

27

78

WOUNDED WARRIORS AND THE REVISIONIST MYTH

Carol Wilder

This essay deals with images of combat veterans from the Vietnam War in four American films—*Coming Home*, *First Blood*, *White Nights*, and *Back to School*. The author investigates how we have pictured veterans of this war in these films and what the “group portrait” our filmmakers have created of these men reveals about us, our politics, and our attitude toward the Vietnam War.

The method Wilder uses, of eliciting the “image” of the combat veteran of the Vietnam War from a number of films, is a common one used in criticism. And she is mindful of the problems this method poses, for she takes care to justify why she chose the films she did and to explain what it was the films had in common that she considered to be important. It turns out that each of them had something unusual, a “message moment” in which one of the characters in the film offers a dramatic monologue. These monologues provided her with an “identifiable unit of text for analysis.”

These monologues also provided writers and directors with an important vehicle for advancing the narrative and helped actors to “anchor” and clearly define their characterizations. Since screenwriters and directors have many different devices to advance a story line, the fact that there are these monologues in these films becomes particularly important. The way many of these monologues were shot also turns out to be significant.

This essay deals with films that had many powerful, gut-wrenching scenes in them. All wars are destructive and horrible but the Vietnam War, which was ultimately a divisive force in our society, left many bitter scars on the soldiers who served there, and on the American psyche. Many of the Vietnam veterans have found themselves, for various reasons, outcasts in American society and the psychological damage done to thousands of young men has been enormous. Many veterans who suffered no physical harm seem to be casualties, unable to shake the experience from their lives.

Wilder suggests that these films reflect an attempt we have made to displace our feelings of guilt about the war by focusing our attention, instead, on the question of our obligations to the veterans of the Vietnam War. By doing this we don't have to face the question of whether we should have got involved in Vietnam in the first place. Ultimately, Wilder concludes, we have displaced our sense of collective guilt by personalizing the war (that is, focusing on the soldiers as heroes and not on the war itself) and by mythologizing the soldiers into “wounded warriors.”

Noting the irony of this situation, she adds, “We risk rewriting the memory of the Vietnam War in such a way as to doubly victimize its veterans and greatly

increase the possibility that its images in films and other media will precipitate the very sort of replay that many of them were created to prevent."

Thou shalt not kill.

Sixth commandment, Exodus 20:13

Kill 'em all. Let god sort 'em out.

Infantry slogan, Vietnam War

Vietnam was a war of paradox. Philip Beidler called it a "Catch-22 world imitating art."¹ Jan Scruggs, moving spirit behind the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial, noted the irony of veterans building a memorial to themselves and to a war the country in truth wanted only to forget, commenting "What the hell. It had been that kind of war."²

"That kind of war." A war of absurdities and contradictions, dilemmas and double binds, ambiguities and oppositions. A war that was never declared a war, a fate sealed by the tragic escalation permitted by the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution that was based upon incidents of "North Vietnamese aggression" that never actually happened at all. A war not really supported or understood by the people of the country that waged it, against an enemy whose elusive identity changed night by day, for objectives that were self-defeating. A war that promised to bring "self-determination" as defined by the U.S. government to the Vietnamese people, whether they wanted it or not—a sort of democracy on demand. And to the devastating consequences of all wars, the bewildering paradoxes of the war in Vietnam added insult to injury for many of the three million men and women who served there, often against their will and the sentiments of their peers. Consider the following scenario.

