/or feverish coverage of the war on part of the media, which bordered on obscenity, but it may also very well be a function of Herr's involvement in the project."³⁸ It might be one of the biggest ironies that, on the one hand, the public expresses their strong opposition to the war; on the other hand, they are passionate for visual access to the war. *Apocalypse Now* is a good example. That's why Vietnam films are considered a significant part of the war itself.³⁹

Apocalypse Now is also the only film dealing with the topic of war evil from the perspective of a philosopher, though a fallacious one. Colonel Kurtz is a philosopher, whether or not he is really insane. From his confessions, he reveals the whole journey of his transformation, and rationalizes his act of killing:

I've seen horrors... horrors that you've seen. *But you have no right to call me a murderer. You have a right to kill me. You have a right to do that... but you have no right to judge me.* ... There they were in a pile. A pile of little arms. And I remember...I...I cried. ...these were not monsters. These were men...trained cadres. ... *You have to have men who are moral...and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts...to kill without feeling...without passion...without judgement...without judgement.* For it is judgement that defeats us.⁴⁰

³⁸ Vargas, "Narrative Mode," 97.

³⁹ Michael Anderegg states in his introduction to *Inventing Vietnam* that "the Vietnam War was itself a movie.... The sight and sound of Huey helicopters, the green of dense jungles, the helmets with plastic bottles taped to their sides, villagers in conical hats." (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 2.

⁴⁰ Emphasize added.

Kurtz compares his first act of killing with other skilled killers on his team and praises the training of Special Forces. He takes his fear of killing as cowardice, and feels ashamed of his weakness. He believes that killers are no different than ordinary human beings in the sense that they both have intimate social connections and are full of love and morality. But killers are stronger than non-killers in that they are capable of making a full play of their “primordial instincts” to conduct the act of mindless killing. Kurtz sees killing as one of the basic instincts of every human being. In other words, he believes that men are born to be killers; it is the after-birth fostering and molding which refrains them from following their instinct. This argument positing a “primordial instinct” of killing, to some extent, explains with fallacious logic why the war never ends, and human beings never stop killing throughout the whole history of human civilization. And it is judgement by the public that limits the infinity of killing. Kurtz categorizes himself as a moral killer because he is afraid of being judged by the society. Since it is clear that he is doomed to be criticized, he chooses to be terminated rather than be tried by the public. Just as Willard says to himself when he first meets Kurtz in the compound: “I feel like he was us there waiting for me to take the pain away...even the jungle wanted him dead, and that’s whom he took his orders from anyway.” In this respect, this film calls on the public to limit people’s acts of killing and decry government’s passion for launching wars.

3.1.3. *Platoon*

Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) is the only war film written and directed by a veteran so far, and it is also one of the biggest box office successes. Like *Apocalypse Now*, this film continues the topic of a philosophical discussion of war evil, but this time from the perspective of an ordinary soldier (also Stone’s autobiographical character) Chris Taylor. *Platoon* presents two contradictory

philosophies of war killing. One is represented by Staff Sergeant Robert Barnes, who is an example of Kurtz's "primordial instinct" practitioner, that is, one who kills without feelings. The other is represented by Sergeant Elias, who still believes in the humanity of every human being, no matter on which side he is on. Similar to the previous Vietnam films, this film avoids topics, such as the reasons for American involvement or the development of the war itself; *Platoon* only focuses on the direct and violent confrontation between Americans and the Vietnamese in one village and its surrounding jungle. To some extent, this film starts where *Apocalypse Now* ends; and it stimulates the discussion on the legitimacy of the so-called "primordial instinct" of the killers (see Figures 3.9 to 3.12).



Figure 3.9. "Airplanes carry the young soldiers in and the corpses out of Vietnam at the beginning of the film." *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone (1986; United States; Orion Pictures), DVD. (top left)

Figure 3.10. "Dead soldiers scatter over the giant crater at the end of the film." *Platoon*. (top right)

Figure 3.11. "Barnes threatens to kill a Vietnamese girl." *Platoon*. (bottom left)

Figure 3.12. "Barnes and Elias encounter alone in the forest, and Barnes gives Elias two shots." *Platoon*. (bottom right)

Different from the previous two films, which strikes analogies between war and the bloody game of Russian roulette (in *The Deer Hunter*) and slaughterhouse (in *Apocalypse Now*), *Platoon*

provides a depiction of bilateral confrontation, and both sides are described as victims of the battle (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10), which is quite different from the characterization of Americans in *The Deer Hunter*. Lawrence W. Lichty states that “[f]or the first time in a theatrical film about Vietnam is the “small war” fought by the ordinary grunt. ... *The Platoon*’s war is being fought not for ideology but for survival. They are draftees, living in fear, counting the days they are ‘short.’”⁴¹ Similarly, Albert Auster and Leonard Quart attribute the strength of this film to “its social realism—its feeling of verisimilitude for the discomfort, ants, heat, and mud—of the jungle and brush: the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release of base camp, the terror of ambushes, and the chaos and cacophony of night firefights.”⁴² As a matter of fact, *Platoon* is the first film to graphically depict the combat in Vietnam, even though it only focuses on the perspective of American soldiers.

Richard Corliss believes that *Platoon* “re-created the world back home, with its antagonisms of race, region and class.”⁴³ In other words, life among soldiers in Vietnam is no different from life in America, and both are split into halves, conflicts, confrontations, and contradictions. Oliver Gruner, in contrast, by comparing the differences between Stone’s original draft with the completed film, argues that *Platoon* curbs the aggressiveness of his statement about the war to cater to the public’s acceptance of the visual representation of the war. Instead, *Platoon* stimulates an open discussion on Vietnam by “capitaliz[ing] on shifting public debates on the

⁴¹ Lawrence W. Lichty, “Fragments of War: Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*,” in *Why in We Fought: America’s Wars in Film and History*, ed. Rollins Peter and O’Connor John (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 399.

⁴² Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 132.

⁴³ Corliss, “Cover Story,” 54.

Vietnam War as America moved into the 1980s.”⁴⁴ In a similar manner, Auster and Quart argue that the high-profile Vietnam films in the late 1970s, such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, “may indeed have contributed to something of a national catharsis, they had hardly met with unanimous acceptance as accurate reflections of the war.”⁴⁵ I agree with the above scholars that *Platoon* vividly exposes the divide between the Left and the Right concerning American involvement in Vietnam, which in turn, provides an exit for the mass public to express their confusions and concerns.

Nevertheless, *Platoon*, along with the previous two films about Vietnam, falls into the category of typical Vietnam War films, “helicopters, jungles, pot, central characters killed, emotionally stressful, hand-to-hand combat, no heroes, individuals, negative view of the military, grunts, no rules of war, more casualties, camaraderie, muddy-bloody, platoons, confused and chaotic, enemies (?)”⁴⁶ Hilbish also believes that Stone purposely mixes personal experiences with conventional literary themes in his film: “He creates characters (Barnes), changes key elements (the real Elias died in a freak jeep accident), and developed a composite drawn from the experiences of individuals in four different platoons to highlight the atrocities of the war.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, Gruner points out that the characterization of three protagonists in the completed film, Taylor, Elias, and Barnes, to some extent, are purposely softened and blurred to “avoid

⁴⁴ Oliver Gruner, “Vietnam and Beyond: Rethinking Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1976-2006),” *Rethinking History*, vol.16, no.3 (2012): 361.

⁴⁵ Auster and Quart, *How the War Was Remembered*, 84.

⁴⁶ Melissa Hilbish D., ““Isn’t It Just a Movie?”: Lessons Learned from Oliver Stone and “Platoon,”” *Reader* (1997): 50-1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

alienating certain, particularly conservative, audience demographics.”⁴⁸ Just as mentioned earlier, *Platoon* is expected to initiate a healing process rather than to re-open the scar of a lost war. That’s why “Elias’ countercultural sensibilities are conveyed solely through visual cues.”⁴⁹ Even if Barnes typically represents the ideals and values of conservatives in America during the 1980s, his death at the hand of Taylor makes vague the political references behind such characterization. Taylor’s killing of Barnes, however, is no different from the way that Barnes kills Elias. In this perspective, Stone defines the nature of war as a vicious cycle of killing without reasonable cause, and emphasizes that searching for the meaning of life is much more important than meaningless killing.⁵⁰

In addition, Tony Grajeda takes *Platoon* as an example to illustrate that “any notion of an original [representation] must be but a copy, already a series of codes and signs continuously reduplicating itself, where life is constructed by representations which are subsequently lived out as real.”⁵¹ That is to say, *Platoon*, on the one hand, presents a vivid depiction of Vietnam battles from the perspective of individual soldiers, which is the originality of the film. But on the other hand, the narrative structure of this film follows the traditions of American war films such as the good Americans vs. the bad/unknown enemies, the white middle-class young men as protagonists, and men’s initiation via war experience, and so on.⁵² Even though *Platoon* is qualified to be labeled

⁴⁸ Gruner, “Vietnam and Beyond,” 366.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁵⁰ Taylor’s voiceover at the end of the film: “But be that as it may, those of us that did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and *to try with what’s left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life.*” (Emphasize added)

⁵¹ Tony Grajeda, “The (Un)Reality of War: Reconsidering Stone’s *Platoon*,” *Disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 1 (1992): 40-57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 53.

an “anti-war” portrait, the intertextuality among reality (both the history and social-political milieu of the time), myth, and representation “paradoxically implicates it in a much more radical glamorization of war: one sophisticated enough to denounce its own antecedents while simultaneously extending the ideological functions of cinematic war itself, i.e. the maintenance of the values and relations which sustain the ‘good fight’ and the will to fight it.”⁵³ In a word, *Platoon*, to some extent, continues the myth of war.

3.1.4 *Born on the Fourth of July*



Figure 3.13. “Carefree Kovic sitting on the shoulder of his father on the Independence Day.” *Born on the Fourth of July*, directed by Oliver Stone (1989; United States; Universal Pictures), DVD. (top left)

Figure 3.14. “Young Kovic is excited by the speech given by the American military in his school.” *Born on the Fourth of July*. (top right)

Figure 3.15. “The desperate, wheel-bounded Kovic after the war.” *Born on the Fourth of July*. (bottom left)

Figure 3.16. “Kovic joins the Vietnam Veterans Against the War parade.” *Born on the Fourth of July*. (bottom right)

⁵³ Grajeda, “The (Un)Reality of War,” 41.

Three years later, Stone made another film about Vietnam—*Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), which is based on a war memoir written by Ron Kovic. This film was a huge box office success as well (\$160 million), and won two Oscars and eight Oscar nominations. The reasons to discuss Stone's second Vietnam film are two-fold. First, the home-coming is one of the most significant topics of war films and wasn't covered in the above discussion. Secondly, this film is the wrapping-up film of the 1980s healing process and also the last film of the second wave of the Vietnam films. In the following part, I intend to argue that *Born on the Fourth of July* fulfills its commitment in healing the wounds, and it presents a more realist depiction of Vietnam than *Platoon*.

In terms of narrative structure, *Born on the Fourth of July* only focuses on the transformation and trauma of one protagonist, Kovic, and chronicles his life experience from a passionate war volunteer to a passionate anti-war activist after the war paralyzes him, the military hospital humiliates him, and the patriots hate him (see Figures 3.13 to 3.16). Compared to all the films discussed above, this film is very complete and detailed; that is, it clarifies when, why, how, and under what circumstances Kovic got involved in the war. Don Kunz praises Stone's film adaptation of the memoir and believes that the film adaptation "constitutes a more profound and comprehensive attack on the authoritarian macho mentality that led us into Vietnam."⁵⁴ Linguistically, this film is full of four-letter-words, and the protagonist calls everything lies which he has been taught, especially about religion (God) and politics (the evilness of Communism and greatness of patriotism), and he claims that he has been lied in order to kill babies and women in

⁵⁴ Grajeda, "The (Un)Reality of War," 53.

Vietnam. What's more important is the casting of Tom Cruise which "guaranteed an audience for this iconoclastic theme and clarifies that theme by trading on Cruise's all-American-boy image"⁵⁵ (see Figure 3.14). Thus, *Born on the Fourth of July* narrows down the grand war narrative into a specific, representative individual experience: how an innocent boy grew up in a small communal American town, how he was educated to sacrifice for his country, how he is destroyed by Vietnam, and how he fights to regain of his dignity and place in society.

Notably, the tradition of home-coming war films can be traced back to the end of the Second World War. *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) tells the bitter-sweet stories of three veterans back from the war. The keynote of the film is loving and supportive. The first home-coming Vietnam film is *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), and it centers on a triangulated relationship between the pretty nurse (Jane Fonda), her deployed husband (Bruce Dern), and a paralyzed veteran (Jon Voight). *Coming Home* presents a very different picture of a veterans' hospital, in which not only veterans are well taken care of, but also pretty women are happy to volunteer to help. And the hospital ultimately turns out to be the setting for a reunion of high-school lovers. *Born on the Fourth of July* emphasizes the veteran's paralysis and castration. Wounded veterans in the previous home-coming films at least have been loved by someone; in *Born on the Fourth of July*, as drunk Kovic cries in front of his father at midnight: "no one is going to love me."

Among the three stages of the protagonist's life, carefree and passionate youth, deployment in Vietnam, and back home wheelchair-bounded, the film spends most of its time and depiction

⁵⁵ Don Kunz, in "Oliver Stone's Film Adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July*: Redefining Masculine Heroism," *War, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1990): 2.

on the last stage. In the last stage, the film constantly tears open the scars of paralysis and castration. First, we see how wounded veterans are treated inhumanely in the veterans' hospital, the worst medical care, poorly working medical devices, an unhygienic environment, and the unprofessionalism of the doctors. Kovic cries out in the film: "This is fucking like slay. I wanted to be treated like human being." Then this film opens up the issue of castration. The author Ron Kovic himself confessed in an interview that "we wanted people to see what disability was all about.... The loss of sexual function was one of the most painful and frustrating and difficult aspect of being wounded in the war."⁵⁶ Sexuality has always been a very important aspect of war, but just as Paul Fussell discusses in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), the extreme condition of war is more likely to generate "special hedonism and lasciviousness."⁵⁷ That's why, in all the books and films discussed so far, war has been constantly related to sexual abuses. Yet, few compare war with the castration of men. *Born on the Fourth of July* is the first one to describe war with a sexual trope—war castrates men, both literally and figuratively. In the film, Kovic pulls a long tube out of his pants and yells to his mother: "It's a fucking lie. There's no god, and there's no country. There's just me and the fucking wheelchair in the rest of my life, and this dead fucking penis." This scene reminds us of the invasion of a leech into a soldier's penis in *Matterhorn*. The fake penis is also badge signifying the very vulnerability of masculinity.

Born on the Fourth of July is more inclusive than most Vietnam films, including the ugliness of the war, the perceived hypocrisy of the government, the suffering of the veterans, and

⁵⁶ "Not a pretty picture; but it is winning awards and is a box office hit," *Accent on Living*, 34.4 (1990): 68+.

