RELIGION AND POLITICS
IN FILMS ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIBERAL/CONSERVATIVE DIVIDE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prophetic and Priestly Type</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The My Lai Massacre</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Types in Oliver Stone’s <em>Platoon</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF “LIBERAL HOLLYWOOD”</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Production Code</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Blacklist</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Hollywood Left Re-emerges</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Film Schools</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnam Syndrome</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>EVIL AND SUFFERING IN FILMS ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useless Suffering</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Platoon</em> Depicts Useless Suffering</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>THE VIETNAM WAR MORALITY TALE</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>VIETNAM VETERANS: MORE SUFFERING AND DEMONIZATION</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuing to Suffer</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veteran Exploitation Films</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the first century of the American film industry, a struggle has persisted over the kinds of values that would be depicted in American films. Hollywood’s tendency to make films that represented liberal or leftist ideals often brought the film industry into tension with the dominant religious and political hierarchy. This thesis examines how long-dormant fissures between liberals and conservatives came to the surface after World War II; and how those divisions manifest themselves in the discourse of films about the Vietnam War.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The film industry often creates debates helpful for understanding religion within the context of American Culture. If a film sparks a controversy, the reasons for that controversy can tell us much about our society. R. Lawrence Moore discussed the film industry as a critical site in the struggle between conservatives and liberals.¹ For example, when director Martin Scorsese announced plans to adapt The Last Temptation of Christ, from a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, Christian conservative groups ardently opposed the project. Moore tells us that struggles like this are an extension of conflicts that have played out during the commodification of the novel, the radio, the theater, and all other forms of mass media and popular culture.²

This thesis begins by examining how the divide between conservatives and liberals began opening after World War II; and how it continued to widen through the Vietnam Era as well as the rest of the twentieth century.

² Ibid 16.
I then discuss ways in which Hollywood became a site in the battle between these coalescing factions. From the late 1970s until 2002, the conventions of the Vietnam genre amounted to a unanimous liberal message spoken in this voice.

This is my thesis: Liberals, who believe their opponents to be conservative Christians, have made films critical of the Vietnam War. Instead of using secular reasoning, which they believe Christian conservatives will dismiss, they use religious discourse—themes of evil and suffering as well as the depiction of characters that face great moral dilemmas that test the codes of Judeo-Christian ethics—in order to confront their critics in their own vernacular.

In the first chapter, I discuss the evolution of what Robert Wuthnow refers to as the liberal/conservative divide. I intend to show that attitudes of deep distrust between liberals and conservatives were most clearly defined by the Vietnam War. Therefore, any text about the Vietnam War must include discourse pertaining to the difference between liberals and conservatives.

Wuthnow describes the ongoing division in American religion and politics as being built on old fissures that date back to the antebellum period then reemerge after
World War I. This divide opened wider in the 1960s because of the different approaches taken by liberals and conservatives to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. Amanda Porterfield also describes ways in which the Vietnam Era contributed to the widening of the divide. She refers to the liberals as the “prophetic” and conservatives as the “priestly” voices of the period. She pinpoints the My Lai massacre as the event that polarized the sides more than any other because of the opposing and intractable views each side had of the event. This division is portrayed in former Vietnam Veteran Oliver Stone’s semi-autobiographical film *Platoon*. In this film, the platoon is a symbolic body divided evenly between priestly/conservative types and prophetic/liberal types. These two sides are almost as much of a threat to one another as the Vietcong.

In chapter 3, I intend to show that the film industry during the seventies and eighties—when most of the most important anti-Vietnam War films were made—predominantly held liberal attitudes about politics and religion. Film historian Dan Georgakas attributes the strong re-emergence

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of liberal filmmaking to the widespread discrediting of Communist witch-hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.\(^6\)

While anti-Vietnam War films were a large part of the leftist backlash, conservatism in general was attacked on several fronts by filmmakers.

Most of these filmmakers were in college during the sixties when the universities were bastions of liberal sentiment. This chapter also shows the link between liberal Universities and liberal Hollywood: film school. Most of the directors of these anti-Vietnam War films went to the most prestigious (and most liberal) film schools.