A young boy is raised in a patriotic Christian culture to love god and country; to believe "Thou shalt not kill." At the age of 18, not yet old enough to drink or vote, he is given a "choice": go to fight in an unpopular war very far away, openly resist and face imprisonment, or leave the country in exile. Unable by virtue of social class or misguided patriotism to defer military service, he enlists and begins a basic training calculated to override his lifetime of values and make him into a killer. He is then sent half way around the world alone, without a

support group, on a one year tour of duty in a situation so horrifying he will never be able to truly share the experience with those who did not participate. He is thrust into a war that has not even been declared a war, where he does not know who the enemy is, where the lines of battle are, or what the objectives may be, because the enemy is everywhere, the lines do not exist, and the objectives are hopeless. It is a guerrilla war of perpetual terror. Booby traps are everywhere, made by the enemy from the G.I.'s own dud ammunition. He learns that his barber or mama san by day may be his hunter by night; that no one is to be trusted, least of all some of his own superiors. Rank carries no credibility. He hears the double talk of having "to destroy the village to save it," and the debased logic of "protective reaction" air strikes. He learns the thrill of battle that comes hand in hand with the excruciating fear; he feels the start of a combat adrenalin addiction. If he survives, he flies home (again alone) and in forty-eight hours he is back in Youngstown or Birmingham or East L.A. He is barely twenty-years old. His peers think he is a psychopath and call him "baby-killer." His friends and relatives think he was a fool to go in the first place and treat him like a child. Veterans of earlier wars call him "loser" and "coward"; he is not allowed to join their fraternal orders and drink in their private bars. One story he hears making the rounds on his return tells that a World War II veteran walking into a bar will get drinks bought for him, a Korean veteran will buy his own, and a Vietnam veteran has to buy for the bar to get out alive.

This radically paradoxical nature of the Vietnam War itself is being enacted two decades later on the popular culture front by the combat veteran, who personalizes and situates the dilemma in a tangible and potentially comprehensible form. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, writing about *Rambo* in *Film Quarterly*, suggest that the displacement of fundamental questions about the war by questions about the warrior himself functions as an important mechanism for "rewriting" the war in order to neutralize its memory. For instance:

In the case of the recent rightwing Vietnam War films, the fundamental textual mechanism of displacement that has not been recognized is that the question 'Were we right to fight in Vietnam?' has been replaced (displaced) by the question 'What is our obligation to the veterans of the war?' Responsibility to and validation of the veterans is not the same as validating our participation in the first place. Yet answering the second question "mythically" rewrites the answer to the first.³

Most Vietnam films of the 1980s, Studlar and Desser argue, depend upon a strategy of victimization of the veteran in order to expiate collective guilt. Following Lévi-Strauss, they posit a "will to myth"—a "communal need, a cultural drive—for a reconstruction of the national past in light of the present."⁴

Lévi-Strauss's notion that myth is a way of resolving cultural dilemmas and contradictions is especially pertinent here when we consider the sort of dark celebrity visited upon Vietnam combat veterans in the 80s. In the violent ethos of American culture, they may be "victims" but they are still the only "heroes" we have outside of perhaps the Super Bowl, the only embodiment of traditional manhood. This is, of course, an untenable role to play—the loser/winner who strategically takes the fall for the culture while somehow surviving himself. ("How will you live, Johnny?" asks Col Trautman at the end of *Rambo II*. "Day by day," replies the victim/hero.)

How is this displacement of blame, this "will to myth," this strategy of victimization shown in characterizations of Vietnam veterans on film? Moreover, can one identify any common patterns or themes in cinematic depictions of combat veterans that may reflect an implicit consensus about how veterans are mythologized in American culture? And further, how are the paradoxical conditions of the Vietnam War and its warriors resolved in the construction of its myths?

In order to explore these questions I examined four vivid and diverse portrayals of Vietnam combat veterans on film: Jon Voight in *Coming Home* (1978), Sylvester Stallone in *First Blood* (1982), Gregory Hines in *White Nights* (1985), and Sam Kinison in *Back to School* (1986). Even more specifi-

cally, I looked at monologues or speeches delivered by each of the characters, a device not commonly employed by screenwriters (compared to, say, playwrights) and found in few veteran characterizations on film. I chose these four particular examples for several reasons.