⁵⁷ Fussell, *Great War*, 270.

the conflicts between conservatives and liberals. To some extent, this film portrays both the veterans and the general public in negative terms. Veterans become more anti-war because of the way they are treated after the war. They are mistreated by military hospitals and misunderstood by their families and society. This film provides catharsis for veterans who yell out their anger and pain. And *Born on the Fourth of July* is also healing in the sense that American soldiers courageously confess their sins in the war. They not only killed Vietnamese men, women, and babies, but also their own fellow soldiers, as when Kovic confesses in tears and with great regrets in front of Wilson's family that he killed their son in Vietnam. Yet, *Born on the Fourth of July* is more positive than the previous films. In *Platoon*, men kill each other to resolve ideological conflicts; in *Born on the Fourth of July*, men protest to express their differences in ideology and politics.

3.2 Iraq War Films

Compared to the rich scholarship on films about Vietnam, scholarship on Iraq war films is quite meagre, even though both wars are widely considered unpopular. Two books have discussed Iraq war films produced between 2003 and 2008: Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* and Martin Barker's *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films*.⁵⁸ These two books share some parallels. First, both focus on the era of the Bush's administration. In other words, both books emphasize the connection between the aesthetic representation of war and the specific social and political background. Kellner describes

⁵⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Martin Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

Hollywood cinema as “a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era.”⁵⁹ Barker shares similar ideas, and he argues that “the issue of ‘failure’[of Iraq films] was clearly a complex discursive topic. For conservatives, a film doing badly was almost as good as a favorable public opinion. For liberals, it could be a ground for recommending the film precisely because it did not court popularity.”⁶⁰ Secondly, both books believe that the era of the Iraq War has taken place during a golden time for documentary films (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four); and comparably, feature films about Iraq are more conservative politically and ideologically.

Even though Iraq war films are considered box office poison, Barker tends to interpret this phenomenon from a different perspective. He challenges the conventional criteria of evaluating the success of a film based solely on box office revenues. Instead, he argues that in the era of the Internet, the distribution of films is different from the traditional way of marketing films, which has various routes and forms, such as online selling and buying. Besides the financial standard, the subjective interpretation and evaluation is complicated in many ways. First, as an unpopular war, both the public and the commentators were waiting for the films about Iraq to fail. Secondly, the public cannot help comparing films about this war with those about the Vietnam War, which are now widely considered “classics.” This comparison contributes to the public’s dissatisfaction with Hollywood’s representation of the Iraq War, which never seems to live up to the glorious horror of Vietnam. Thirdly, the public’s refusal to watch Iraq war films also reflects the “popular left arguments about the ‘political-military-industrial complex,’ which advocates selling wars to the

⁵⁹ Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, 2.

⁶⁰ Barker, *Toxic Genre*, 71.

American population as a form of entertainment.”⁶¹ From this respect, I think we should take diverse perspectives in interpreting Iraq war films as well as the public’s responses to the films.

Barker also challenges the classification of Iraq war films as a ‘toxic genre.’ He argues that the labelling of Iraq war films as a ‘toxic genre’ results from the “games associated with different players in the film business: producers, publicists, distributors, exhibitors, and (professional, citizen and academic) critics.”⁶² In other words, Iraq war films are controversial in nature, no matter how good or bad they are. The controversy over the war itself, combined with the accumulating tension between the different parties involved both in filmmaking and viewing, determines that films about Iraq will always invite conflicting interpretations. Consequently, Iraq war films are doomed to “struggle against the threat of controversy, and of being judged bad.”⁶³ What’s more, I believe there are two more factors contributing to the controversy over Iraq war films. First, Iraq war films tend to interpret Iraq in terms of *conspiracies*, not only of the American government, but also of the Iraqi terrorists and insurgents. Secondly, Iraq war films call for new heroism, which is represented by a responsible, competent, and moral grunt. In the following, I discuss two Iraq war films that were produced during the Bush’s era and two made during the Obama’s era to see how the representation of this ongoing war interacted with the changing social-political milieu of the time.

⁶¹ Barker, *Toxic Genre*, 71.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 132.

3.2.1 *In the Valley of Elah*

In the Valley of Elah (Paul Haggis, 2007) is a sad detective story about how a father, who is a Vietnam vet (Hank Deerfield), finds out the secrets about his son's sudden death at a military base after returning from Iraq. It turns out that his son was murdered by his fellow soldiers who suffered from PTSD. Though this film is based on a true event, the authenticity of the story does not prevent this film from falling into the list of the 'toxic genre' of Iraq war films, and Rotten Tomatoes gives it an average rating of 7/10.⁶⁴

In the first place, the film highlights the consequences of PTSD on young soldiers in the aftermath of war. Since the end of the First World War, PTSD has become one of the most important indicators of war literature and film. But in all the literature and films we have discussed so far, the major manifestations of PTSD are depression, suicidal inclination, domestic violence, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and difficulty in maintaining normal relationships. In a word, the damage is mainly restricted to the sufferer him/herself. However, *In the Valley of Elah* demonstrates the effect of PTSD in extreme, since the soldiers inflicted with PTSD even kill their fellow soldier in the most inhumane and brutal way. Barker argues that this film fails to attract an audience because the public is no longer interested in the topic of PTSD:

...the whole of America is sick with on-going PTSD. ...with the smell of science and promise of remedies, PTSD has come to function as a key metaphor for America inspecting itself within safe margins. ...it offers soldiers a self-justifying account of their situation. It 'explains' abuses as unintentional outbursts. It generates positive-smelling narratives. It helps make suffering 'American'. It provides a bridge across conservatives and liberals in America.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/in_the_valley_of_elah/ (accessed on August 7, 2018).

⁶⁵ Barker, *Toxic Genre*, 98-9.

However, no matter whether the public is interested in the topic or not, the emphasis on the consequences of PTSD has been and will always be one of the most significant unavoidable aspects of war literature and film, and it constitutes a weighty part of the anti-war narrative.

Similar to Barker, Norman L. Keltner argues that even though this film renders “this cruel murder and the sociopathic behaviors afterwards as a product of the war,” it was more like “propaganda and does a disservice to all the young men who have faced this trauma and come back to make the most of their lives.”⁶⁶ Besides, Keltner, compares the finished film with the original report of the story and concludes that the alteration made in the film weakens the credibility and legitimacy of the inhuman behavior of a group of young soldiers towards their fellow soldier. Keltner summarizes that there is no logical connection between PTSD and murder of a fellow soldier, and the film fails to convince the audience that the murder of Mike by his assailants was “a war-induced rage reaction.”⁶⁷ I agree that, overall, this film is quite “understated” compared to all the war films discussed so far. But it is not reasonable to take this film as a propaganda film for the possible side effects of PTSD or a failure to present the connection between the death of Mike and the inhumanity of his comrades. In fact, this film makes it clear that the fate of Mike replicates that of the Iraqi prisoner who is killed by Mike and his fellow soldiers in Iraq. The American military and government did not punish the soldiers for their abuse nor the murder in Iraq. Similarly, the American military and government try every means possible to cover up Mike’s death.

⁶⁶ Norman L. Keltner, “*In the Valley of Elah* Paul Haggis (Director),” *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, vol.44, no. 4 (2008): 300.

⁶⁷ Keltner, “*In the Valley of Elah*,” 299.

Contrary to Barker and Keltner, Thomas A. Horne distinguishes this film from other ignorable films by its very *low-key* and spectacle-free representation. According to Horne, Haggis makes a thoughtful war narrative by “brilliantly avoid[ing] producing an alluring spectacle of combat.”⁶⁸ Indeed, instead of entertaining the public with a representation of spectacular combat, this film is thought-provoking and myth-breaking. The title of the film refers to the mythic story in the Bible about the battle between the heroic David and monstrous Goliath. However, Horne suspects that the American public and soldiers are more likely to identify themselves with the former, and the enemies with the latter. Instead, the truth should be vice versa. In this sense, we may infer that Horne actually means that the Iraq War is analogous to the battle in the Valley of Elah described in the Bible, which is actually an unjust war of invasion. What’s more, this film counter-argues that war only teaches men how to kill instead of being an essential initiation into heroic masculinity: “instead of becoming a man, Mike became a torturer. Instead of becoming a man, he learned to abuse women and to abuse himself with alcohol and drugs.”⁶⁹ I agree with Horne that this film challenges the public and is a “great political film” that aims to “get under its audiences’ skin and force it to feel its own mistakes and change its self-understanding.”⁷⁰ Consequently, only those who can correctly identify themselves with the metaphor involved in the film, can they be horrified by it and be educated: “political films, like *In the Valley of Elah*, that are deeply emotional, can lead to viewers becoming informed as they try to make sense of the

⁶⁸ Thomas A. Horne, “Goliath *In the Valley of Elah*,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2011): 261.

⁶⁹ Horne, “Goliath *In the Valley of Elah*,” 260.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 261.

images and emotions the film produced.”⁷¹ Whose fault is it that audiences ignored and misunderstood this Iraq film? I agree with Horne that both the public and the filmmakers are to blame. Filmmakers are motivated to entertain the public by providing easy and exciting war films; and the public—likely overwhelmed by the onslaught of everyday bad news—are eager to entertain themselves with thought-free and challenge-free media products. A challenging film like *In the Valley of Elah*, which is not only a philosophical contemplation upon the nature of the controversial Iraq war, but also a satire on the passive consumerism in the American society, was a hard sell in the Bush era. Besides these difficulties, this film also reminds us of the American military’s notorious cover-up of My Lai and Abu Graib, which will be discussed in Chapter Four. In *In the Valley of Elah*, Mike’s death is covered up by the American military, and the investigation by Mike’s father is interfered with and hindered. The American government is portrayed as hypocritical bureaucracy. In other words, *In the Valley of Elah* is in no way as conservative as Barker, Kletner, and Alvah would have it. All in all, this film is quiet, heavy, and strongly anti-war and anti-propaganda.

3.2.2 *The Hurt Locker*

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) records the daily missions of a three-man squad—the U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit—with the invincible Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) leading Sergeant J.T. Sanborn and Specialist Owen Eldridge. The film, with a low budget (\$15 million), won six Oscars, including the first ever Academy Award for a female director. For Barker, this closes the cycle of the ‘toxic genre’ in four ways: “its timing (running

⁷¹ Horne, “Goliath *In the Valley of Elah*,” 263.

over the 2009 election); its ‘overcoming’ of PTSD by having James absorb it into his personality; its deletion of all Reality Guarantees; and when the film won the Oscars, in important senses it ceased to be an Iraq war film, being celebrated instead as: the first Oscar-winning Best Film by a woman director; an indie art film; and an anti-special effects accolade.”⁷² According to Barker, on the one hand, this film “does present bits of an ‘Iraq war experience’ (soldiers’ respectful public appearance coupled with wild barracks behavior);” on the other hand, this film is totally de-politicized: “what this film celebrates, is a character who is *the living embodiment of post-traumatic stress disorder*, but who is treated by the film as not disordered at all.”⁷³ However, Barker’s comments on this film are contradictory and extreme in nature.



Figure 3.17. “The word Baghdad occurs at the very beginning of the film.” *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (2008; United States, Summit Entertainment), DVD. (top left)

Figure 3.18. “A bomb disposal expert is killed by the explosion of the bomb.” *The Hurt Locker*. (top right)

Figure 3.19. “James at the center of a web of the bombs.” *The Hurt Locker*. (bottom left)

Figure 3.20. “A human bomb is going to explode after James fails to unlock the bombs all over his body.” *The Hurt Locker*. (bottom right)

⁷² Barker, *Toxic Genre*, 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 157.

Even though the film focuses only on the repetitive daily mission of bomb disposals by the three-soldier unit, disposal of IEDs constitutes one of the major commitments of the American soldiers in Iraq. Accordingly, this film is not totally de-politicized. From the very beginning, the film clearly states that the American soldiers are in Baghdad (see Figure 3.17). Actually, the director purposely chose Jordan, which is only miles away from Iraq, as the shooting location to better replicate the verisimilitudes of Baghdad in the film. Bigelow also hired Iraqi refugees to play the minor roles to better display the language, culture, and customs of the Iraqis even though they are generally depicted either as sneaky terrorists or indifferent onlookers. Since Barker admits that James is the living embodiment of PTSD, how could he be not disoriented at all after seeing the most horrible deaths and human bombs every day (see Figures 3. 18 to 3.20). Indeed, James is quite different from other soldiers inflicted with PTSD who usually resort to violence, alcohol, or drug abuse; instead, he chooses to keep renewing the deployment to keep under control all the pressures and traumas induced by the war. In this perspective, James represents a counterpart to those who killed Mike in *In the Valley of Elah*, emerging rather as an “adrenalin junkie” who is addicted to the dangers and risks of war.⁷⁴

Similar to Barker, many scholars tend to attribute the success of this film to the characterization of James as an idealized war hero. For example, Isabelle Freda states that “its idealized protagonist functioned as an effective personification of official American ideology: or, better, its (im)possible figuration within a coherent narrative.”⁷⁵ Freda points out that the film

⁷⁴ Barker, *Toxic Genre*, 157.

⁷⁵ Isabelle Freda, “Screening War: *American Sniper*, *Hurt Locker*, and Drone Vision,” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2016): 234.

offers spectators a “claustrophobic” view of the soldiers, which reinforces both the vulnerability and the masculine heroism of the soldiers.⁷⁶ In addition, Alex Vernon argues that this film is similar to Western films in plot structure and the characterization of the protagonist:

The Hurt Locker pays visual homage to the western—and thus to the historic crossover and interdependence of war films and westerns—with shots of empty vistas, the mise-en-scène detail of a Washington Redskins poster, a circle-the-wagons desert ambush by natives, whirling dust devils marking elapsed time, and the maverick protagonist’s striding toward a final confrontation down a dusty, deserted town street at high noon.⁷⁷

Vernon assumes that the public feels comfortable with this film since this film renders America’s invasion of Iraq as a “nostalgic and paternalistic salvation operation by technicians who prevent death, not warriors who dispense it.”⁷⁸ However, Freda and Vernon’s comments remind us of the comments made by Leonard Quart and Leo Cawley on *The Deer Hunter* that both films are compared as Western films, and both protagonists are considered heroes who risk themselves to push forward the Westward expansion.⁷⁹ In this sense, all Vietnam and Iraq war films could be compared to Western films since Vietnam and Iraq are exotic and unknown lands, and America’s intrusions are adventurous. Nevertheless, America’s invasion of Vietnam and its attack on Iraq are not equal to the Westward expansions in the nineteenth century. Therefore, to some extent, the above-mentioned comments on *The Deer Hunter* and *The Hurt Locker* reflect the typical ideology

⁷⁶ Freda, “Screening War,” 234.

⁷⁷ Alex Vernon, “Spectator-Citizen-Soldier: History, Genre, and Gender in *The Hurt Locker*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 63, no. 2 (2017): 378.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Leonard Quart, “*The Deer Hunter*: The Superman in Vietnam,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Leo Cawley, “The War About the War,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

of American exceptionalism. It is true that the backwardness of Vietnam and Iraq are in sharp contrast with the advancement of American technology and economy. However, in both films, neither Mike nor James literally saves anybody. Instead, both Mike and James try to save their lost selves, but in vain.