Not only was Stone a veteran of the Vietnam War, he was also a product of one of these liberal film schools—New York University. Stone (and his fellow students who became directors) in part used their films about the war in an effort to deter other wars. These films became a large factor in the demand that the United States stay out of conflicts that did not explicitly serve national interests. Historian Marilyn B. Young refers to this as Vietnam Syndrome—a name given to the phenomenon by foreign

\(^5\) Porterfield 93.
policymakers. Stone believed that *Platoon* coming out in 1986, ten years later than he intended was important because it became a popular film with an antiwar message at a time when memories of Vietnam had been fading.

Chapters 4–6 describe the types of religious discourse used by antiwar filmmakers. In chapter 3, I will discuss films about the Vietnam War which include discourse on the themes of evil or suffering. Vietnam War filmmakers commonly use the religious theme of evil or suffering because this is a theme with which Christians should identify, since Christians are supposed to aid the less fortunate. If the soldiers' experience (or the Vietnamese experience) amounts to useless suffering that accomplished no goal; it must be un-Christian to support this war or others like it.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the tendency of anti-Vietnam War films to be structured as morality tale. Anti-Vietnam War filmmakers created characters with strong moral codes usually consistent with Judeo-Christian ethics. These characters then become involved in dilemmas that tempt them to abandon their beliefs. The filmmakers make the temptation harder to resist by showing repeatedly that

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Vietnam is an amoral place and that any behavior can be justified there.

Chapter 6 discusses the continuing suffering of the Vietnam Veteran once he returns home to the United States. Films about Vietnam Veterans show how the suffering explained above continues once the soldier returns home. Many of these films depict Vietnam Veterans as anti-social monsters. This genre quickly mutated, using elements of the occult to represent an anti-Christian retribution wrought by soldiers who literally become monsters.

In Chapter 7, I will discuss how conservatives have responded to the liberal messages of the anti-Vietnam War films. I will look at a response from a conservative film critic, a conservative politician, and a conservative filmmaker. The response of that filmmaker comes in the form of the first Vietnam War film with an overtly conservative voice since *The Green Berets* (1968)—the 2002 film, Randall Wallace’s *We Were Soldiers*. The discrimination faced by Wallace, a devout Catholic with a seminary background who had to essentially pay for the film himself, shows that Hollywood remains as liberal as ever. The controversy that followed *We Were Soldiers*—Stone, among others, lashed out at the film, calling it a
“desecration of memory”—shows that Wuthnow’s divide remains quite deep.\textsuperscript{8}

CHAPTER 2
THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIBERAL/CONSERVATIVE DIVIDE

If the anti-Vietnam War films of the second half of the Twentieth Century are messages sent from liberals to conservatives, then we must start by defining the terms liberal and conservative. How and when did these terms emerge? What characteristics do liberals commonly share? What do conservatives value? What motivates these groups? Do they truly exist? In this chapter I will examine how liberals and conservatives define themselves and each other. I will look at the evolution of this divide and attempt to understand the role of the Vietnam War in deeply polarizing American culture.

Robert Wuthnow describes the current division in American religion and politics as being built on old fissures that date back to the antebellum period, when the emergence of science allowed liberals to use theories like Darwin’s theory of evolution to challenge the religious establishment.\(^9\) Wuthnow believes that both sides of what he calls the “liberal/conservative divide” recognize “the

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\(^9\) Wuthnow. 370.
They also recognize the “the predominance of ‘fundamentalists,’ ‘evangelicals,’ and ‘religious conservatives’ in one camp and the predominance of ‘religious liberals’, ‘humanists’ and ‘secularists’ in the other”. Both sides also generally feel deep hostility and have strong misgivings about the other.

Wuthnow warns that these two groups have within them a variety of distinct entities that do not typically identify with one another. For instance, fundamentalists often make efforts to distinguish themselves from evangelicals. Similar distinctions are made throughout both the right and the left. Wuthnow argues that the binary way of thinking exists in the “popular mind” where it is treated as a reality.