First, each of these films was very popular at the time of its release and remains so on videocassette, reaching a wide popular audience. Secondly, the films vary widely in type and in relevance of the Vietnam issue to the central story line: *Coming Home* is a drama about disabled veterans, *First Blood* is an adventure story about a wronged veteran, *White Nights* is a story of political intrigue with Vietnam a small but significant part of the story, and *Back to School* is a comedy where the Vietnam veteran image is satirized. Thus, these are not all "Vietnam" movies, and in two of them the image of the veteran is a distinctly minor concern. This is all the more germane to understanding how myths are created and perpetuated; it is the information we attend to subliminally and peripherally that enters our consciousness unexamined. I also chose these examples because each one of them includes what can be properly called a speech or monologue, offering an identifiable unit of text for analysis. These are obvious "message moments" in the films, although Kinison's satiric stance sets his performance somewhat apart and will be considered as a special case. In the other three speeches (Voight, Stallone, Hines), it is clear that the writer and director are using the scene as a vehicle to advance the narrative in a major way. The segments studied here also provide telling opportunities for the actors involved, serving to anchor their characterizations and define the Vietnam veteran animus as they understand it.

The significance of the use of dramatic monologue in film derives in part from the fact that it is less essential as a cinematic device than it is in rhetorical or theatrical contexts where choice of communication forms is more restricted. The filmmaker's repertoire of communication techniques, especially in the realm of visual expression, renders sustained verbal communication less necessary and even less desirable than it is on stage or, of course, from the podium or even in conversation. This suggests that when a screenwriter actually resorts to monologue form, the choice is a meaningful one that the viewer can rightfully read as textually central and inten-

tional. Thus the scenes considered here, while but a small sample of Vietnam veteran portrayals, are probably as responsible as any on film for the creation of the combat veteran image. Let's look now at *Coming Home*, *First Blood*, *White Nights*, and *Back to School*, and especially at their veteran speeches, to discern the makings of the wounded warrior myth.

.....

Coming Home opens in the smoke filled pool room of a Veterans Administration hospital. Luke Martin (Jon Voight), paralyzed below the waist, lies flat on a gurney. Someone asks "Would you go [back to Vietnam] if you had the chance again?" One man answers "yes," sparking incredulity in the others. His response is dismissed as an expression of the need to justify what went down in Vietnam. A buddy reacts: "How many guys do you know who can make the reality and say 'what I did was wrong and all this other shit was wrong', man, and still be able to live with themselves 'cause they're crippled for the rest of their fuckin' life?" This is the question that drives the film, and *Coming Home* is essentially a story of how two veterans try to "make the reality" of their Vietnam traumas. Luke's disability is physical; Bob Hyde's (Bruce Dern) is psychological.

Jane Fonda as Sally Hyde provides the love interest in this Academy Award winning film (best actor and actress) that has nonetheless been accused of mawkish sentimentality, heavy-handed editing, and overly explicit use of rock music to move its message.⁵ Luke and Sally meet when he is an embittered VA inpatient struggling to find his way back to the world and she is a hospital volunteer dogooding while her officer husband does his own tour of Vietnam. Predictably, Luke and Sally become (lustfully) infatuated with each other, and Bob's return from Vietnam precipitates the inevitable triadic confrontation, brandished bayonet and all, which Luke manages to defuse in one of the few scenes on film that offers a credible portrayal of what has since been termed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Luke's speech and, one must presume, the message of the movie, comes at the end of the film, and it really is a "speech," delivered to a high school audience. The speech is crosscut with a sequence of

Bob undressing at the beach and walking out to sea in an apparent suicide, a perplexing ending. James Wilson called Bob's demise "a scene so unconvincing and melodramatic that it nearly negates the all the movie's good qualities."⁶ Fonda herself recently revealed that she had disagreed with director Hal Ashby about the ending, saying "I thought it didn't acknowledge the violence built up in him. I thought he should have used his gun—on them or on himself."⁷ Vietnam veteran author Ron Kovic claimed he didn't know any vets "who committed suicide by going skinny-dipping in the ocean."⁸ "But there may be a mimetic integrity in this uncertain ending we should appreciate," wrote Peter McNerney. "For like the war itself, *Coming Home* is a powerful drama that ends ambiguously, an experience that is still hard to figure out."⁹ In another sense, Luke's speech provides the verbal rationale for Bob's nonverbal behavior, and the two segments are musically bridged by the poignant "Remember Me."