Bruce Bennett and Bulent Diken are more extreme than Barker, Freda, and Vernon, and they attribute the success of the film to its catering to the “prevailing cultural and political codes.”⁸⁰ They point out that the film is “totally silent on the most crucial aspect of the war against terror, its depoliticizing effects.”⁸¹ They argue that the film is neither a “war film” nor a “Iraq war film” in the sense that first, the film depicts no combat battles, but instead depicts “a drastically unequal conflict between the heavily militarized, technologically and economically superior US and scattered, fugitive snipers and bombers making improvised weapons with electrical wiring, batteries, and mobile phones.”⁸² However, all the above scholars take the standards of a traditional war to assess the representation of a totally different war therefore fail to see how the filmmakers challenged the conventional representation of war.

First of all, the Iraq War officially claims to be a fight against *terror*, which actually refers to a strong sense of fearfulness, rather than a national ideology. That is to say, the representation of Iraq, to some extent, is the representation of a sense of terror, which I believe films like *The Hurt Locker* succeed in conveying. In the 21st century, no one knows who the real enemies in the war are. Consequently, the IEDs and any suspicious objects are what American soldiers are

⁸⁰ Bruce Bennett and Bulent Diken, “*The Hurt Locker*: Cinematic Addiction, “Critique,” and the War on Terror,” *Cultural Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2011): 165.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 176.

literally fighting against. Secondly, after the beginning of the war, Iraq becomes formless thanks to bombing by the American and British allies. Therefore, it is not reasonable to argue that the film “does not represent Iraq as internal to our time and space.... Iraq as the ground zero of history...an a-political ‘formlessness.’”⁸³ In a word, *The Hurt Locker* in fact highlights the formlessness of Iraq, and this representation is political in essence because it is the key feature of the ongoing war.

Nevertheless, *The Hurt Locker* confirms the nihilism and democratic materialism of contemporary Americans.⁸⁴ Even though Bennett and Diken believe that James’ nihilism illustrates how current American democratic materialism is a “violent and warmongering ideology,” we may also take James’ recklessness and nihilism as his objection to America’s involvement in Iraq.⁸⁵ On the other hand, Bennett and Diken emphasize that the representation of “time-image” in which the audience is “locked into [an] “atonic” world in which time collapsed into a permanent present.”⁸⁶ In other words, this film creates a simulacrum of the state of constant terror as well as shows the responses of people towards it. In this sense, this film best attests to public’s status quo; that is, the society as a whole is shrouded in a pressing sense of terror.

3.2.3 Green Zone

Two years’ after the release of *The Hurt Locker*, Hollywood presented another high-budget film (\$100 million dollars) about the ongoing war—*Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass, 2010). This

⁸³ Bennett and Diken, “*The Hurt Locker*,” 168.

⁸⁴ Democratic materialism is a term coined by Alian Badiou in his *Logics of Words: Being and Event* (New York: Continuum, 2009). He argued that the axiom of contemporary conviction was “There are only bodies and languages” (Badiou, 34). By materialism, he referred to Michael Foucault’s “bio-politics,” or the materialism of life. By democratic, he referred to a “right to intervention” (legal, international, even military) against dictatorship and totalitarian.

⁸⁵ Bennett and Diken, “*The Hurt Locker*,” 180.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

film centers on the exposure of the lies about the WMDs in Iraq from the perspective of a U.S. Army Warrant Officer Roy Miller (Matt Damon) who is working on the search for WMDs. As the first Iraq war film released during the Obama administration, *Green Zone* is more anti-Bush administration than anti-Iraq. Like other Iraq war films we have discussed so far, this film concentrates on the conspiracy of the American government in the war. The director Greengrass defines this film as “a thriller about the hunt for WMDs.”⁸⁷ The film is also the first one to directly target the most controversial political aspect of the war. However, both the public and the film critics tend to describe the film as a good thriller rather than as an anti-war film. Even Greengrass himself declares that he wants this film to be a “big mainstream movie.”⁸⁸ Then does this mean that anti-war films are not mainstream movies? And why did both the public and critics tend to ignore the political implications of the film?

First of all, this film is based on Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006); however, few similarities could be found between the book and the film except that both are set in Iraq. Chris Hewitt and Kim Newman point out that “there is no Roy Miller in *Imperial Life*. No one-legged informants. No plot. Frankly, *Green Zone* bears as much relationship to Chandrasekaran’s book as Jack Slater’s *Hamlet* does to Shakespeare’s.”⁸⁹ Personally, I think there are more similarities between this film and Terry Anderson’s book *Bush’s Wars* even though there is also neither Miller nor one-legged informants in the book. *Bush’s Wars* argues that lies were

⁸⁷ Chris Hewitt and Kim Newman, “On-Set Special: On-Set “*Green Zone*”: In the Zone,” *Empire*, no. 248 (2010): 71.

⁸⁸ Chris Hewitt, “2009 Preview: 20 to Watch in 2009: “*Green Zone*,” *Empire*, no. 236 (2009): 79.

⁸⁹ Hewitt and Newman, “On-Set Special,” 71.

spun by the Bush administration to support the need for war, a critique which overlaps with the political statement of the film. From this perspective, we might infer why the public showed no interest in this film. First, the “truth” about the WMDs was not news anymore to the whole public. Secondly, conservative Republicans were reluctant to accept that Bush’s “preemptive strike” was based on lies about the existence of WMDs, and liberal Democrats understood that whether the existence of WMDs was a lie or not, it would not make a difference to a war that had already gone on for seven years.

Thirdly, Greengrass was famous for his *Bourne* series. He had already made two *Bourne* films before *Green Zone: The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007). In 2006, he made *United 93*. After producing *Green Zone* in 2010, he made another *Bourne* film – *Jason Bourne* (2016). The casting of Matt Damon in both the roles of Bourne and Roy Miller made many critics consider *Green Zone* as part of the Bourne series. Steven Peacock defines this film as one of “ferocious examples of what David Bordwell calls the ‘intensified continuity’ of modern American cinema: a hyper-charged spectacular and affective style of film-making adhering to formal paradigms of classical Hollywood narrative, yet playing out at a more intense rhythm and register.”⁹⁰ Anyway, Greengrass took the public’s rendering of this film as another Bourne film as a compliment: “Matt (Damon) and I share the same desire to make films that are high energy and have a lot of action, but are also intelligent, smart and contemporary. So, in that sense (‘Green Zone’) is like a ‘Bourne’ movie. It has that same sense of energy and hopefully the same

⁹⁰ Steven Peacock, “The Collaborative Film Work of Greengrass and Damon: A Stylistic State of Exception,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, vol. 9, no. 2-3 (2012): 147.

satisfaction from the audience's point of view."⁹¹ But I tend to interpret the constant comparison between *Green Zone* and other Bourne films as just a marketing strategy—and a failed one at that.

Nevertheless, this film is an open criticism of the American government's conspiracy in launching the unnecessary war. To some extent, *Green Zone* reflects the tension between the Right and the Left with the election of Democrat Barack Obama as the new president succeeding President Bush. The characterization of Roy Miller as the representative of justice and integrity, on the one hand, carries on the myth of hero in American mass culture; on the other hand, it stands for the core spirit of the Left.

3.2.4. *American Sniper*

The highest-grossing (\$547 million) war film ever, *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) is based on Chris Kyle's war memoir—*American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012). This film chronicles the major moments of the protagonist's life: his family and education in Texas, the failed romance which stimulated him to enlist in the Navy SEALs, his four deployments to Iraq after 9/11, his marriage with Taya Kyle, the births of his children, his homecoming, and finally, his accidental death at the hand of a veteran with PTSD. Kieran Keller comments that this film is a "heart-wrenching tale of a glorified war hero who recently died (which, in the film industry, is the perfect time for sniffing out a profitable martyr)."⁹² The casting of Bradley Cooper in the role of Kyle won unanimous praise from the public and the pundits: "Cooper imparts substance to a character type that movie audiences always adore: the principled, no-nonsense man of the West, who banter[s] easily with his buddies, addresses

⁹¹ Addie Morfoot, "Universal's 'Green' Team," *Daily Variety*, vol. 306, no. 41 (2010): 11.

⁹² Kieran Keller, "Review: *American Sniper*," *Human Prospect*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2014): 55.

women with wry gallantry and prevails in fights when he must.”⁹³ Kyle Smith addresses this film as “Apple Pie” and praises the director Eastwood as “the first director both inclined to salute the entire parade, including those still in uniform today, and skilled enough to summon the full force of Hollywood emotional imagery to provide a stricken but grateful nation a long-needed moment to pay respect to our troops and their sacrifices in Iraq.”⁹⁴

Similar to the grunt image of James in *The Hurt Locker*, Kyle is a “Legend” in the U.S. Navy with two hundred fifty-five kills in four tours. It is fictional that James kept an incredible record of successful and safe disposal of numerous bombs in his multiple tours, but it is true that Kyle had one hundred and eighty officially confirmed successful kills and more unconfirmed ones. In *The Hurt Locker*, James only fights against the bombs with no information about why and how the bombs are there and by whom. Kyle, on the other hand, visibly shoots people, men, women, adults, and children whom he believes to be the “bad guys/enemies.” Both James and Kyle have families and children, but James has a looser bond with his ex-wife and child than Kyle does with his wife. Both heroes have difficulty returning to the civilian life. James chooses to renew his deployment; Kyle chooses to rebuild his connection with the rest of society, and he becomes a celebrity. James continues the infinite war on terror; Kyle is killed by a psychologically disturbed vet from Iraq. *The Hurt Locker* interprets America’s presence in Iraq as an attack on terror; *American Sniper* presents American’s mission in Iraq as a life and death battle between good American soldiers and evil Iraqi terrorists.

⁹³ Stuart Klawans, “American Shooter,” *Nation*, vol. 300, no. 9 (2015): 35.

⁹⁴ Kyle Smith. “*American Sniper* as Apple Pie,” *Commentary*, vol.139. no. 3 (2015): 52.

I argue that *American Sniper* powerfully defended the mechanism of traditional Hollywood war film and perfectly fits the structure and framework of a Hollywood war film: a heroic, disciplined, skillful man vs. evil and sneaky enemies. The film also has a Hollywood ending with the defeat of the enemies. But the imaginary Hollywood construct turns out to be true in real life. After accepting constant negative comments from the public in the past decade, the American military finally created a genius sniper that the country could celebrate. The revelation of the life story of a real “hero” meets the expectation of all parties: the government, the military, Hollywood, conservatives, and even liberals could not dispute the story of “The Legend” since it is true. However, this film is not a duplicate of the hero’s life, and no film can be. The aesthetic representation of a historical event or figure is inseparably entwined with the complicated social-political milieu of the time of its representation. In *American Sniper*, the characterization of Kyle in the film is undoubtedly glorified to pacify the mass public after the unexpectedly tragic death of not just one hero, but the many soldiers who lost their lives in what the public perceived to be an unjust and unnecessary war.

Likewise, Deborah Cohler believes that the success of the film had a lot to do with Taya Kyle’s memoir and her active presence in public sphere, which legitimize the flaws of the protagonist and the aestheticization of war violence in the film. Cohler argues that “Taya Kyle’s importance in the oeuvre as a white, conservative military spouse and war widow illustrates how the longstanding trope of nationalist white womanhood becomes a key to the operations not only of home-front bio-political projects, but also of warfront necropolitics.”⁹⁵ The images of the couple

⁹⁵Deborah Cohler, “*American Sniper* and *American Wife*: Domestic Biopolitics at Necropolitical War,” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2017): 73.

in the film, memoir and mass media collectively attest to the “gendered American exceptionalism and xenophobic nationalism” that are the staples of American national ideology.⁹⁶

American Sniper depicts Iraq as an inhumane place and the Iraqis as “visibly primitive and sinister.”⁹⁷ Accordingly, America is a humane place and its people civilized and peaceful. In sum, the film defines the nature of the Iraq War as a conflict between good and evil, and tells the story in the most classical language of Hollywood. In my reading, *American Sniper* intends to pacify the bifurcated political stances toward the war. The film glorifies the image of American soldiers as well as their achievement in Iraq. Jean Baudrillard argues that even though America did not win in Vietnam, America did win a spectacular success in the cinematic representation of the war with films such as *Apocalypse Now*.⁹⁸ His analysis applies as well to the Iraq War and Iraq war films. In this sense, I believe that *American Sniper* is a healing film for a war-weary public. Perhaps its greatest achievement as a film is the way that *American Sniper* totally redefines the image of the American soldier in the past half century since the Vietnam War. Kyle represents everything that American society value in a soldier: healthy masculinity, competence, responsibility, and morality.

In conclusion, even though feature films about Vietnam and Iraq cannot be read alongside each other as readily as novels and memoirs (Chapter Two) or documentary films (Chapter Four) about the two wars, there are striking parallels between war films about Vietnam and Iraq. In general, films about Vietnam and Iraq can be divided into two large groups: one is based on real events or memoirs, such as *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *American Sniper*; the other

⁹⁶ Cohler, “*American Sniper* and *American Wife*,” 74.

⁹⁷ Keller, “Review: *American Sniper*,” 56.

⁹⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*.

based on stories created about Vietnam and Iraq, such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *The Hurt Locker*. Like most of war films, these also follow the tradition of classical Hollywood movies, and center around the life story of a heroic male protagonist. Most of these films only present an isolated picture of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars (except *Born on the Fourth of July*), and they purposely omit the larger social-political backgrounds of the wars. They also only take into account the perspective of the Americans, that is, they only tell one-side of the story about the wars; there is little to no coverage of the Vietnamese or Iraqis in these films, which instead tend to stereotype them as dangerous or undecipherable enemies. Accordingly, American core values and ideologies are presented as the golden standard in carrying out the discussions about the two wars. Last but not least, all the films are trying to make sense of the randomness and insanity of war, which, in turn, highlight the futility and insignificance of war.

CHAPTER 4

REPRESENTATIONS OF VIETNAM AND IRAQ IN DOCUMENTARIES

Scholars often begin the history of documentary filmmaking with Robert Flaherty's first film—*Nanook of the North* (1922). Throughout his illustrious career, Flaherty mainly shot those who lived close to nature in remote places. Accordingly, *Nanook* was considered “the beginning of the naturalistic school of cinematography.”¹ During the same period in Russia, Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov began to produce the “Kino-Pravda” documentaries, by which meant “film truth.”² The intention of Vertov's films was to “inform and indoctrinate Soviet audiences regarding the necessity for and the values and progress of the Revolution.”³ Vertov defined his films as “life as it is; life caught unawares.”⁴ Both the ethnographic films made by American and European filmmakers and the propaganda films by Russian filmmakers were sponsored either by corporations or by the governments. Moreover, these documentaries were didactic in nature to some extent. The Russian government used these indoctrination films to bolster the status quo in Russia, and Western countries benefited from ethnographic films that highlighted the “natural” superiority of Western countries over non-Western countries in terms of civilization and industrialization.

Theoretically, John Grierson, a Scottish filmmaker, stimulated by Flaherty's second film *Moana* (1926), laid out three principles of documentary-making in his most frequently mentioned

¹ Frances Patterson, “*Nanook of the North*,” *The New Republic* 31.401 (1922): 306.