This liberal/conservative division runs through religions and denominations. Among Christian denominations, Wuthnow mentions that Southern Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Catholics all experience divisions between liberal and conservative church members. Before the liberal/conservative divide, America had a tripartite religious system. This system was based on two

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10 ibid. 371.
11 Wuthnow. 371.
12 ibid. 372.
prevailing conflicts: Protestants vs. Catholics and Christians vs. Jews. This model dissolved, according to Wuthnow, because its basic divisions were eroded by interfaith cooperation, greater education, remembrance of the Holocaust and the growth of the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{13}

To a great extent, Wuthnow credits the widening of the “old fissures” between conservatives and liberals to the dramatic civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s. With the advent of great social change, liberals and conservatives showed a considerable difference in problem solving methods. According to Wuthnow, values were much more important to conservatives, while behavior mattered more to liberals. Whether on not behavior would result that could alleviate racial discrimination or the war in Southeast Asia was not relevant to conservatives, rather what mattered were the values that motivated one’s actions. Conversely, liberals believed that behavior was more important than values and that social institutions needed to be changed to bring behavior and values into agreement.

**Prophetic and Priestly Types**

In her book, *The Transformation of American Religion*, Amanda Porterfield describes how the Vietnam War polarized the country into two fundamentally different groups. These

\textsuperscript{13} ibid. 378.
groups parallel Wuthnow’s liberal/conservative divide. Using the terminology of Max Weber, Porterfield goes into great detail identifying the “prophetic” and “priestly” voices of the period.

Delineation of the prophetic and priestly types first occurred during the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing rise of Puritanism. Protestants were the prophetic forces; Catholics were the priestly. By the 1960s however, Protestantism had become the traditional patriarchy. Catholics were critical of the prevailing Protestant patriarchy while investing in their own patriarchy. When the Vietnam War came, the prophetic types and the priestly types emerged from both Protestant and Catholic communities (Jews largely supported and often led the prophetic types). This shift mirrors Wuthnow’s explanation of how America shifted from the tripartite system to the liberal/conservative divide.

On the function of the priestly type Weber wrote, “Priesthoods have always (in the interests of traditionalism) protected patriarchalism against impersonal relationships of dependence.” This group was widely invested in the patriarchal structures and traditions of

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14 Porterfield. 89.
15 ibid. 90.
16 Quoted in: Porterfield. 89.
America. As with the priestly voice of the Protestant Reformation, the priestly type of the sixties was rooted in a traditional role of religion—"to preserve the stability of the material world." Along with this came a loyalty to the government and support for the war effort. Part of the reason this group maintained loyalty to the war effort was the thinking that if America was wrong about something as important as the war, then everything they invested their faith in might also be wrong.

Porterfield believes that the prophetic type emerged from the Vietnam era as the dominant worldview. Of the priestly type she wrote,

Cynicism became widespread, especially toward the structures and leaders of the United States government. And some of the people who came to feel most alienated from the government were conservatives, such as George Wallace, who blamed the antiwar activists of the sixties and seventies for destroying the traditional religious fabric of American society.¹⁷

She describes this group of people as taking up the post-war role of the prophetic type, touting a return to pre-1960s values (now a sacred myth of "how America used to be").¹⁸ According to Porterfield, this group blames "cultural relativism and rampant hedonism" for the onset of these current "dark ages".
Porterfield describes the antiwar, prophetic type as typically economically and educationally privileged, young and self-centered.\textsuperscript{19} This large group internalized religious beliefs that called for fairness rooted in good conscience. They believed that the government and the military had become mechanical. What they considered the “mindless destruction of human life going on in Vietnam” disagreed with their religious upbringing. Porterfield believes that what they did not understand was “how privileged and potentially subversive their education in ethical reasoning had been”.\textsuperscript{20} Their education obligated them to stand in moral opposition to society. This agrees with Wuthnow’s assertion that liberals favor correct behavior over correct values and will change society if necessary to bring it into agreement with proper behavior.

\textbf{The My Lai Massacre}

The division between the priestly type and prophetic type deepened throughout the war. Porterfield believes that the revelation of the My Lai massacre served to polarize the priestly type and the prophetic type beyond the point of impasse. In March of 1968—as an unofficial, partial response to the Tet Offensive—a platoon of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Porterfield. 93.  \\
\textsuperscript{18} ibid. 94.  \\
\textsuperscript{19} Porterfield. 90. 
\end{flushleft}
American soldiers killed almost everyone in the South Vietnam village of My Lai.\textsuperscript{21}