In a trite but pointed juxtaposition, Luke's speech in the auditorium follows that of a Marine recruiter. We see only the tail end of the recruiter, but enough to enable Luke to call attention to his presence and use it. (Both had been Marine sergeants.) Luke begins by struggling to lower the microphone to wheelchair level, foregrounding his physical condition. The emotional speech that follows seeks to create identification with the audience ("You know, you want to be a part of it—be patriotic . . ." ". . . And I know some of you guys are gonna look at that uniform, man, and you're gonna remember all the films and you're gonna think about the glory of other wars . . ." ". . . I was the captain of the football team and I wanted to be a war hero, man . . .") Having established his credibility and worked himself close to tears, Luke implores his young listeners to see through the "bullshit"; war is not what it may seem and, he pleads, "I don't wanna see people like you comin' back and havin' to face the rest of your lives with that kinda shit—it's simple as that—I'm just tellin ya'—there's a choice to be made here." These are the last words of the film before a cut to Dern swimming out to sea and to Fonda leaving Luckys with a cart full of groceries. Despite this puzzling (non)denouement, Voight's final statement offers several answers to the question posed at the film's start: how can one "make the reality" of managing guilt and victimization? Voight

chooses to proselytize others; Dern chooses suicide. (Fonda goes grocery shopping—an All American ending.) Issues central to the conduct of the Vietnam War in general are displaced by a localized focus upon the sympathetically drawn veteran/victims, who strategically expiate cultural culpability while leaving fundamental ambiguities for the viewer to negotiate alone.

Going, one might say, from the sublime to the ridiculous, Sylvester Stallone's characterization of Vietnam veteran John Rambo shares little of the Voight/Dern verisimilitude while cutting an even more indelible figure. The stunning and virtually instantaneous ubiquity of the Rambo icon following the 1985 release of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* suggests a strong "will to myth" about the Vietnam War and its veterans; a need to rewrite the record in a way that will resolve the lingering paradoxes of that misadventure. Given Rambo's overriding physicality and his taciturn nature, it comes as some surprise that he delivers any speech at all, but speak he does at the end of *First Blood*, the better conceived and lesser noted of the first two Rambo films. Greg Waller, writing specifically about *First Blood Part II*, observes that "Rambo's mind is signified so often by his face, rather than his speech, because the film shows how readily language functions as a tool of oppression and an assertion of authoritarian prerogative . . . To some degree, Rambo's haltingly articulated, heartfelt, unembellished, unintellectual speech redeems language, which can, in fact, express what Rambo knows to be the truth about the world and about correct political/ethical conduct."¹⁰ Thus when he speaks, we listen.

In *First Blood*, from the David Morrell novel (at the end of which Rambo dies), Rambo goes off the deep end after he is (unfairly, unjustly) provoked and hassled by a small town sheriff, and after some hours of guerrilla warfare theatrics ends up alone and surrounded by the National Guard. His old Special Forces commanding officer Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna) is called in to persuade Rambo to surrender. "It's over Johnny. It's over," Crenna tells him. "Nothing is over. Nothing. You just don't turn off . . .," Stallone responds with his distinctive histrionic excess. What follows is an incredibly subtle but oddly moving scene wherein Stallone shifts from anger to grief to resignation as he recalls the scorn of anti-war protesters, the contrasts be-