² Betsy McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 30.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

article “First Principles of Documentary” that, (1) “documentary would photograph the living scene and living story;” (2) “the original (or native) actor, the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world;” and (3) “the materials and the stories taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article.”⁵ Besides these three principles, Grierson also defined documentary-making as an “creative treatment of actuality.”⁶ Moreover, Grierson took documentary film as “an agent of civic education capable of explaining and promoting the essentially harmonious and consensual nature of society to its citizens.”⁷ What’s more, Grierson defines documentary films as a unique category of non-fiction film, in which “the carefully selected raw materials, or edited footage, is creatively or ‘artfully’ edited or ‘interpreted’ to reveal truth which would otherwise evade the camera.”⁸ Nevertheless, from Grierson’s definition of documentary film, we can infer that from the very beginning, a documentary film was not expected to present “reality” as it is since the so-called truth in film is hard to define. Siegfried Kracauer, of the post-war Frankfurt school, argues that “reality does not ontologically precede the medium (cinema); rather, the medium is constituted by certain parts of reality.”⁹ That is to say, reality, to some extent, is defined by the medium through which it is represented. Similarly, feminist postcolonial scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha believes that “reality runs

⁵ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” *Grierson on Documentary* (1947), 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷ Keith Beattie, *Documentary Screens: Non-Fiction Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 56.

away, reality denies reality;” therefore, we must recreate reality in other forms.¹⁰ Though they were writing decades apart, Kracauer and Minh-ha both emphasize the importance of the film medium in presenting the “reality.” As has been noted, the “creative treatment” of reality in documentary filmmaking reflects that, first of all, a documentary film is a matter of art. Secondly, a documentary film is a *selected* revelation and interpretation of reality rather than truth itself.

Even though Grierson only produced one film in his whole career, his theory of filmmaking influenced not only filmmaking in Britain, but also in America, Canada, even Europe from the 1920s throughout the 1960s. Documentary filmmaking in English-speaking countries from the 1920s to the 1960s, to some extent, could be considered more or less part of the Griersonian tradition. On the one hand, the filmmakers emphasized the documentary quality of filmmaking, which was, to creatively or artfully construct a story from raw or natural materials. On the other hand, documentaries were fully exploited to express nationalism and mainstream political statements in each society because documentary filmmaking during this period was all corporate or government sponsored. In other words, documentaries were realist *and* propagandistic:

In many ways, Grierson helped to forge the field of documentary as it came to be understood in the postwar world as a technique of citizenship by helping to envision and then justify its institutionalization.... Documentary, devised as a technology for modernization, was presented into service for nation-building, for bolstering a mediated public sphere and for conveying in a more compelling and immediate manner the problems and concerns of ordinary people as they related to state projects.¹¹

To be more exact, Grierson compared documentary filmmakers as “medicine men hired to mastermind,” and he believed that “the ‘manipulation’ in our films combines aesthetics with ideas

¹⁰ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October*, vol. 52 (Spring 1990): 88.

¹¹ Zoe Druick and Deane Williams, *The Grierson Effect: Tracing Documentary’s International Movement* (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

of democratic reform.”¹² Following Grierson, we might say that filmmakers who make documentary films about Vietnam and Iraq are “medicine men” who diagnose the diseases of the American society in hopes of promoting democratic reform.

In the previous chapter, I argued that both the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars have been fictionalized by mainstream Hollywood movie-makers to reflect on America’s presence in the two controversial wars. As the most influential social agent, fictional war films act as an intermediary between war and the public. On the one hand, these fictional war films reveal the atrocities of war on both sides of the invaders and the invaded. On the other hand, they glorify and depict the heroism of American soldiers in the two wars. The history of Vietnam and Iraq war films demonstrates shared goals, echoing the public’s anti-war fever, finding national peace with the war, and looking for healing after traumatic losses. The voice of the Hollywood war films might be the dominant one in the public sphere. However, the voice of independent documentary films is also important and usually quite different. To better contrast war documentaries with fictional war films, this dissertation only focuses on documentary films made by American independent film-makers. We exclude documentaries produced by filmmakers from other countries, the propaganda documentaries made by the Office of War Information or the Department of Defense, and the newsreels made by American television stations. My claim is that documentary films about Vietnam and Iraq are manifestos of the American New Left in the sense that they make the most straightforward and strongest arguments against war, injustice, immorality, and the perceived hypocrisy of the government.

¹² Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74.

Between 1963 to 1967, the Vietnam War had been covered and reported by three major American television stations—ABC, CBC and NBC, which produced more than one thousand and two hundred programs on the war.¹³ However, these programs more or less presented the war “from this optimistic point of view and supported the American government.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, such optimism was challenged by what happened in the year of 1968.¹⁵ The Tet Offensive on January 31, though a military failure of North Vietnamese, was “a decisive communist victory on the political front: it turned the American public irrevocably against the war.”¹⁶ CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, after visiting Hue after the Tet Offensive, made a famous speech in his news report that “the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.”¹⁷ Following the Tet Offensive were numerous bloody military operations and battles which usually lasted for months with heavy casualties on both sides. Amidst this social and political context, Eugene S. Jones made *A Face of War* (1968). Months later, Emile de Antonio released another influential

¹³ The Library of Congress offers a list of television documentaries produced by these three major American television stations, collections of television documentaries made by French, Australian, Japanese, British, and other countries, and an uncomplete list of documentaries films made by American filmmakers: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/findaid/vietnam.html#list>. (assessed on Aug. 3, 2018).

¹⁴ Ahmad Alasti, “*The American Documentary Films of the Vietnam War*” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dalls, 1992), 45. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304039958).

¹⁵ Mark Bowden, *Huế 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017).

¹⁶ George Hofmann, “Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam,” *Naval War College Review*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2018): 170.

¹⁷ “Who, What, When, Where, Why: Report from Vietnam by Walter Cronkite,” *CBS Evening News*, February 27, 1968. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106775685>

documentary film—*In the Year of the Pig* (1968). Both films emphasize that America cannot win the war in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the late 1960s and early 1970s also witnessed the speedy development of new film technology and equipment—16mm shoulder-mounted cameras, noiseless portable reflex, silent reflex, the French Angenieux 12 to 120mm zoom lens, Eastman Kodak 16mm color negatives, which made possible new forms of cinema in the U.S. and Europe.¹⁸ In the 50s, 60s and 70s, Direct Cinema in the U.S. and cinéma vérité in Europe focused on the daily experiences of the individual, and attempted to minimize subjective intervention to maximize the objectivity of the recording. These two movements have similarities because, above all these, they are the products of the development of modern film technology and equipment. New technologies narrowed down the distance between camera and subjects, which in turn, revealed a more intimate aspect of the subjects and the culture in which they exist. Secondly, both Direct Cinema and cinéma vérité are called “writing with the camera.”¹⁹ With different terminologies and methodologies, they both aim at looking for “reality of life...truth in people hidden under the superficial conventions of daily living.”²⁰ The differences between these two are: “the Direct Cinema artist aspired to invisibility; ... Cinéma Vérité artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of the involved bystander; the Cinéma Vérité artist espoused that of provocateur. Direct Cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. Cinéma Vérité was

¹⁸ Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface.”²¹ In the following section, I will argue that cinéma vérité documentaries are less ambiguous in their political implications than Direct Cinema documentaries.

For example, in 1970, CBS produced a direct cinema documentary called *The World of Charlie Company*, which, to some extent, is similar to *A Face of War*. Both films record how American soldiers are fighting and suffering in the jungles of South Vietnam. Joseph Strick exposes the truth about the My Lai Massacre in his cinéma vérité documentary *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1970). *F.T.A.* (1972), directed by Francine Parker, is a direct cinema recording of a group of performers and artists who conducted their satirical dramas at coffeehouses and parks near American military bases in Vietnam. In the same year, twenty filmmakers coordinated with Vietnam Veterans Against the War to document testimony in *Winter Soldier* (1972) by thirty veterans who either committed or witnessed atrocities in their deployment in Vietnam. In 1974, Peter Davis made one of the most open anti-war statement in *Hearts and Minds*, that is, America’s war in Vietnam did hurt, rather than win over, the hearts and minds of both Vietnamese and Americans. In 1979, Glenn Silber recorded the anti-war movement in Madison, Wisconsin in a cinéma vérité documentary titled *The War at Home*. More cinéma vérité documentary films than Direct Cinema films were made between the late 60s and the whole 70s, which are clearly political and anti-war. These films constitute an anti-mainstream narration of the Vietnam War

From the 1980s on, the fever of the anti-war movement was strategically suppressed with the establishment of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.; consequently, the

²¹ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 255.

public and mass media were initiating a collective healing process. Similarly, both feature films and documentary films focused on the suffering of the veterans. For example, in *Dear America: Letter Home from Vietnam* (Bill Couturie, 1987) a group of Hollywood actors read aloud letters written by American soldiers back in Vietnam, and the reading is accompanied by archival footage and captions. The whole film is filled with a strong sense of fear and suffering from the perspective of the American soldiers. Tilly Heald believes that this film is a “complex, abundant text that brings to light a number of important issues relating to the experiences of young men in war, and which aims to do justice to the memory of the soldiers who served; each and every one in that statistical total.”²² In general, documentary films about Vietnam made during and after the 1980s, to some extent, fall into the category of healing films.

The latest documentary about Vietnam, *The Vietnam War* (Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, 2017), is an eighteen-hour, ten-part documentary on Vietnam. This film discusses Vietnam from three different perspectives: those of the Americans, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese. The director Lynn Novick states that this film aims to “shed new light on the war by looking at it from the bottom up, the top down and from all sides.... Within this almost incomprehensibly destructive event, we discovered profound, universal human truths, as well as uncanny resonances with recent events.”²³ But some veterans complain that this long documentary series only focus on “leftist anti-war protesters and soldiers who came to oppose the war,” and intentionally omits the

²² Tilly Heald, “*Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*,” *Screen Education*, no. 36 (2004): 118.

²³ Adrian Gomez, “10-part Ken Burns documentary looks back on divisive Vietnam War,” *Albuquerque Journal* (NM), September 17, 2017. <https://www.abqjournal.com/1064500/10part-ken-burns-documentary-looks-back-on-divisive-vietnam-war.html>

voices of the veterans of the South Vietnamese military who “saw humanitarian treatment of the enemy.”²⁴ Nevertheless, as the latest and the most inclusive documentary so far, it presents a holistic scenario of the Vietnam War from a wide range of perspectives: politicians, veterans, Americans, Vietnamese, men, women (which are absent in the former representations), witnesses, and victims (especially the famous “napalm girl”). This film also likely reminds us of what’s going on in Iraq in the sense that the main argument is centered on how the politicians and decision makers lie to the public about a bad war.

The Iraq War has also been called the “YouTube War” because tons of videos shot by soldiers in Iraq are posting on YouTube every day. The public is literally watching the ongoing war. In Chapter Two, we read Colby Buzzell’s memoir *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005), from which we knew that nowadays soldiers are equipped with smart phones, laptops, and digital cameras. They are allowed to take pictures, make videos, and post them online. The era of the Iraq War is also called the “Golden Age of Documentary” thanks to more accessible and cheaper digital cameras, computers, Internet, video-maker/editor software; that is to say, the budget of filmmaking has been reduced by taking the advantage of modern technologies.²⁵ On the other hand, the production and distribution has been greatly revolutionized, and e-commerce/business becomes the dominant channel for selling.²⁶ Documentaries can be purchased online via Amazon, Netflix, various websites, and they can be rented at a cheap price from DVD rental stores. The low budget combined with more profit stimulates the development of documentary making. From this

²⁴ Gomez, “10-part Ken Burns documentary.”

²⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

perspective, I agree with Martin Barker that the twenty-first century is a “‘democratized culture’ and a ‘consumer paradise’ of abundance” in which there are no absolute film failures because each one has the “potential to find its niche, and diminished costs... coupled with the rise of ‘producerism.’”²⁷

Moreover, Pat Aufderheide argues that documentaries concerning the Iraq War are “active interventions in public life, ... fit squarely into a core expectation about documentaries: that they will be about something timely and important.”²⁸ Aufderheide takes the Pew survey as an example to illustrate the close connection between documentary making and the construct of public’s social and political conception of the status quo.²⁹ Aufderheide categorizes Iraq documentaries into three types: Why-We-Are-in-Iraq Docs, which provide “explanations of “why we are in Iraq” if there were no weapons of mass destruction and there never were;” Grunt Docs, which chronicle “the actual experience of combat” and Learning-from-Iraq Docs, which show “the daily lives of Iraqis.”³⁰ However, such categorization is limited to either Iraq documentaries or the documentaries about the two wars in general. For example, such classification does not include the topic of war scandals, such as the Abu Ghraid scandal in Iraq. Besides, the topic of letters written during the war can be addressed separately.

This chapter first pairs *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968) with *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, US, 2004) to see how the directors anatomize the America’s involvements

²⁷ Martin Barker, ‘*Toxic Genre*,’ 72.

²⁸ Pat Aufderheide, “Your Country, My Country: How Films About the Iraq War Construct Publics,” *Framework*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007): 56.

²⁹ In Aufderheide’s article, one Pew survey reported that “31% of American adults said that they had seen a political documentary relating to the campaign or the candidates.” (56)

³⁰ Aufderheide, “Your Country, My Country,” 57.

in the two controversial wars. Next, it discusses how *A Face of War* (Eugene Jones, 1968) and *The War Tapes* (Deborah Scanton, 2006) manifest the humanity and plights of American soldiers in Vietnam and Iraq. Then, it analyzes how director Bill Couturie observed and presented the experiences of American soldiers in two different wars with his *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987) and *Last Letters Home: Voices of American Troops from the Battlefields of Iraq* (2004). Lastly, it includes *American Experience: My Lai* (Barak Goodman, 2010) and *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007) to investigate two notorious scandals of the wars. I exclude the topic of learning-from-Vietnam/Iraq for two reasons. First, most documentaries from the perspectives of Vietnamese/Iraqis are made by non-American filmmakers (for example, *We Iraqis* (Abbas Fahdel, 2004)), and the consensus on such films is the victimization of the Vietnamese and the Iraqis during the war. Secondly, very few documentaries focus only on the perspective of Vietnamese in the war, but many Iraq documentaries have been made by independent filmmakers from Iraq, Iran, France, Britain, and other countries. Since this dissertation focuses on the perspective of Americans in making and interpreting the war films, such a topic may be saved for future research.

The analysis of the selected films in this chapter will center on questions like these: What are the social-political contexts in which the documentary films were produced? To what extent, are the documentaries in accordance with the mainstream narrative of the war? And to what extent do they challenge the public's understanding of the war? Are war documentaries similar to or different from the corresponding war feature films?