Seymour Hersh’s revealing articles in the \textit{New York Times} laid bare the events of My Lai and the subsequent cover up to the people of the United States. The My Lai massacre was no doubt a horrific atrocity. Many of the women were raped before being killed.\textsuperscript{22} Al Hubbard, executive secretary of the VVAW said that “My Lai was not an isolated incident” and that “[it] was only a minor step beyond the standard official United States Policy in Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{23} Historian Marilyn B. Young argues that the atrocities at My Lai spawned an identity crisis for many Americans who were brought up to believe that the American value structure could not allow for such aberrant behavior.\textsuperscript{24} These people then had to watch a significant portion of the American population argue that My Lai was not an aberration, rather a continuation in the pattern of American behavior that allowed the genocide of the Native Americans, slavery, colonialism, and long term social injustice.

\textsuperscript{20} ibid. 90.
\textsuperscript{21} Young. 243.
\textsuperscript{22} ibid. 243.
\textsuperscript{23} ibid. 256.
\textsuperscript{24} Young. 244.
Journalist David Obst thought that once the national media distributed stories about the My Lai massacre the American people would immediately cut off all support for the war. This, Obst believed, would make it impossible for the politicians in Washington to continue the war. According to Porterfield, Obst was so trapped in his view of the significance of the My Lai massacre that he failed to see the ways in which those with a pro-war perspective could continue to believe in their cause. Obst did not explain fully in his story that Lieutenant Calley was at fault for breaking the rules of the U.S. military, not the entire war effort. As soon as the story was reported, Calley was arrested and tried in due course. Even though there was an attempted cover-up, it could be argued that since the cover-up failed, the system worked. To those who believed in the war effort to begin with, the story was certainly not sufficient to resolve anything, much less the immediate resolution that Obst and many in the antiwar movement imagined.

The opposing perceptions of My Lai by the pro-war and antiwar contingents served the purpose of further mystifying the beliefs of the other. For the antiwar group, My Lai was a barometer for how out of control our

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25 Porterfield. 97.
forces had become and that anyone would dispute that must be in favor of winning at all costs. The Pro-war group believed the incident was wrong, but that it had been dealt with effectively and that it was just another attempt of the unpatriotic antiwar forces to undermine the efforts of our troops. Liberals and conservatives moved even further apart ideologically and their distrust of the other grew.

Types in Oliver Stone’s Platoon

Of Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War film Platoon, critic Stuart Voytilla writes, “The Vietcong, the apparent enemy, are beyond dehumanized uniforms becoming literal shadows that flit through the jungles. The Platoon--the sacred Hero’s Team of World War II--is the battlefield. And we have become our Enemy.”26 The Vietcong in Oliver Stone’s Platoon are just another factor to weigh (along with heat, fatigue, mines...) when considering the question of whether or not the war effort was worth it. Stone divides the military between those with pro-war tendencies and those with antiwar tendencies. It’s as if the soldiers were sent to Vietnam simply to have the debate that was going on at home, only their version of the debate was held among the landmines, with the Vietcong “shadows” watching, under a

26 Voytilla, Stuart. Myth and the Movies: Discovering the mythic structure of 50 unforgettable films; Michael Weise Productions; Studio City, California; 150.
blistering sun. Both factions were armed to the teeth, and the officers, who were supposed to lead and keep order, frequently became targets for their own men.

We can see Porterfield’s priestly and prophetic types in this division of the platoon. The ‘heads’ are Stone’s version of the prophetic type. According to Milton J. Bates, they share many of the same characteristics of the “portion of the working class which shared the antiwar sentiment, hedonism, gender-blurring, racial tolerance, recreational drugs and music of middle-class student culture.”27 The heads smoke pot the first time we see them. A poster of Ho Chi Minh hangs on the wall. When we come back to this warm, tight-knit group later in the film, they dance intimately with each other or with chairs and brooms to Smokey Robinson’s “Tracks of my Tears.”

The second group consists of the ‘juicers’. They represent Stone’s version of the priestly type. They tend to be very macho. They prefer beer to marijuana. They tend to come from rural locations. In one scene, Bunny demonstrates their masculinity when he bites a hole in a metal can of beer.28 They tend to use more racist language.

28 Bates. 119.
Elias (head/prophet) and Barnes (juicer/priest) most epitomize their group/type. Elias draws all the common cinematic Christ-like imagery. The scene in which Elias is finally killed is titled in the screenplay “Elias crucified.” Elias’s reason for going to Vietnam in the first place is to avoid jail.