tween military and civilian life, and the haunting traumatic death of a buddy who was blown apart before his eyes. "I can't put it out of my mind," he sobs, his head on Crenna's fatherly shoulder, a vision of defeat. It is a very "un-Rambo" scene—Rambo is not noted for his tears and vulnerability—yet it is a scene closer to the heart of the John Rambo character than perhaps any other. The speech reveals a complex man beyond the potential range of Stallone's one-dimensional acting style, a style that imbues Rambo's anguished speech with all the passion of a man who has dropped his blowdrier in the bathtub. (Imagine, if you will, John Rambo played by Voight or Hines!) Still, it is difficult to underestimate the power of the Rambo icon to shape the Vietnam veteran image. Studlar and Desser suggest that "in rewriting the Vietnam defeat, Rambo attempts to solve the contradiction posed by its portrayal of the Vietnam vet as powerless victim and supremacist warrior by reviving the powerful American mythos of a 'regeneration through violence'."¹¹ "To be a victim," they write, "means never having to say you're sorry."¹²

Victimized in a different vein, one might say, is Gregory Hines's character of Raymond Greenwood in the 1985 film *White Nights*. Hines's role differs significantly from the veteran images of Voight and Stallone in several ways. For one, Hines's identity as a Vietnam veteran is a distinctly minor yet consequential feature of the narrative. Also, Hines speaks for the black veteran of a war in which minorities were heavily overrepresented in combat. And the context for Hines' speech is the most remarkable of the three considered here: he is an American defector ("I'm not a defector—I'm a selector.") to the Soviet Union.

White Nights is the story of ballet dancer Nikolai Rodchenko (Mikhail Baryshnikov), a Soviet defector to the United States whose plane is forced down inside the Soviet Union, where he is detained, with the subsequent action focused on his escape efforts. Hines, a jazz/tap dancer, is assigned by the KGB to keep tabs on the understandably restless Baryshnikov. One thing leads to another, and they warily become acquainted until one night after dinner and copious quantities of vodka, Baryshnikov asks Hines "Tell me, why did you come here?" Hines, who has consumed the lion's share of the liquor, begins to unravel, tapping his way through a splendid scene

explaining how he went from patriot to "selector." It is by now a familiar litany: Hines enlisted to "get myself a real career, but when they made me the . . . nobody said you're gonna become a murderer—you're gonna become a rapist—you're gonna maim and rob people." He continues, distraught, "I kept sayin' to myself—this war's gotta be about somethin'—we can't just be hired killers. It's not possible. We're Americans. There was this little voice in my head that said 'Ray, you're bein' used. They're tryin' to kill you. They don't even think you're human and they want you to die for them to make them richer. It was all very clear."

For Raymond Greenwood, defection was the strategy for resolution of the contradiction between his trusting patriotic beliefs and his experience of betrayal, giving him a stinging bitterness. Voight lost his mobility, Stallone lost his freedom, Hines lost his homeland. The Vietnam angle keeps *White Nights* from an otherwise strong anti-Soviet ideological bias, although Hines flees to the United States with Baryshnikov in the end.

In sharp contrast to the Vietnam veteran portrayals considered thus far is Sam Kinison's character (Modern American History Professor Turgeson in the Rodney Dangerfield-fueled 1986 comedy hit *Back to School*). Kinison plays a crazed professor who comes unglued in the classroom in a caricature of a Vietnam veteran. This sets Kinison apart from the Voight/Stallone/Hines dramatic role models. Caricature works through imitation and hyperbole; familiar images are exaggerated and reframed so that sometimes we can see them for the first time. Without the recognition and resolution of this dialectical tension between the presumed "real thing" and the "imitation," the humor is lost. In order for Kinison's caricature to work, it must play upon some shared audience image or stereotype of its subject of exaggeration—the Vietnam veteran. So now we have real life Vietnam veterans, realistic fictional Vietnam veterans in the movies, and unrealistic fictional Vietnam veterans in the movies. Real, fictional, caricature—can this be far from the abstraction of parable and myth? (It could be said that Stallone is more of a caricature—even parody—than Kinison's caricature, at least in the eye of the beholder, though the comic effect of Rambo was presumably unintentional.) In any case, I will take a closer look at Kinison as a special case of veteran

imaging after examining the major themes that emerge from the dramatic speeches of Voight, Stallone, and Hines.