4.1 *In the Year of the Pig* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*

As we discussed earlier, the year of 1968 in Vietnam redefined the nature of America's presence in Vietnam as well as the outcome of the confrontation. The battle of Tet Offensive and the fierce battles that followed destroyed all the previously made optimistic political statements and predictions. With this social and political background, American filmmaker, Emile de Antonio made *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), the first documentary about the hotly disputed war. This unique documentary is a compilation film that gathers together many valuable archival records, news footage, and interviews with politicians, scholars and journalists and adheres to Marxist ideas about the intellectual value of montage. This film was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1969. Decades later, in the second year of the Iraq War, Michael Moore released his documentary about the Iraq war, called *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which exposes the lies made by then President George W. Bush to justify American involvement in the war. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the most successful and highest grossing documentary so far, and it was awarded the Palme d'Or at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. Moore's film employs the filmmaker's famous participatory techniques and also includes archival and news footage, interviews with politicians, soldiers, soldiers' families, and the ordinary publics.

Both films borrow from other media to argue against the mainstream political understandings about the wars. In other words, the films are not only anti-war, but also anti-mainstream-media and question the credibility of the media coverage of the wars. Even so, the two

directors formulate their counter-arguments quite differently. Both directors use montage to express their political ideas in films, but in different ways.³¹



Figure 4.1. “The statue of a Confederate soldier at the very beginning of the film,” *In the Year of the Pig*, directed by Emile de Antonio (1960; United States, Kanopy Streaming, 2015), DVD. (left) Figure 4.2. “One American soldier got wounded and carried by the other two soldiers at the end of the film,” *In the Year of the Pig*. (right)

De Antonio, a World War II veteran, radical painter, and “Marxist,” defines the nature of the Vietnam War as a civil war (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).³² He takes advantage of montage to compare and contrast, first, whether America’s involvement is different from French colonization. Kellner defines the way de Antonio uses the technique of montage to make political statement as “aesthetic-political strategies.”³³ The film shows no fundamental differences between the two parties, only that America is more arrogant in assuming that it is the Giant and Superman of the world. The montage also contrasts what the American government said and did in Vietnam. American officials declared that they only aimed at military targets, but in fact, the majority of

³¹ Montage is a popular technique in political documentary-making since the start of cold war. For instance, the Cambodian French filmmaker – Rithy Panh, is a master of montage user in political documentary films. Panh believes that montage is a “politics” and a “morality” unto itself (Deirdre Boyle, “*Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*,” *Video Recording Review*, vol. 39 (2013)).

³² Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, 134.

³³ Ibid.

casualties were innocent civilians, especially women and children. Moreover, de Antonio uses montage to satirize how Americans, in the beginning of the war, defined themselves as peace-makers who willingly sacrificed themselves for the enslaved North Vietnamese, whereas in reality, they were just cruel killers. In this film, de Antonio makes a very serious and satirical argument against American's intervention in Vietnam.

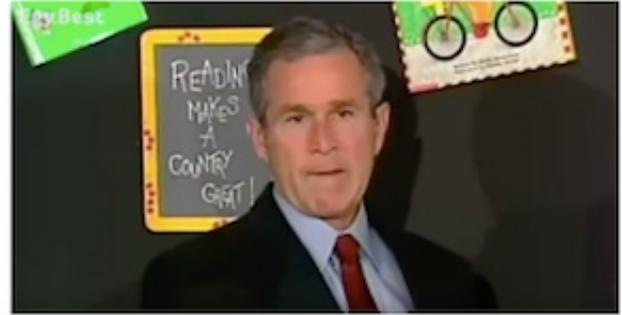


Figure 4.3. “President Bush is holding a book in a classroom with the teacher and the students after hearing the first attack on the World Trade Center,” *Fahrenheit 9/11*, directed by Michael Moore (2004; United States, Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment), DVD. (left)

Figure 4.4. “A close-up of President Bush after he was informed of the second attack,” *Fahrenheit 9/11*. (right)

Moore also employs montage strategies in his political documentary, but he creates a “unique documentary style” that takes his own voice as the ubiquitous and omniscient narrator, or the Voice of God, which is not common in contemporary documentary.³⁴ Among the films in this chapter, *9/11* is the first and the only political documentary in which the director himself dominates and occupies a great part of the film. Moore, like de Antonio, uses montage to utter his counter-mainstream statement. In this case, he is anti-Bush/War, but he coordinates montage with dramatization; that is, he uses special effects, such as still picture of certain motion at certain

³⁴ Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, 134.

moment, to mock the body languages of President Bush and members of his administration (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4). He even turns some public declarations into songs. Moore not only directly refutes the political statements pronounced by the government and the media, but he also ridicules President Bush and his team. He literally presents Bush as an incompetent president who cares only about photo opportunities and his family business. Unlike de Antonio's serious film, Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* is funny and entertaining.



Figure 4.5. “Moore walking with a veteran.” *Fahrenheit 9/11*. (left)

Figure 4.6. “Moore trying to talk to a Senator.” *Fahrenheit 9/11*. (right)

Thematically, *In the Year of the Pig* centers around two questions about the war: why the Americans are in Vietnam, and whether it is right to be there. To answer these questions, de Antonio looks back into the colonization history of Vietnam by Japanese and French, and compares it with America's intervention. The logic of the whole film is very clear and straightforward. That is, on the one side, the American government believes that their involvement in Vietnam is both military and politically necessary, and it is absolutely right and would be undoubtedly successful. On the other side, a group of scholars, journalists, and writers argue that in the eyes of Vietnamese, America's intervention in Vietnam is no different from all foreign invasions in their history, and it is colonization. That's why the Vietnamese hate the Americans in Vietnam, and Americans could not win the war because the Vietnamese would do anything they

could to fight the invaders. However, *Fahrenheit 9/11* does not raise any questions about the ongoing war, but makes a strong statement against the president, the American election system, the injustice of law, the unfairness of treatment received by African Americans in the society, and the conspiracy between politics and business (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6).

While *In the Year of the Pig* targets the irrationality of America's involvement in Vietnam's civil war, *Fahrenheit 9/11* points to the perceived hypocrisy of then President Bush and his administration. The former emphasizes that it did not make sense for the Americans to step into the conflicts between the North and South Vietnamese; the latter lays bare the fact that the Bush administration lied about everything concerning 9/11, and that the Iraq War was a mistake thanks to Bush's personal ambition and conspiracy with his administration. Even though we are sure that de Antonio is within the film, at least he holds back his personal declaration in the film. On the contrary, Moore is actively participating in interviews in the film, and he openly questions why the senators would not send their own sons to Iraq. *In the Year of the Pig* still interprets the war as a difference between two different ideologies—capitalism vs. communism/nationalism; *Fahrenheit 9/11* renders the war as a divide between the upper class and the working class. For much of the film, *In the Year of the Pig* gives each of the two contradictory parties a chance to defend themselves. When the American government declares that the Americans have come to Vietnam to help and liberate, the interviews with the scholars and journalists clearly state that “this war is not working,” communism is what Vietnamese want, and Vietnam is not the business of America. Only in the last ten minutes of the film, the director openly shows his preference for the argument held by the activists. The film displays how efficient and determined the North Vietnamese are in fighting against the American military. The film ends with a scene of a group

of American soldiers, who are injured and getting out. And this is how the film and de Antonio predict the ultimate outcome of the war.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore controls the whole argument, and he greatly silences President Bush and his administration. Whenever he gives voices to them, either they say something arrogant or stupid. Moore himself creates and narrates the monologues on behalf of President Bush and his team. This film can be considered a representative of the “New Documentary,” created since the 1990s, which features a combination of techniques from both feature film and documentary film.³⁵ Bill Nichols believes that the demarcation between fiction film and documentary is blurred.³⁶ In a similar manner, Errol Morris argues that “there is no reason why documentaries can’t be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn’t guaranteed by style or expression. It isn’t guaranteed by anything.”³⁷ Therefore, we can see that filmic methods can no longer distinguish the documentary film from the fictional film. What distinguishes these two genres is their different commitments in filmmaking. Documentary films are capable of generating a feeling of tension between the film and the world. They convey a sense of un-balance and inequality. In this respect, I do not think that documentary films narrow down the gap between the differences. Instead, they highlight the differences. Accordingly, documentary films act as a counter-argument to the mainstream statement of society.

³⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁶ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³⁷ Errol Morris, “Truth Not Guaranteed: An Interview with Errol Morris,” *Cineaste*, vol. 17 (1989): 17.

Then can Moore really control the voice of the film? In other words, does the omniscient narration of the director overwhelmingly bury the voices of others? Moore's own voice in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is indeed loud in the sense that he states his anti-Bush/Republican argument directly and visibly. He comes face to face with the government officials questioning their credentials and motives in launching the war in Iraq. But the audience does not take for granted whatever Moore says because each documentary has its own independent "voice." In "The Voice of Documentary," Nichols defines "voice" as "a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us.... Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary."³⁸ The question of 'voice' in the documentary, in essence, projects both the filmmaker's commitment in filming and viewer's expectation in watching.

Furthermore, Jay Ruby argues that, as a byproduct of social science, "documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to *not* be objective."³⁹ Documentary filmmakers share the same responsibilities as social scientists in the way that they read and interpret the world, and they reflect on themselves while studying others and the world. Besides the voice of the filmmakers, Nichols believes that the film has its own independence and its own voice:

The film operates as an autonomous whole, as we do. It is greater than its parts and orchestrates them: (1) the recruited voices, the recruited sounds and images; (2) the textual "voice" spoken by the style of the film as a whole (how its multiplicity of codes, including those pertaining to recruited voices are orchestrated into a singular, controlling pattern);

³⁸ Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3(1983): 18.

³⁹ Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film", in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 45.

and (3) the surrounding historical context, including the viewing event itself, which the textual voice cannot successfully rise above or fully control.⁴⁰

The film's own consciousness reflects on the voice of personal consciousness—of the filmmaker, the subjects involved, but at the same time, it puts all the voices in doubt, and examines the validity of each voice. This is why as the most financially successful documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is also one of the most controversial documentaries. When Moore doubts the credibility of the Bush administration, the audience also doubts the credibility of the director as well as his own motives in the film.

Pol Capdevila classifies documentaries into objectifying and realist documentaries: the former uses “the language of classical cinema, ... to deconstruct previous versions disseminated by realist documentaries and put forward positivist arguments for a new reading of events. They thus present themselves as an epistemological tool informed by scientific rationality;” the latter “adopts the perspective of an observer—the observer's singular position in relation to the object—and may even reproduce the imperfections, arbitrariness and contingencies that can intrude upon an observer's subjective perception of a particular phenomenon.”⁴¹ In this sense, *In the Year of the Pig* may be considered as an uneven combination of objectifying (more) and realist (less) documentary, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* a realist one. In one word, comparatively, the latter is more subjective than the former.

The analysis of the two films also reminds us of the connection/resonance between the two films and two pieces of literary work, which were all published after the release of the films. *In*

⁴⁰ Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” 27.

⁴¹Pol Capdevila, “The Objectifying Documentary: Realism, Aesthetics and Temporality,” *Communication and Society*, (2015): 68-69.

the Year of the Pig is similar to Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (1972), and *Fahrenheit 9/11* is similar to Terry H. Anderson's *Bush's Wars* (2011).⁴² De Antonio and FitzGerald are more pro-Communism in the sense that they both present the Vietnamese in a more positive way than what had been presented in the public media. They make similar analysis of America's involvement in Vietnam by taking the historical survey of the event, and they make a similar prediction about the outcome of the war. Moore and Anderson are typical left-wing Democrats, and they don't trust President Bush or the Republicans. They are also populists who see the government in opposition to the people. Just as Moore himself says at the end of the film: "war is not meant to be won, but be continuous. A hierarchical society is only possible based on poverty and ignorance. ... the war effort is to keep the society on the brink of starvation waged by the ruling class over its own subjects. The object is not to win in East Asia, but to keep the structure of society intact." In other words, Moore is more ambitious than de Antonio in that he wants to extend the subject of the Iraq War to war in general in a philosophical way. However, the expanding of the topic, to some extent, compromises his critique of this ongoing war.

4.2 *A Face of War and The War Tapes*

In 1966, one year after the American military officially entered the war in Vietnam, director Eugene S. Jones and another two photographers J. Baxter Peters and Christopher Sargent arrived, and spent ninety-seven days with Mike Company, 3rd Battalion of the 7th Marine Regiment. In May of 1968, a documentary recording the everyday life of the Marines was finally released—*A*

⁴² These two books have been discussed in Chapter Three.

Face of War (1968). This film was the first and only documentary film recording the real battlefield in Vietnam and representing the war from the perspective of the American soldiers. The second day after its release, *The New York Times* praised the film as “one of the most authentic, intimate and remarkable war records ever put on film.”⁴³

Mike Moriarty, Zack Bazzi, and Steven Pink were three soldiers from the New Hampshire National Guard. They took more than eight-hundred-hours of footage between 2004 to 2005 in Iraq with MiniDV cameras. Meanwhile, the filmmakers Deborah Scranton, Robert May, and Steve James shot more than two hundred hours of footage of the soldiers’ families back in America. Later on, three filmmakers spent more than a year editing this thousand-hour long footage into a ninety-seven-minute film—*The War Tapes* in 2006. This film has been widely reviewed as the first true film shot by the soldiers about their real experiences in Iraq.

Both films are considered the first documentaries about the real experiences of Americans in the respective Vietnam and Iraq Wars. First, they focus only on the perspective of the insiders of the wars. The films provide the viewers with repetitive records of soldiers’ everyday life in the jungles and on the roads. Both films show the tedium and unexpected death of war. Meanwhile both films refrain from making a clear political statement about the war, allowing the viewers to make their own judgment and evaluation. Secondly, both films focus on the humane aspects of the soldier, making them very different from the feature films about the two wars. In the two documentary films, the men are solemn, reasonable, and self-disciplined. They fight, get wounded

⁴³ Howard Thompson, “‘A Face of War’ Offers Intimate Records of 97 Days with G.I.’s,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1968. <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/05/11/archives/a-face-of-war-offers-intimate-record-of-97-days-with-gis.html>

or killed. But at the same time, they care for their comrades and help innocent local civilians. They are quite different from those in the feature films on the two wars, in which the men are either insane or indifferent killers. Thirdly, both films are products of careful and selective editing. *A Face of War* took two years to edit, *The War Tapes* one year. The act of editing is political in nature, and involves a complicated process of selecting and legitimizing. But the politics and ideology of the films are presented in the seemingly non-political/ideological way, which is also a defining feature of Direct Cinema.

In contrast, the documentaries highlight that Vietnam and Iraq are two different wars. First, the two films highlight the two different atmospheres of the wars. *A Face of War* entails the endless shift between in and out of the jungle. When men trudge in the jungle, their lives are at stake, and they are easily injured or killed. When they finish the mission and leave the jungle, they drink, play, and hope. *The War Tapes* is characterized by an endless shift on and off the road. Soldiers start on the road to carry out their missions and face the death-threat; they step off the road to prepare themselves for the next mission. The tempo of *A Face of War* is slow, and that of *The War Tapes* moves quickly. Secondly, *A Face of War* displays the casualties of Americans and innocent Vietnamese civilians with more focus on the Americans; *The War Tapes* mainly highlights Iraqis casualties (both the insurgents and civilians). *A Face of War* is a sweet-bitter film made at the initial stage of the war before the war turned really ugly; *The War Tapes* is a cynical and hopeless film shot at the peak of the war when the casualties were very high on both sides.