Barnes, conversely, is identified as the Beast from the Book of Revelations—seven times shot, seven times survived. Elias was forced to defy his natural place and fight. Barnes, however, is a natural fighter. Barnes personifies the rhetoric of the priestly type’s need for discipline with the line, “When the machine breaks down, we break down.”

Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) represents the triumph of the prophetic type at the time of the Vietnam War. Chris’s character—and young Stone—matches Porterfield’s description of the war critic—well educated, economically privileged, young, and self-centered. At the beginning of the film, he’s obsessed with himself, writing, “Maybe I’ve finally found it, way down here in the mud. Maybe from down here I can start up again and be something I can be proud of, without having to fake it, be a fake human

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29 ibid. 108.
30 ibid. 109.
being." 31 Both Stone and Taylor went to Vietnam because they did not believe they should get out of service because they were privileged. All of these things amount to Chris having two mentors, one liberal and one conservative. In the end, it is the conservative mentor that Chris kills.

Stone’s film represents the attitudes of deep distrust between liberals and conservatives by showing them killing one another rather than the Vietcong. Stone is saying that the war itself had more to do with the ideological differences among Americans than it did with any ideological differences between Americans and the North Vietnamese.

31 ibid. 114.
CHAPTER 3
RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF “LIBERAL HOLLYWOOD”

From the earliest days of the film industry, filmmakers have struggled with members of the social hierarchy over the content of their work. People in power—religious figures and politicians—immediately recognized the power inherent in the medium. In his book, Politics and Politicians in American Film, Phillip Gianos wrote:

The history of movies is clear on one point: people in and out of the industry have behaved as though movies make a difference, as though they are powerful. From the beginning movies were the target of attempts from without to control their content; these were succeeded by attempts from within to do the same. In one case movie executives directed a campaign, using film as a weapon, to defeat a candidate in an election in the movies’ home state of California. And of course, there was the blacklist, the best known episode in the history of politics and film.32

In this chapter, I will explore the Wuthnow’s liberal/conservative divide as it manifested itself throughout the history of the film industry. This is important to the understanding of the messages of the anti-

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32 Gianos, Phillip L. Politics and Politicians in American Film; Praeger; Westport, Connecticut; 1998. 63.
Vietnam War film because the political climate of the industry is not always the same as the political climate of the rest of the country. The film industry during the seventies and eighties—when most important Vietnam War films were made—predominantly held liberal attitudes about politics and religion. In this chapter I will attempt to explain why.

The Production Code

In the early thirties, the film industry experienced widespread criticism for too much sexual and violent content. The industry took action before the government could, instituting the Production Code. This doctrine of ethics was devised by a Jesuit priest and a Catholic publisher commissioned for the task. Among the rules listed by the code was a dictate that characters who participate in “crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin” not be depicted in a sympathetic way. The code also called for “moral retribution” and “compensating moral values”. Even though Hollywood self-imposed the code, many of its filmmakers would spend countless hours devising ways to circumvent the code.

The Blacklist

After the relative harmony of World War II, during which the film industry largely aided the war cause, came the onset of what may very well be the most tumultuous period of American film history. In 1947, and again in 1951, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigated the film industry in an attempt to purge Hollywood of communists and communist sympathizers. The committee believed that communists had infiltrated Hollywood and were disseminating communist propaganda by way of American films. Reports surfaced that those in the film industry who were unsympathetic to the communist movement were commonly discriminated against.

Film historian Dan Georgakas argues that contrary to the contentions of HUAC, communists in Hollywood operated primarily from a defensive standpoint. The Communist Party’s focus was keeping anti-Soviet and anti-Left sentiment out of films. Georgakas also believes that liberalism rather than communism was the true target of HUAC. He writes:

The Right wished to discourage any Hollywood impulse to make films advocating social change at home or critical of foreign policy. The task of intimidation was focused on the role Communists played as

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34 Georgakas. 1.
35 ibid. 2.
Nearly 60 percent of all individuals called to testify and an equal percent of all those blacklisted were screenwriters. Only 20 percent of those called and 25 percent of those blacklisted were actors.\(^{36}\)

On November 24, 1949, Congress cited ten uncooperative screenwriters for contempt\(^{37}\). Within days a bloc of prominent Hollywood producers met at the Waldorf Astoria hotel and pledged that “no Communists or other subversives will be employed by Hollywood.” By the middle of the next year most of the so-called Hollywood Ten began serving one-year prison sentences.