.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the similarities between these speeches, it is useful to point out the differences between the three films of which they are a part. Certainly, all three films share the ideologically limited milieu of contemporary American popular culture, but their surface features vary widely. *Coming Home* is a domestic drama about the personal consequences of the Vietnam War that manifests a liberal political agenda. *First Blood* is an ideologically reactionary adventure story in which John Rambo's Vietnam experience is essential but subordinated to the action imperative. *White Nights* is a politically ambiguous drama with cold war overtones in which the Vietnam War is used as a weight to balance the East vs West narrative. The three films had entirely different writers, directors, casts, crews, and production histories over an eight-year period. In other words, as far as one can tell their characterizations of Vietnam veterans were arrived at independently and thus similarities in the characters must reflect some degree of explicit or (more likely) implicit consensus about how Vietnam veterans are imaged in American culture. And indeed, the veteran portrayals observed in *Coming Home*, *First Blood*, and *White Nights* show striking similarities, especially in their thematic patterns of patriotism, trauma, disillusionment, and blame.

Speaking of his own patriotism and disillusionment, Voight says "You know you want to be a part of it. Be patriotic. Go out and get your licks in for the U.S. of A. And when you get over there it's a totally different situation . . . I wanted to be a war hero, man. I wanted to go out and kill for my country . . . And now I'm here to tell ya that I have killed for my country or whatever and I don't feel good about it . . ." Stallone's disillusionment is directed to Colonel Trautman: "It wasn't my war. You asked me, I didn't ask you. And I did what I had to do to win. But somebody wouldn't let us win . . . For me civilian life is nothin'. In the field we had a code of honor . . . back here there's nothin' . . . Back there I could fly a gunship. I could drive a

rank. I was in charge of million dollar equipment. Back here I can't even hold a job parking cars." Hines addresses his sense of disillusionment and betrayal to Soviet defector Baryshnikov: "I used to feel the way you do about America. I was a patriot. Greatest country in the world. . . . I said 'Ma, this is it. I'm gonna get myself a real career, Gonna get involved in electronics, become a communications expert, defend my country against communism.' But when they made me the offer nobody said 'you're gonna become a murderer, you're gonna become a rapist, you're gonna maim and rob people. . . . Don't talk shit to me. I know about America. I know what makes it tick and you don't fool me for a second. . . .'"

All three speeches also feature some sort of war related trauma that becomes a vehicle for typifying the veterans Vietnam experience and provides a rationale for their evident anger and grief. In a noteworthy parallelism, all three of these "trauma" segments are done with high angle camera shots, a device that Louis Gianetti tells us tends to "reduce a subject to insignificance, suggesting vulnerability; we are superior to the subject."¹³ In Voight's trauma narrative, he refers to the anguish of battlefield death, "because there's not enough reason, man, to feel a person die in your hands or see your best buddy get blown away. I'm here to tell ya' it's a lousy thing, man. I don't see any reason for it. And there's a lot of shit that I did over there that I find fucking hard to live with. . . ."

Stallone expresses no regret over his own actions, but rather speaks graphically of his buddy's gory death: "We were in this bar in Saigon and this kid comes up carryin' a shoeshine box and he says 'shine, please.' I said 'no' and he kept askin' and Joey said 'yea' and I went to get a coupla beers and the box is wired and he opened up the box and fuckin' blew his body all over the place. And he's layin' there and he's fuckin' screamin' and there's pieces of him all over me, and I'm tryin' to pull him off, ya' know, my friend, it's all over me, blood and everything, and I'm tryin' to hold him together and put him together and his insides keep comin' out and no one would help, no one would help. And he said 'I wanna go home, . . . I wanna go home Johnny. I wanna drive that Chevy.' With what? I can't find your legs. . . . I can't find your legs. . . ." Stallone plays this scene for all it is worth, offering glimmers

of authenticity otherwise lacking in his Rambo interpretation.