A Face of War was quickly forgotten by the public when both the war became ugly and all the cinematic representations were horrifying. Two scholars offer quite different comments on this film. David E. James compares *A Face of War* with World War Two films and states that “most

of the motifs *A Face of War* employs... are recruited from Hollywood features; their silent intent is to rewrite imperialist invasion as the anti-fascist liberation of Asia from the Japanese, or of Europe from the Nazis.”⁴⁴ Thomas J. Slater, however, disagrees with James. Slater, also compares *A Face of War* with World War Two films, and points out that the film debunks the myth of American innocence which was the core value of most World War II films.⁴⁵ Slater emphasizes two features of the film. First, the film “heightens our sense of the precariousness of the American situation in Vietnam” by representing Americans as targets/victims and portraying the enemies as the unseen.⁴⁶ Secondly, this film is “viewer-oriented” by “starting directly with the action and drawing the viewer into an unfolding event and into the men’s anxiety and uncertainty.”⁴⁷ I tend to agree with Slater that the film highlights the plights of the soldiers in the unpredictable jungles. Besides, I think this documentary film is very different from all the representations of the Vietnam War in both feature films and documentary films in the sense that no matter how ugly the Vietnam War was, American soldiers were both killers and sufferers; they killed, but they would not lose all their humanity. The film has lots of shots of Vietnamese children, women, and the aged. The American medical personnel help with the labor and take care of sick children and villagers, and the soldiers treat the locals nicely. It is certain that not all Americans treated the Vietnamese this way, but this is also one aspect/face of the war, in which a group of men does not completely lose

⁴⁴ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 201.

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Slater, “Teaching Vietnam: The Politics of Documentary,” in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 277.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

their humanity all the time in the war. In this respect, I think that *A Face of War* takes a humanistic approach to observing the behavior of American soldiers in Vietnam, representing the soldiers as ordinary human beings who display both kindness and evilness in different situations. But the documentary tends to highlight that collectively the American soldiers were kind and caring to their fellow soldiers and the innocent Vietnamese civilians.

In contrast, *The War Tapes* tends to emphasize the individuality of each soldier. Altogether, seventeen soldiers shot tapes of their year-long deployments in Iraq with MiniDV cameras. After reviewing the tapes, the filmmakers chose the films of three of them. Among these three soldiers, Moriarty strongly believes that the Iraqis are responsible for the 9/11 event, and “what happened on 9/11 is just like they were shooting my own house.” He is more than eager to go to Iraq. His perspective on Iraq represents the mainstream narrative of Iraq after 9/11. Pink is a radical, and he hates war. But he has to go to Iraq to pay for his college tuition. Consequently, he makes the most daring and cynical statements about the American government and the war. He shot some dreadful and violent scenes. His perspective of war in the film is representative of anti-war Americans. Bazzi is a Lebanese-American, who speaks both Arabic and English, and loves being a soldier. His connection to the two opposing worlds, tortures and confuses his mind and heart. In other words, this documentary presents three different and equally-distributed voices about the Iraq War, but they all come from the working class.

The War Tapes focuses on a specific group of soldiers who are guardsmen and their main responsibility is to protect supply convoys, trucks operated by Kellogg Brown & Root, Inc. Quite different from other war documentaries, this film mainly targets the war profiteers. This approach simplifies the war narratives into one, that is, in Pink’s words, the Iraq War is “a war for cheese.”

In this respect, *The War Tapes* echoes the radical statement made in *Fahrenheit 9/11* that the Iraq War is partly stimulated by the chain of profit. Moreover, for the American soldiers in Iraq, the war is no more than a way to make a living. In this sense, *The War Tapes* reinforces the statement that war is fought by the poor for the rich, which in turn demonstrates the absurdity of the war and the helplessness and hopelessness of the underclass.

Visually, this film is replete with scenes of American soldiers dodging IEDs and ambushes. Such scenarios are repetitive, and shot by different subjects from different angles on their different job trips. The film only shows how the trucks succeed in surviving those attacks, but gives no hints of what the sources of such attacks are or whether such attacks are targeting the American soldiers or random victims. What we see from the film is that Americans successfully escape the attacks, and only innocent Iraqi civilians lose their lives or are wounded in the attacks. Superficially, the film conveys the message that the Americans survive the attacks because they are much better armed and protected. However, when the three subjects declare themselves as peace- and democracy-makers, and declare that “Iraq will be a better place in twenty years because we are here,” the film quickly runs over the scorched corpses scattering around the road. In this sense, the film intentionally juxtaposes the naivete and innocence of the soldiers with apocalyptic scenes of Iraq, which in turn demonstrate the futility of Iraq as well as the sacrifices made by the soldiers.

Moreover, this film pays great attention to the impact war has on the soldiers’ families. The families are struggling during the whole process, but they do not have better choices because they all need the soldiers to solve financial pressures. They cannot fulfill their respective family responsibilities as son, father, and spouse. The soldiers suffer physically and psychologically from their deployment in Iraq: Moriarty has a serious problem with his hand and back and Pink is

suffering from PTSD. Nevertheless, they fulfill their major purpose of going to Iraq: they get paid, and they are able to continue their normal lives as the supporting spouse and the prosperous college student. The ultimate outcome of their deployment in Iraq best illustrates the helplessness and hopelessness of the soldiers.

It is not certain why the subjects are allowed to record their lives in Iraq, but it is certain that all recordings by the American soldiers had to be censored. We can infer that the American government must believe that these tapes are not going to argue against the government's policy because war at least offers the innocent and ignorant young men a way out of their financial plight. To some extent, this film is ambiguous in warning those who come from the humble families that the war will trap them in other plights if not the financial one.

4.3 Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam and Last Letters Home: Voices of American Troops from the Battlefields of Iraq

Bill Couturie is the only director who made two films about both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. In 1987, he produced a documentary film about Vietnam called *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. Composed of the reading of forty letters, *Dear America* chronicles the history of the Vietnam War in ten segments from 1964 to 1975. The film presents the history of America's involvement in Vietnam by reading aloud the letters of the soldiers who fought in different time periods during the war. The film portrays the development of war from the perspective of the individual soldiers, who first experience the exciting enlistment, tough training and initial adventure in a foreign country. It describes their first sight and act of killing, and as the war progresses, it shows the increasing frustration of the soldiers, and shows them being injured or killed or returning home. In one word, Couturie offers an audio-visual version of letter reading in

the context of the chronological and logical progression of the war. Two decades later, he released a documentary about Iraq titled *Last Letters Home: Voices of American Troops from the Battlefields of Iraq* (2004).⁴⁸ This film is very short (one hour long) compared to the former one (ninety minutes long), and is only composed of ten letters written by ten soldiers from different social backgrounds.

Generally speaking, the two films are consistent in style and political implications. Both are epistolary documentaries. In the former, letters are read aloud by Hollywood actors and actresses; in the latter by soldiers' families. However, all senders in *Last Letters Home* are killed in Iraq, that is to say, their last letters home are actually their farewell letters and render their everyday deployment in Iraq as a possibly last day of their lives. Some of the senders in *Dear America* are killed in Vietnam, some are wounded, a few return safely; their letters home mostly record their true experiences and feelings in Vietnam, such as fear and comradeship in the battlefield, their psychological changes with the development of the war, and their homesickness. Next, both films are compilation films, including still photos, archival footage, news report/headlines, private videos, voice-over, official statistics of casualties, and captions. Besides, both films present the American soldiers as victims and good soldiers who sacrifice themselves for their beloved nation.

To be more exact, *Dear America* incorporates all the above-mentioned materials and presents a historical narration of the soldiers at different stages of the war; that is, the film connects what, when, how, why, and to whom each soldier wrote the letter with the whole history of the

⁴⁸ *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* and *Last Letters Home: Voices of American Troops from the Battlefields of Iraq* will be abbreviated as *Dear America* and *Last Letters Home* thereafter.

war. *Dear America* can be watched in two ways: first, as a historical survey of the war which consists of ten one-year segments, and the annual casualties are listed at the end of each segment; secondly, as a collection of war letters by different soldiers in different periods of the war. However, *Last Letters Home* totally abandons the historical background of the ongoing war and focuses on the “knock-on-the door” moments when the family members are informed of the death of their loved one by the American military. *Last Letters Home* starts from the moment the families receive the news and traces back to the life journey and profile of the deceased through the reading of their last letters home by their parent, sibling, or spouse. In this perspective, *Dear America* emphasizes the connection between the private history of each letter writer with the big history of the war; *Last Letters Home* emphasizes the bondage between the deceased soldier with his or her family as well as the pain of loss the families of the dead experience.

Both films are sad and emotional. Couturie believes that “reality is the power.”⁴⁹ From what the film displays, the public sympathizes with the suffering of the soldiers and the pain of the families. But from what the film excludes, the audience comes to understand the ideology of the film and the filmmaker as well as the corresponding social-political reality in which the films were created. As we discussed in the previous chapters, the 1980s was an era calling for forgiving and healing. Anthony A. McIntire categorizes *Dear America* as a “revisionist” film which refuted the stereotypes of American GIs portrayed by the films during the 1970s.⁵⁰ Indeed, in this

⁴⁹ Samuel Freedman, “Television; Vietnam Echoes: ‘We Are All Afraid to Die,’” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1988. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/03/movies/television-vietnam-echoes-we-are-all-afraid-to-die.html>

⁵⁰Anthony A. McIntire, “*Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 77, no. 3 (1990): 1126.

documentary, the American soldiers are young, nice, innocent men who suffer in the hell-like Vietnamese jungle. They are not as insane and cruel like the men in *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter*, but they suffer more and are more miserable than any of them in the films because most of them are killed in the war. In this respect, this documentary looks like a sequel to *A Face of War*. Moreover, McIntire argues that this documentary film is a “distortion” of the Vietnam subject.⁵¹ McIntire believes that the documentary is consistent with the major feature films about the Vietnam War in the sense that they collectively help convey the message of “the war was nasty, the soldiers were victims.” Consequently, this documentary film leaves out all controversial aspects of the military, such as drug abuse and racial tension, as well as the atrocities of the American soldiers in Vietnam. In a word, this film reduces the degree of the ugliness of Vietnam. In this perspective, we can see that *Dear America*, similar to *A Face of War*, features a humanistic approach to observing the conditions of the soldiers in Vietnam, and it best attests to collective healing by defining the soldiers merely as victims of Vietnam.

Craig Hight echoes McIntire’s comments on the film, and states that the film is a “fascinating” one which “appears to sit comfortably with these fictional films [such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, and so on].”⁵² Hight actually argues that this documentary is no different from those Hollywood Vietnam films in the sense that the history presented in the documentary is “impersonal, and quite distanced.”⁵³ I agree that, by recounting a well-known historical development of the war, the documentary film calls for the public’s mediation on the past war,

⁵¹ McIntire, “*Dear America*,” 1127.

⁵² Craig Hight, “Mediated Reality: *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*,” *Australian Screen Education*, no. 29 (2002): 174.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 175.

but definitely not on the legitimacy of the war. Indeed, there is nothing the public can do about the history, but by taking the real soldiers as “characters” in the film—each plays a role in the development of the story—this film encourages the public to put themselves in the shoes of the soldiers, that is, to think about how they would feel if they were in Vietnam. However, I think this film compromises its anti-war narrative by inviting the celebrated actors to perform the roles of narrators because the vocal performances of the actors quickly remind the audience of the disconnect between sound and image, and reveals that the intention of the film only targets an “emotional level” of the Vietnam War.⁵⁴

Both *Dear America* and *Last Letters Home* focus on the emotional resonance of the two wars, that is, the deep sense of hurt and loss. Mark Freeman believes that the director Couturie does a good job in exploring the sophisticated relationship and tension/conflict between the values and ideals of the individuals, and the conformity and compliance demanded by the social institutions/government.⁵⁵ In other words, the film shows how the development of war changes men from passionate to disillusioned, and shows how the men ultimately make peace with the outcome of the war. Ryan Watson, by employing Roland Barthes’ theory of “Mythologies” and Benedict Anderson’s theory of “Imagined Communities,” boldly argues that *Dear America*

⁵⁴ Couturie says in an interview that “I wanted to make the definitive film on Vietnam from an emotional level, yet I hadn’t even been there. I’d been an antiwar protester and a hippie, and if I had to do it again, I’d do the same thing. I thought the war was wrong and shouldn’t have been fought. But I also thought that it had been a class war and I was of a class of people that had escaped it. People from less fortunate circumstances than I had to fight that war and do terrible things. That was a big reason I chose to do this film. Now I feel I’ve done my tour of duty.” (Samuel Freedman, “Television; Vietnam Echoes: ‘We Are All Afraid to Die,’” *The New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1988.)

⁵⁵ Mark Freeman, “Conflicting Accounts: *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*,” *Australian Screen Education*, no. 33 (2003): 121.

constructs a “new myth” for a “national inspiration,” and creates a “universal soldier” endowed with the “grandeur of heroism.”⁵⁶ Watson, on the one hand, agrees with Freeman about the tension presented in the film between the individual and the institutions; on the other hand, Watson argues that *Dear America* “sublimates” the conflicts between the individual and the state by smoothing and softening the narrative of Vietnam.⁵⁷ In this sense, Watson echoes McIntire on the “distortion” of the film and believes that this film intentionally emphasizes the positive aspect of American grunts in Vietnam. Watson goes further than Hight and argues that the American soldiers in the film are not only displayed as “good American boys,” but also heroic “universal soldiers.” I agree that this film, to a great extent, reminds us of the representative image of warrior in the classical American war literature discussed in Chapter Two: innocent and passionate young men who take war as an initiation ritual to manhood; they suffer tremendously on the battlefields, becoming tough and heroic. Then they return home, and fight their way back to the normality.

The above analysis of the documentary film reminds us of Oliver Stone’s film *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), which we discussed in Chapter Three. We see parallels between the two films in terms of the whole narrative structure, characterization of the American soldier, and the main message conveyed. To a great extent, the disabled Ron Kovic is just one representative of the “universal soldiers” who first witness and experience the whole procession of the war, then suffer, and ultimately find a way to redefine themselves. Watson believes that after decades of

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991); Ryan Watson, “American Myth and National Inspiration: Bill Couturie’s *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*,” *Journal of Film & Video*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2007): 3-4.

⁵⁷ Watson, “American Myth and National Inspiration,” 3.

fictive representation of Vietnam and the American soldier in the films, *Dear America* represents “a new level or phase of Vietnam films, one that moves beyond reconciliation, revision, and dialectical synthesis to a new plane, where narrative becomes a healing myth.”⁵⁸ I agree that *Dear America*, along with *Born on the Fourth of July* and other films, engaged in the collective healing process of the late 1980s. Just as we discussed in Chapter Three, the 1980s witnessed an overwhelming dominance of conservative politics over the radical politics, as the Reagan administration commenced and the anti-war and civil rights movements retreated. The whole public was trying to make peace with the most controversial war. In this aspect, *Dear America* is a representative healing film.