As a result of the HUAC hearings, Hollywood overcompensated by releasing a series of strongly anti-Communist films.\(^{38}\) *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *Walk East on Beacon* (1952), *My Son John* (1952), and *Trial* (1955) were among the anti-Communist films issued in the wake of the HUAC hearings. In *Big Jim McClain* (1952), Hawaiian Communists were exposed by John Wayne. In *Trial*, it was a Mexican American depicted as an insincere mercenary for the Soviets. Each of these films traced the roots of the global communist conspiracy directly or indirectly to the Soviet Union.

\(^{36}\) Georgakas. 4.
\(^{37}\) Ibid. 6.
The Hollywood Left Re-Emerges


Liberal Film Schools

Most of the filmmakers of anti-Vietnam War films attended college during the sixties when the universities were at the heart of the counterculture. The link between liberal universities and liberal Hollywood became the liberal film school.

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38 Georgakas. 7.
In 1993, an anonymous film student discussed the extent to which liberal ideals had pervaded the film schools of the University of Southern California and the University of California at Los Angeles. These schools are vitally important to the film industry. Together, they have produced a large number of the industry’s most successful directors, writers, and producers. *Star Wars*, *The Godfather* trilogy, the *Indiana Jones* franchise, the *Lethal Weapon* series, *E.T.*, and *Rain Man* are just a few of the most financially successful films that have been made by filmmakers from these schools.

This anonymous film student, who used the pseudonym Arlene Sterling, discussed the hostility that met any idea that seemed conservative at these schools. Conversely, any idea that struck a chord with liberalism was praised. Sterling writes,

‘Courageous’ is the standard term used to defend anything depressing, nihilistic, and bleak. In an industry in which calling somebody a ‘Republican’ constitutes a vicious personal smear, ‘courageous’ is also used to praise any story that promotes a liberal political cause. For example, a story about two oppressed housewives finding independence through lesbianism would be ‘courageous’. Any script involving gays, lesbians, abortion, minorities, or the evils

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39 Georgakas. 9.
of Western civilization would be praised as ‘timely’, as well as courageous.

Sterling also describes pervasive anti-religious sentiment. The only religious content found in the students’ scripts were condemnations. Priests or pastors were commonly portrayed as corrupt. Film students write script after script about characters that grow by losing their faith. Sterling writes about an occasion of blatant anti-religious sentiment:

During a class script reading, a student read a scene that he had written between a priest and a female environmental activist. In the scene, the priest attempts to show the activist the beauty of his church and his religion. After the scene was read aloud, another student immediately said, ‘I've got a real problem with this religious element. Being anti-religious myself, I just shut down when I start seeing crosses and cassocks. My first instinct is, some slope-browed Jesus freak is trying to convert me, which I hate.’ The red-faced writer anxiously defended the scene on the grounds that it was being taken out of context. ‘I'm passionately anti-church,’ he said. ‘In the end of the story, the priest realizes the evils of organized religion and gains the courage to break free of it. The activist shows him her religion, which is all about people and nature, not God. Please don't think I'm for God.’

The writer later presented a scene in which the priest has sex with the activist on the altar. This scene, according to Sterling, was greeted with

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41 Sterling. 79.
enthusiastic praise. Sterling describes a feeling of superiority among the students. Sony Pictures Chairman Peter Guber informed his class one day, "Congratulations! You're all members of the cultural elite!" Then added, "Just don't let anyone know how much fun it is." Sterling admits that there is a certain amount of irony used by the students and faculty using this term. Sterling wants it known that the term is quickly losing that irony. As an example, she cites a party invitation that had been circulated at USC that was addressed, "Attention: Members of the Cultural Elite."