Hines focuses solely upon the trauma of his own actions quoted earlier and described as killing, raping, robbing, and maiming. Interestingly, Stallone is the only one of the three veterans considered here who does not point to his own behavior as one source of guilt and blame. Rather, he points only to the actions of others, which in the case of his traumatic incident is a "kid" with a shoeshine box. This is consistent with the reactionary ideology of the Rambo character, a subtle but telling bit of framing that implies blame one way only.

All three characters also directly assess at least some of the blame for the war, albeit in the direction of very different targets. In a nice recursive touch, Voight uses his movie portrayal to blame movie portrayals for glorifying war: ". . . and I know some of you guys are gonna look at that uniform, man, and you're gonna remember all the films and you're gonna think about the glory of other wars and think about some vague patriotic feeling and go off and fight this turkey too. . . . And I'm tellin ya it ain't like it is in the movies. That's all I wanna tell ya because I didn't have a choice." As Voight continues he ties in the Marine recruiter: "When I was your age all I got was some guy standin' up like that, man, and givin' me a lot of bullshit, man, which I caught. . . ." Stallone assesses blame, too, but he targets an unspecified "somebody" ("I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win.") and takes a very specific shot at antiwar protesters. ". . . Then I came back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protestin' me, spittin', callin' me 'baby killer' and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me, huh? Who are they, unless they've been me and been there and know what the hell they're yellin' about?" Hines suggests yet another source of blame for the war when he says, "They don't even think you're human and they want you to die for them to make them richer." Here the capitalists are at fault, business is to blame for the war. And racism: "Uncle Sam wanted the whole ghetto. He said 'I want all of those. Get over here.' "

War movies, military recruiters, antiwar protesters, capitalists, racists: a mixed bag of blame for the war. But what is interesting here is not so much the target of blame or the source of disillusionment or

the specific nature of the trauma, but the fact that each of these stories follows the same narrative pattern of patriotism, trauma, disillusionment, and blame. Further, and of equal interest, is the fact that each of these speeches follows similar sequences of affect: exposition, grief, and catharsis. Stallone's anguish may carry a different textual rationale from that of Voight and again from that of Hines, but it is acted as essentially the same feeling. Thus both the cognitive and affective profiles of these three veterans are remarkably similar despite definitive differences in their specific texts and contexts.

Last but not least here we can consider Sam Kinison's portrayal of Professor Turgeson in *Back to School*. For Kinison's caricature of a Vietnam veteran to work, it must mimic and exaggerate a shared if unspoken cultural stereotype of a veteran in order to establish common ground with the audience. If we can accept that the characters portrayed by Voight, Stallone, and Hines presume to depict veterans realistically (though that may be stretching the point with Stallone), then it should follow that Kinison's caricature will reflect an exaggeration of the patriotism, trauma, disillusionment, blame sequence delivered with an emotional pattern of exposition, grief, and catharsis.

Since Kinison's actual Vietnam speech is short, it can be included here in its entirety for the reader to judge if it mimics the others:

KINISON: Now, can someone tell me why in 1975 we pulled our troops out of Vietnam?

STUDENT: The failure of Vietnamization to win popular support caused an ongoing erosion of confidence in the various American but illegal Saigon regimes.

KINISON: Is she right? 'Cause I know that's the popular version of what went on there and a lot of people like to believe it. I wish I could, but I was there. I wasn't here in a classroom hopin' I was right, thinkin' about. I was up to my knees in rice paddies with guns and there we were up against Charlie sluggin' it out with him while pussies like you

were back here partyin' puttin' headbands on doin' drugs listening to the goddamned Beatle albums . . . [starts to scream]

DANGERFIELD: Heh, professor, take it easy. These kids were in grade school at the time . . .