Then, does Couturie tell stories about Iraq in a different way? In *Last Letters Home*, we do see many differences (just as we discussed earlier in this section). However, these two films share amazing similarities in their ideological and political implications. First, the fallen soldiers fit neatly into the category of “universal soldiers” who are either good and loving children of the parents, or supportive and intimate spouses. They voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the safety of the nation. Secondly, the focus of the films only targets the “emotional” level of the war narrative. *Dear America* highlights the emotional layer of the war narrative, and at the same time, brings in the partisan political statements. *Last Letters Home* totally avoids the political discussion of the war by stripping away all the socio-political connections to the war. *Last Letters Home* is composed of ten heartbreaking moments when the officers who notify relatives of casualties knock on the door of each family, and the film is very much a recording of the sweet memories between

⁵⁸ Watson, “American Myth and National Inspiration,” 6.

the deceased and their families. The contrast between the sweet intimate moments and the notification of death succeeds in turning the audience into tears instantly. Actually, the structure of the film is quite similar to a feature film—*The Messenger* (Oren Moverman, 2009); the biggest difference is that *The Messenger* tells the stories of the causality notification officers. In this sense, this film is more a film about mourning than a war film.

Moreover, *Last Letters Home* is also a healing film just like *Dear America*. *The New York Times* praises the film for “tak[ing] us a small step toward understanding the awful depth of that pain [of war].”⁵⁹ Besides, Michael Judge labels the film as both a tribute to the families of the dead and “a candid and moving introduction to the love, respect and overwhelming pride of 10 military families grieving the loss of a father, a son, a husband, a sister, a daughter.”⁶⁰ From this perspective, I agree with Judge that the film not only highlights the sacrifice of the soldiers who usually come from the working class but also illustrates “a dignified study of sacrifice—and, yes, patriotism.”⁶¹ Then why do only soldiers from the disadvantaged underclass demonstrate their patriotism in Vietnam and Iraq? How about those from the privileged upper class? Couturie defines Vietnam and Iraq as wars of class, and it was wrong to make those wars.⁶² With *Dear America* and *Last Letter Home*, Couturie displays “the real human cost” of the wars.⁶³

⁵⁹ Bob Herbert, “Death Comes Knocking,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2014.

⁶⁰ Michael Judge, “Weekend Journal; Review / TV: The War Dead Speak,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 05, 2004. <http://libproxy.utdallas.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/398893288?accountid=7120>.

⁶¹ Michael Judge, “The War Dead Speak,” 2.

⁶² See Footnote No. 54.

⁶³ “Interview with Bill Couturie,” *International Wire*, Nov. 10, 2004. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/466945188/>.

4.4 *My Lai* (2010) and *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007)

American soldiers suffered greatly in Vietnam and Iraq. However, American soldiers also committed the most notorious atrocities in Vietnam and Iraq. On March 16, 1968, three platoons of the American soldiers attacked My Lai village in South Vietnam, and killed about five hundred innocent civilians, mostly women and children. But the public did not know the truth about this event until November 1969. Before that, the whole event had been described and highly celebrated by the American military as “an amazing military success.”⁶⁴ Americans called it the “My Lai Incident;” Vietnamese called it the “My Lai Massacre.” The first My Lai film is *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (Joseph Strick, 1970). This film lasts only twenty-two minutes, and it won the 1971 Academy Awards for best documentary. Jan Dawson does not believe this film deserves such award because it was just a “reflection of the schizophrenic attitudes the Vietnam War induces.”⁶⁵ As a matter of fact, this short film is roughly made and lacks consistency and clear statement. Five veterans briefly answer the questions raised by the interviewer about their participation in the mission. The responses of the veterans are very casual, and they even look a little excited when they describe how they scalp the Vietnamese, and how they mutilate the corpses and gang rape the women and young ladies. Each interviewee echoes others in the way that they say they do not believe that they are killers; instead, that they are carrying out their “Search and Destroy” mission and they are just following orders as every soldier must do. *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* is important because it initiated an open discussion about and aesthetic representation of My Lai.

⁶⁴ To see the documentary “*Four Hours in My Lai.*”

⁶⁵ Jan Dawson, “Interviews with My Lai Veterans,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 444 (1971): 128.

Between January 31 to February 2, 1971, Vietnam Veterans Against the War sponsored the “Winter Soldier Investigation,” in which more than one hundred veterans who participated the My Lai massacre made their confessions and testimonies.⁶⁶ In the following year, a group of filmmakers (Winterfilm Collective) coordinated with Vietnam Veterans Against the War to release a documentary about the investigation called *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm, 1972). Ron Wilson argues that this film is “a living document to the atrocity of war itself – rather than as an account of war atrocities.”⁶⁷ Wilson believes that the “matter-of-fact” way the veterans recount their deeds in the massacre and the “candid” look on their faces “dispel any disbelief.”⁶⁸ This film is mostly composed of a recording of an official military investigation of the conduct of soldiers in three operation units with some news footage and photos about the war and the massacre. The core argument of this film is that these veterans were not intentional killers and were forced to make a choice between killing others or being killed by the officers if they did not follow the orders. All veterans place the blame on the military training they have received; that is to say, the military training dehumanized them so they could dehumanize the enemies. *Winter Soldier* defines My Lai as a massacre, and the testimony footage in this film are frequently borrowed by the media, films, and other documentaries.

All of the above-mentioned documentaries about My Lai failed to reach a wide public due to the restricted channel of distribution as well as the public’s indifference. Stephen L. Carter points out that after the revelation of the massacre to the public, “public support actually

⁶⁶ It’s an anti-Vietnam War organization founded in 1967.

⁶⁷ Ron Wilson, “Winter Soldier (1972),” *The Moving Image*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 122.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

increased.”⁶⁹ In 1989, Kevin Sim from Britain presented *Four Hours in My Lai* via the British program “First Tuesday.” This film takes a traditional historical survey of the whole event from the military training, the chronological development of the event, to the impact of the event on both the Americans survivors and the Vietnamese. The progression of the narration is interspersed with footage of the investigation and the testimonies. This is the first film about My Lai, which utilizes both the voices of the Americans and Vietnamese witnesses and survivors. This film concentrates on the soldiers’ conduct of raping and mutilating the Vietnamese. I think *Four Hours in My Lai* is a most radical criticism of My Lai, and it is more aggressive than *American Experience: My Lai* (Barak Goodman, 2010).

Quite different from the third-party perspective taken by *Four Hours in My Lai*, *American Experience: My Lai* (Barak Goodman, 2010) shares one of the defining moment in American history. The film is composed of three parts: The Tragedy, The Cover-up, and The Aftermath. The first part starts with the care-free American young soldiers in the heaven-like Hawaii military base, then they are sent to the hell-like Vietnam jungle where the casualties increase daily by the horrible bobby traps and mines. The Charlie Company’s mission in My Lai is to terminate the Viet Cong hidden in the village. The part entitled “The Tragedy” mainly states that the whole event is a *tragedy*, and the main reason for this tragedy is because the soldiers could not distinguish the Viet Cong from the civilians, and only followed the orders to kill. The second part of the film tells how a soldier who participated My Lai wrote a letter about the event and sent it to thirty congressmen, who refused to respond. And later on, it was the army photographer’s selling of the massacre

⁶⁹ Stephen L. Carter, “My Lai Revisited,” *Newsweek*, vol. 159, no. 13/14 (2012): 19.

photos, which brought the real crisis in front of the public. The third part of the film centers on the argument whether Second Lieutenant William Calley is guilty for his leadership and conduct. It brings in both the testimonies of veterans against him and testimonies of support from the public. The film ends with the characterization of heroic Hugh Thompson who is believed to be the one who ends the massacre.

As a documentary made four decades after the end of the Vietnam War, *American Experience: My Lai* is radical in the sense that it provides a complete and detailed account of the most controversial scandal in Vietnam, and exposes the notorious cover-up conspired by the American government. However, this documentary is ambiguous in its political implications. First, I agree with Susan Carruthers that this film does not have “an explicitly enunciated point of view” about whether My Lai is a massacre or Calley a murderer.⁷⁰ Besides, Carruthers criticizes the juxtaposition of veterans’ recollections with the iconic photos taken by the army photographer, which compromises the critique of the atrocities conducted by the soldiers. Instead, this film portrays a “landscape at once lush and treacherous, a paradise playground and a lethal minefield.”⁷¹ Carruthers summarizes the theme of the first part of the film as “the bewildering chameleon nature of this alien terrain.” In other words, this film defines My Lai as a tragedy rather than a massacre, which results from a bunch of uncontrollable factors such as the geography of the war zone and the revengeful psychology of the young men who witnessed the unexpected death of their

⁷⁰Susan Carruthers, “Movie Reviews: *My Lai*,” *The Journal of American History*, (December 2010): 909.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

comrades. In this respect, I think, instead of criticizing the atrocities made by the Americans in the war, this film somewhat legitimizes the inhumane conduct of soldiers in Vietnam.

Secondly, the narration of the cover-up of the event in the film is quite different from the above-mentioned documentaries. The film makes the revelation of the event a conscientious act of the soldiers, in which the soldiers themselves realize that their deeds in My Lai are wrong, unacceptable, and they voluntarily report their deeds to the government for punishment. The investigation of the cover-up starts with the letter written by Ronald Ridenhour, and ends with the sentence of Calley. This film totally leaves out far more significant details of the cover-up. For example, it was Seymour Hersh, a war journalist, who first exposed the military operation in My Lai in *The New York Times*, and officially defined it as “a massacre.”⁷² However, this film simplifies the complicated process of exposure and cover-up, which, in turn, “creates the impression that after months of suppression the story of the massacre instantly seared public consciousness, animating a wave of revulsion against the war.”⁷³ But this is not the case. Just as we mentioned earlier, the exposure of the event actually increased the public’s support of the war.

The third part of film is ambiguous in the way that, on the one hand, it portrays William Calley as the only one who is responsible for the event, and he is convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to jail. On the other hand, the film shows how President Nixon pardoned him and reduced the punishment from twenty years in prison to three years of house confinement. The film also shows how the public collectively protested the “scapegoating of an American patriot,” who

⁷² Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 2.

⁷³ Carruthers, “Movie Reviews: *My Lai*,” 910.

had faithfully obeyed the military orders in the war.⁷⁴ That is to say, this film diverts the attention of the public from focusing on all of the My Lai veterans to merely targeting Calley. In this way, the characterization of Calley as a scapegoat outweighs his identity as a war criminal. Besides the controversial characterization of Calley, the film ends with Hugh Thompson heroically calling off the atrocities, successfully transforming a traumatic event into the heroic act of an individual. I argue that the representation of My Lai in the documentary demonstrates Kendrick Oliver's argument in *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* that Americans consciously repressed and muted the memories of My Lai, and "the ordeals of its victims became neutralized as a source of national anxiety and remorse and their presence within the culture reduced to half-remembered images."⁷⁵

The history of documentary representation of My Lai in the past four decades, by chance, illustrates the four frames of the "cascading activation" model of press-state relations advocated by Robert M. Entman.⁷⁶ Charles M. Rowling argues that "the Nixon administration employed frames designed to downplay the severity of the My Lai incident, highlight extenuating circumstances faced by those directly involved, denigrate the alleged low-level perpetrators, and bolster the national identity."⁷⁷ Rowling even makes an analogy between My Lai and Abu Ghraib

⁷⁴ Carruthers, "Movie Reviews: *My Lai*," 910.

⁷⁵ Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 10.

⁷⁶ Robert M. Entman, in "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," defines that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (*Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1993): 52)

⁷⁷ Charles M. Rowling, "American Atrocity Revisited: National Identity, Cascading Frames, and the My Lai Massacre," *Political Communication*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2015): 310.

and states that the Bush administration employed similar frames to “downplay the incident and restore the national identity.”⁷⁸ But it took forty years for the public to finally come to terms with the memories of My Lai. Then to what extent, has the Abu Ghaib scandal been downplayed by the government and the mass media to find peace with the status quo?

It is well-known that after 9/11, America officially launched its global war on terrorists, especially targeting Middle East countries. Numerous suspects have been detained and interrogated. In 2002, an Afghan taxi driver, Dilawar, died after five days of detention in Bagram prison. In 2003, Carlotta Gall, a *New York Times* correspondent in Afghanistan, revealed that Dilawar did not die of natural causes but rather was tortured to death. However, her report was totally ignored both by the public and the authorities. In 2004, a group of pictures about abuse of detainees in Abu Ghraib prison was released by CBS, and instantly developed into the infamous “Abu Ghraib Scandal.” Finally, the abuse of prisoners in American custody abroad became the topic of the day. Inspired by Gall and Tim Golden, another *New York Times* journalist, Alex Gibney released his documentary, *Taxi to the Dark Side* in 2007, and this film won the Academy Award for best feature documentary in 2008.

This documentary is very expressive in the way that it employs rich cinematic techniques not only to make clear the whole scenario of the event, but also the complex deeper political association with this seemingly independent issue. The film traces the intertwined circles of cause

⁷⁸ According to Charles M. Rowling, there are four frames functioning in response to the critical moments of national dissonance, “*minimization* of the transgressions, *contextualization* of the transgressions, *disassociation* of the transgressors, and *reaffirmation* of the nation’s identity.” (Charles M. Rowling, “American Atrocity Revisited: National Identity, Cascading Frames and the My Lai Massacre,” *Political Communication*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2015): 314).

and effect around the murder, and ultimately arrives at the hidden crime of U.S. government-sponsored torture. Instead of using montage and archival records as many documentaries do, the film incorporates dramatic reenactments with many close-ups on the written word, chapter headings, superimpositions identifying speakers, and inserts of onscreen text to state key points.⁷⁹ Besides the traditional presentation of visual forms, the documentary pays great attention to textual presentation. Gibney uses written words to not only logically link each section of his narrative, but also to lay bare his main arguments. In other words, Gibney turns his documentary into a piece of legal defense against the American government's torture of the detainees since America has always claimed to be a nation of laws. By taking an advantage of the various cinematic techniques, Gibney shows his sympathy for the abused prisoners and uses irony to depict the U.S. government, especially the Bush administration.

The film incorporates a variety of emotionally suggestive visual materials to reinforce the arguments about torture. In particular, the film uses dramatic reenactments to depict torture techniques, close-ups on texts to highlight ideas and words, and shots of Dilawar's family to heighten pathos. On the one side, Gibney either uses the accused military interrogators to reenact the torture techniques or draws on coded photographs and videos to elicit empathy with Iraqi and Afghani prisoners. On the other side, he presents many still "photo-op" images of political figures

⁷⁹ Re-enactment is a very popular technique in Holocaust documentary films. For example, *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell* (Rithy Panh, 2011) exclusively focuses on one person – Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, who was the commandant of Security Prison 21 and he trained all the murderers, supervised all the tortures and executions between 1975 and 1979; and the film re-enacts how Duch trains and administrates the perpetrators. *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn, 2012) presents the Indonesia genocide between 1965-7, re-enacts the procedure of killing with the performance of real perpetrators.

standing in ironic contrast to what's being discussed on the sound track. In addition to these, the film is edited around the recurring image of a Bagram prison cell, showing shackles and chains dangling from the ceiling, from which prisoners are hung by raised hands. The recurrence of this image elicits ever-greater horror as the narrative circles back to it and as we know more of the background of the torture, especially at Bagram.



Figure 4.7. “Colonel Hayden instructs the soldiers to hit the legs of the prisoners.” *Taxi to the Dark Side*, directed by Alex Gibney (2007; United States, THINKFilm), DVD (left)

Figure 4.8. “A word of WHORE occurs between a soldier and a prisoner.” *Taxi to the Dark Side*. (right)

The film is filled with spare and symbolic images, which are emphasized to facilitate the viewers' understanding of the development and practice of torture techniques in American prisons abroad (see Figure 4.7). Only by equipping them with the sufficient knowledge about the torture can the viewers ultimately build up their empathy for the abused. In the film, we can see an extreme close-up of a man's eye and ear with a female whispering into it; the word “WHORE” is printed on the screen between them (see Figure 4.8). There is also a close-up of a man's shoulder and head as he lies on the ground face down, wearing a collar with a leash leading offscreen, is overlaid by “LOG PAGE 47: DOG TRICKS CONTINUED.” At one point, al-Qahtani is taken to the hospital for hypothermia since the air conditioner was turned too high; to represent this, one image shows the prisoner shivering on the ground, clinging to a small blanket, a small figure against a white

background, with the words: “LOG PAGE 53: THE INTERROGATORS REMOVED THE BLANKET AND TURNED AIR CONDITIONER BACK UP.”⁸⁰ To explain waterboarding, Gibney demonstrates the technique with a very old picture, and explains that this ancient torture technique is still popularly used in interrogations. Of all the cruel and inhumane torture techniques, forced nudity and sexual abuse are the most emotionally and psychologically unbearable. Gibney displays a series of well-known Abu Ghraib scandal photos about how some nude detainees are forced to make dog-piles, some nudes are masturbating, and some are dragged to crawl on the floor. These pictures are so powerful that viewers’ visual encounter with them is more than enough. Gibney leaves out all the vocal or textual forms, but accompanies these images with some obscurely audible sad music (see Figure 4.9). With the help of these impressive images, Gibney provides the viewers with sufficient and succinct knowledge about torture.

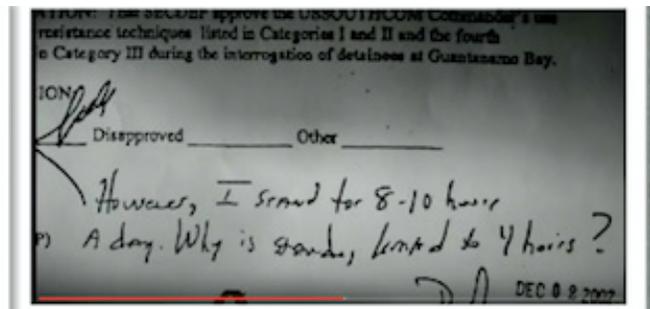
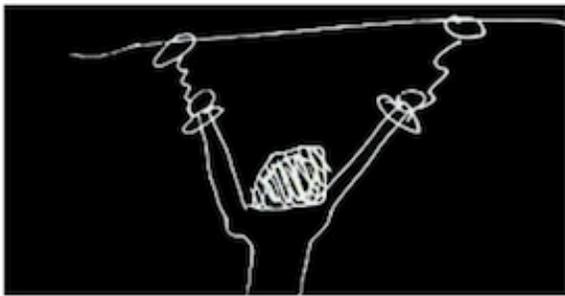


Figure 4.9. “A scratch of a man with both hands hanging up to a horizontal line.” *Taxi to the Dark Side*. (left)

Figure 4.10. “Donald Rumsfeld’s comments.” *Taxi to the Dark Side*. (right)

To illustrate the interviewees’ points, Gibney not only selects carefully and cautiously from numerous images by photojournalists, but also presents interviewees of different backgrounds differently for different purposes. Sitting calmly against a dark background, the accused military

⁸⁰ Al-Qahtani is one of the detainees.

interrogators are defending themselves by unanimously stating that they are just doing their jobs with the permission of their authorities. Gibney lets us not only hear but also see how ignorant and innocent these young people are. On the contrary, he usually presents military officials of high rank against a backdrop of the American flag along with a contradictory soundtrack about what they say and what they do to show the irony and bureaucracy. Besides, Gibney uses many “specific” angles and lens to convey his own understanding and stances. In particular, he uses a wide-angle “fisheye” lens to emphasize power differences. In one photo, a short, hooded man wearing a suit and standing outside a shop seems to have been recently arrested; the picture is taken from a ground level angle, as U.S. soldiers take his jacket off and a large machine gun looms in the left foreground while the other soldiers stand by. In another image, with a viewpoint steeply angling down, we see a boy and man with a bandaged foot huddle in a corner as the man looks up to the soldier, whose side and large gun barely enter frame left. With more direct commentary from Gibney, a news photo ironically frames General Geoffrey Miller, commander of detention facilities in Guantanamo and Iraq; Miller’s small head and shoulders appear in the lower right corner against a backdrop of a huge U.S. flag hung behind him that takes up the rest of the frame; superimposed is “US ARMY DECLINED TO DISCIPLINE GEN. MILLER.” Sometimes these ironic photos are of national leaders, such as the silhouetted Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney in an ornately furnished, elegant, red-toned White House room shown as the soundtrack tells how the Bush administration twisted laws and treaties to its own ends. A news photo of Donald Rumsfeld presents him standing at his exaggeratedly large desk working in his office, while the soundtrack reads what he wrote on a memo about interrogation techniques, “However, I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to four?” At this point the reproduced memo is shown,

with a close-up on his penned words (see Figure 4.10). In this perspective, *Taxi to the Dark Side* satirically demonstrates the hierarchical bureaucracy of American society.

Though centered on one event, this film aims to investigate the issue of torture in general. It not only introduces all the currently practiced torture techniques in American secret prisons abroad but also digs out the CIA's covered history of torture after the end of the Second World War. Even after the signing of Geneva Convention in 1949, the American government still budgeted one billion dollars annually between 1950-62 to research and develop the torture techniques, especially the "lite torture" or techniques targeting the psychological and mental collapse of the tortured.⁸¹ To draw more attention to the present situation of detainees, the film even includes reconstructions of the Bagram prison and a recapitulation of the infamous Mohammad al-Qahtani interrogation at Guantanamo, from which a detailed log of torture tactics survives. Guantanamo is, as a subtitle puts it, "the laboratory."

All in all, *Taxi to the Dark Side* effectively uses the crime against Dilawar to examine the chain of command and the larger issue of what torture entails. The film repeatedly returns to this one specific instance of abuse so that we look at Dilawar's situation, and that of his captors, with new understanding each time the film circles back to Bagram. In a word, the film is a very strong argument against prisoner abuse which has been conducted systematically by the American military and approved by the American administration. Similar to most Iraq films, the documentary also targets the incompetence of the Bush administration. Compared with *American Experience: My Lai*, this documentary does not demonstrate the completion of the four frames employed by

⁸¹ This information is included in the interviews in the film.

the whole public to downplay the severity of the scandal, but it displays the dynamics of some frames. Rowling believes that so far, the American community has employed at least three frames in response to the Abu Ghraib scandal: minimization, disassociation, and reaffirmation.⁸² In other words, this film, on the one hand, exposes the most inhumane abuse received by the war prisoners; on the other hand, it considers this independent case in the context of the long history of torture. After *Taxi to the Dark Side*, Errol Morris also released a documentary about the Abu Ghraib scandal called *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008). This film is an extension of *Taxi to the Dark Side* in the sense that it incorporates a great many comments made by politicians, historians, and scholars. In other words, it analyzes and contextualizes prison torture in an academic way, which in turn, further legitimizes prison torture.

In conclusion, the analyses of the documentary films about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars confirm what we discussed at the beginning of this chapter: that documentary films on the two wars tend to present a different voice from what has been reflected in the feature films. The documentary films, to some extent, are more radical and less ambiguous than the feature films on the two wars. First and foremost, there are no heroes at all in war documentaries, which is one of the two fundamental differences between the feature films and documentaries about the two wars. The second fundamental difference is that most documentary films about the two wars are shot in the location where the war took place; however, none of feature films about the two wars were. The third difference is that while the feature films tended to show fragments of the war, the war documentaries tend to be more inclusive and cover almost every aspect of the wars. Fourthly, while

⁸² Rowling, "American Atrocity Revisited," 314.

most feature films present Vietnam as *tragedy* and Iraq as a result of *conspiracies*, most documentary films present both Vietnam and Iraq as *mistakes*.

On the other hand, representations of Vietnam and Iraq in documentary films, like literature and feature films about the two wars, also reflect the specific social contexts in which each project is presented as well as the dominant ideologies of the time. Even though it is widely argued that war literature tends to be anti-war while war films are more pro-war, this dissertation suggests that the selection of Vietnam and Iraq as topics in both feature and documentary films, determines that the films about the two wars are political and anti-Vietnam/Iraq in nature. The fundamental contrast between different films about the two wars lies in the use of different perspectives. Feature films about the two wars mainly highlight either the ugliness of Vietnam or the conspiracy of Iraq in various degrees. However, documentary films about Vietnam and Iraq mainly target the American government by calling into question the core values and ideologies claimed by American society. From this perspective, we can infer that documentary films about Vietnam and Iraq are manifestos of the American New Left in the sense that they make the most straightforward and strongest arguments against war, injustice, immorality, and the perceived hypocrisy of the government.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, this dissertation has fulfilled three research goals. First, this project fills a gap left by other scholars, since no one has done an aesthetic study of this kind. This project found that literary representations of Vietnam and Iraq share striking similarities, since these literary works were mainly written by veterans who usually highlight the traumatic and tragic experiences of the soldiers, which in turn, creates a strong emotional impact upon readers, usually conceived of as individuals. However, filmic representations of Vietnam and Iraq differentiate the two wars greatly because the films are more likely to cater to a specific social and political milieu, and they are made for a mass public, rather than individual readers. Second, this project proves that representations of Vietnam and Iraq have still firmly stuck to the prestigious paradigm of the war genre. Despite the fact that these two wars stand out as the only “lost” and “erroneous” wars of the twentieth century, their aesthetic representations maintain fidelity to the established conventions of the genre, such as graphic language and horrifying depictions of bloody combats and heartbreaking scenes of death. Third, this project illustrates that the most celebrated literature and films about Vietnam and Iraq manifest the politics of the American New Left, especially as it was when it first emerged in the 1960s.

Of course, leftist ideologies, such as those espoused by the American New Left, are constantly changing and developing in accordance with the changing social and political milieu. It is true that the core tenets of the American New Left are humanistic and idealistic in essence, and are typically anti-war, anti-authority, anti-injustice, and anti-discrimination. However, the anti-war position during the era of the Vietnam War was different from the anti-war position during the era of the Iraq War. On the one hand, the literary and filmic representations of the Vietnam

and Iraq Wars by American Leftist writers and filmmakers have successfully presented powerful anti-war statements. On the other hand, different literary works and films regarding the two wars espouse different “leftist” anti-war positions. This research demonstrates that literature and films about Vietnam focus more on anti-containment critiques while literature and films about Iraq espouse more anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonialist critiques.

The most celebrated literature and films about the Vietnam War included in this dissertation such as *A Rumor of War*, *The Things They Carried*, *Paco’s Story*, *Matterhorn*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and others conventionally start with narrating the passion and righteousness of young Americans who were stimulated by their beliefs in freedom, equality, and democracy at the beginning of the Vietnam War; these tend to end by presenting totally changed men mentally, psychologically, and ideologically. *A Rumor of War* and *Born on the Fourth of July* clearly state that young American soldiers went to Vietnam to liberate the poor civilians in North Vietnam who were suppressed by the Communist Party led by Ho Chi Minh. Many short stories included in *The Things They Carried*, for example, reiterate the idea that Vietnam is a big “shit field” which is none of the business of the United States and beyond the capabilities of the American government and American military. All the literature and films explicitly interpret America’s involvement in Vietnam as a “mistake” and “failure” by highlighting the unproductivity of the American military and the frustration and desperation of American soldiers in the horrific monsoons, forests, and jungles. Vietnam literature and films agree that the American military neither made any significant progress in defeating the Viet Cong and the Communist Party in North Vietnam nor in liberating the alleged victims of Communism. Instead, these representations are more likely to characterize American soldiers as cruel killers and

perversed rapists. Meanwhile, these representations put all the blame on the American government. That is to say, the atrocities committed by the soldiers resulted from the “attrition policy” authorized by the American government. Almost all the examples included in this dissertation emphasize that the attrition policy only brought about more casualties on both sides and increased the brutality and inhumanity of the war. In a word, Vietnam literature and films prove that it was not reasonable at all to send hundreds of thousands of innocent young Americans across the globe into the Vietnamese jungles to aimlessly search for and kill the suspicious Viet Cong.

Decades later, once again, the American government sent tens of thousands of innocent young Americans into a foreign country thousands of miles away from America. Most of literature and films about Iraq such as *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Break*, *Redeployment*, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, *The Yellow Birds*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Green Zone*, and others fiercely criticize the American government for making up stories about the non-existing WMDs in Iraq and making the fallacious connection between 9/11 and Saddam Hussain. These representations literally interpret America’s preemptive launching of the war as an imperialist and neocolonial move, arguing that the “War on Terror” is more of an excuse to start the war. Most of literature and films included in this dissertation clearly point out that the real motivations of the American government in launching the war were to secure access to military and oil bases in Iraq. All these representations show that American soldiers are deeply horrified by the constant threat of IEDs and insurgents. What’s more, these representations ironize how the American government presents the war in front of the mass public and how the war is actually played out by American soldiers. In *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Break*, the American government glorifies the war in the most dramatic way. However, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Taxi to the Dark Side* expose American soldiers’ deeds in Iraq

as no different from the “real” terrorists. In a word, all these examples illustrate that America’s imperialist action in Iraq is neither moral nor rational. And further, that the US conducted a misinformation campaign at home in order to drum up support for the war abroad.

The different anti-war positions reflected in the representations of Vietnam and Iraq, to some extent, demonstrate that Vietnam and Iraq are two different wars politically and ideologically even though many representations show great resonances in soldiers’ experiences of the two wars. Despite the apparent differences between the emphases of the New Left during Vietnam and the established Left during Iraq, opposition to an unjust war has been a consistent feature of the literature and films about war in the post-war era. If during the early part of the 20th century the war genre generally highlighted the “successful conflicts” in the two World Wars since they were the “Great” Wars. Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate that artists and intellectuals who take on the issue of war tend to create representations that criticize the wrongdoings of the American government and American soldiers. The left therefore, despite its shifts in attention and emphasis continues to demonstrate a consistent critique of war as immorality and inhumanity. Representations extend this anti-war sentiment through the key artistic strategies of irony and satire. As the “Party of Hope,” the Leftist intellectuals and artists, I believe, will continue to act as the most thoughtful social critics to defend against all injustice, inequality, unfairness, immorality and inhumanity and push forward the making of American democracy.

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