Does Kinison follow the pattern of the others? First he expresses his disillusionment ("I know that's the popular version of what went on . . ."), then his patriotism ("I was there . . ."), his trauma ("I was up to my knees in rice paddies with guns and there we were up against Charlie sluggin' it out . . ."), and he assesses blame ("While pussies like you were back here partyin' . . ."), all delivered with increasing hysteria ending with his trademark bellowing. It is a small gem of a scene that works precisely because it so shrewdly exploits the Vietnam veteran stereotype, illuminating with its hyperbole the sort of tacit conceptions that so often remain unexamined.

.

To return to the earlier question about whether one can identify common patterns in cinematic depictions of combat veterans that may reflect a tacit consensus about how veterans are mythologized in American culture, the answer based upon what we have seen here must surely be yes. It is no news that the Vietnam combat veteran has been stereotyped. But what function does this image serve in the larger process of remembering and forgetting the Vietnam War? As first hand experience of the war recedes farther into the past, mediated realities will soon become the only realities of remembrance. And since the Vietnam War is such a profoundly painful chapter in American history, the interest of the power elite in neutralizing its memory coincides nicely with the preference for denial of most of the rest of us. This is where the wounded warrior myth emerges to resolve the paradox of an experience which is unbearable to remember but impossible to forget.

In critic Kenneth Burke's dramatic social theory, the guilt that results from one's departure from the status quo hierarchical distribution of power leads one to seek redemption through either the self-

sacrifice of mortification or the victimage of becoming a scapegoat who symbolizes society's guilt.¹⁴ What better description of the role of the Vietnam veteran in the displacement of guilt from the architects of the war to its agents? The myth of the wounded warrior synthesizes on one hand the need to victimize, shame, and punish the veteran in order to distract us from the political causes of the war, with the contradictory need for heroes in a culture that exalts greed and violence. The wounded warrior both carries out the cultural imperative, and suffers for our sin of compelling him to do so. His atonement (and ours) can be realized only through his perpetual self-sacrifice. We can celebrate him only so long as he continues to suffer. But as long as blame is situated within the individuals at the lowest rung of the military ladder—the grunts—those warmakers in the white shirts who did their killing with a fountain pen instead of a gun remain unscathed and free to implement proxy murder herever they may.

Bill Nichols, writing about *The Deer Hunter*, characterized one paradox of the Vietnam veteran to be "If I am to be a man, I must control my feelings. But if I control my feelings, I cannot be a man."¹⁵ Transformed to the wounded warrior myth, one might say "If I am to be a hero, I must do what my country asks. But if I do what my country asks, I cannot be a hero." By sustaining the myth of the wounded warrior, by making the veteran simultaneously impotent and omnipotent, by displacing guilt and blame, by personalizing the political, we risk rewriting the memory of the Vietnam War in such a way as to doubly victimize its veterans and

greatly increase the possibility that its images in film and other media will precipitate the very sort of replay that many of them were created to prevent.

■ Notes

1. Philip Biedler. "Truth Telling and Literary Values in the Vietnam Novel." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87 (1979): 145.
2. Jan Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow. *To Heal a Nation*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985, 19.
3. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War." *Film Quarterly* 42 (Fall 1988): 11.
4. Studlar and Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry." 10.
5. James Wilson. *Vietnam in Prose and Film*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1982.
6. Wilson. *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, 83.
7. Ron Rosenbaum. "Dangerous Jane." *Vanity Fair* 51 (November 1988): 210.
8. Cited in Peter McNerney. "Apocalypse Then: Hollywood Looks Back at Vietnam." *Film Quarterly* 33 (Winter 1979–80): 27.
9. McNerney. "Apocalypse Then." 27.
10. Gregory Waller. "Rambo: Getting to Win This Time." Unpublished manuscript, University of Kentucky, 1988: 16.
11. Studlar and Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry." 13.
12. Studlar and Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry." 11.
13. Louis Gianetti. *Understanding Movies*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976, 15.
14. Kenneth Burke. *Permanence and Change*. New York: New Republic, 1935, 284.
15. Bill Nichols. *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981, 99.