This anonymous account probably should not be given too much weight, since there is no way to corroborate any of her stories. However, as a former film school student, I can attest that many of her accounts were similar to my experience and are not limited to schools in Los Angeles. Sterling’s accounts again affirm Wuthnow’s liberal/conservative divide. The idea of Hollywood being alienated from the rest of the country began as a conservative criticism. If these accusations of elitism are true, it seems that now idea runs both ways, with Hollywood happily alienated from the "unwashed masses"--a

42 Sterling, 79.
term that Sterling quotes her fellow students as using for those outside New York and Los Angeles.

Porterfield and Wuthnow have described colleges as being centers of the antiwar and civil rights movements of the sixties. This becomes significant when considering some of the most influential antiwar filmmakers came from these liberal institutions. Oliver Stone, writer and director of three Vietnam War films, and Martin Scorsese, who’s film *Taxi Driver* was the first film with a returning Vietnam Veteran as the central character, both attended New York University Film School. Francis Ford Coppola, who directed *Apocalypse Now*, was a graduate of UCLA’s film school. Brian DePalma, who directed *Casualties of War*, graduated from Columbia University.

**Vietnam Syndrome**

Once these directors made the transition from liberal university students to liberal filmmakers, many of them still wanted to stop a war that had already ended. If the Vietnam War had ended, then they would make sure that nothing like it ever happened again.

Marilyn B. Young identifies a “pathology” of foreign policy caused by the general revulsion to the Vietnam War that has been given a name by politicians--Vietnam
Syndrome.\textsuperscript{43} She identifies the symptoms as “grave reluctance to send American troops abroad, close questioning of administration interventionist appeals, consistent poll results indicating that most judge the Vietnam War to have been not simply a mistake but fundamentally wrong”.

As a result, subsequent administrations have had to cautiously select their theaters of combat. Ronald Reagan used two very brief incursions, an invasion of Grenada in 1983, and air strikes against Libya in 1986, to reestablish the United States’ ability to project power in the world if it were deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{44} Reagan also saw it necessary to revise the nature of the Vietnam War. He called it “a noble cause”.\textsuperscript{45} Another time he told reporters that after World War II, France had liberated North and South Vietnam and that their reunification was blocked because Ho Chi Minh refused to participate in elections. During his speech at the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial, Reagan encouraged the nation to move on “in unity and with resolve, with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as

\textsuperscript{43} Young. 314.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid. 315.
\textsuperscript{45} ibid. 315.
Those who fought did, and to always try to protect and serve the peace".  

Stone partially credits himself with the continuation of Vietnam Syndrome (though he did not use the term). He finished the script for _Platoon_ in 1976, but found the film industry unwilling to make such a film. Initially, Stone felt betrayed by a country that he called a “trasher of history”. After the film came out in 1986, Stone changed his mind, saying that the film coming out when it did made it more important. He saw it as “a possible antidote to the reborn militarism” of the Reagan Administration. Stone referred to the limited incursions in Grenada, Libya and Nicaragua. Stone believed that the popularity of his film, which won the Oscar for best picture and made over $100 million, had temporarily helped keep America out of another intervention.

Stone’s point is difficult to ignore. Not only was _Platoon_ an extremely visible film, it was followed by a second wave of anti-Vietnam films. High profile films such as, _Full Metal Jacket_ (1987), _Casualties of War_ (1989), _Born on the Fourth of July_ (1989) and _Heaven and Earth_ (1993) kept Vietnam on the big screen through the rest of the 1980s.

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46 Young. 328.
47 Hart, Dave.  Responses to War: An Intellectual and Cultural History; The University of Adelaide; 1998. 2.
the Reagan administration and throughout the Presidency of George H. W. Bush. These films all but disappeared during the Clinton Administration. This distribution in films tends to show that the film industry responded to the strong foreign policy rhetoric of Republican Presidents. Again we see that liberal filmmakers are addressing their conservative opponents.
Liberal anti-Vietnam War filmmakers often use religious themes to address their conservative opponents. One of the common themes that these filmmakers use is that of evil or suffering. I believe this theme has been deliberately chosen to resonate with Christian beliefs that abhor useless suffering. Antiwar filmmakers are making the following case for a conservative audience: If the soldiers’ experience accomplished no goal yet caused great pain and suffering; then the war must be un-Christian and therefore it was unethical to support the Vietnam war or any new war like it.

**Useless Suffering**

In his book, *The Working Class War*, Christian Appy shows that the Selective Service System or the draft was an obvious tool exploited by the rich to send a predominantly young, uneducated, working-class fighting force to Vietnam. Appy then uses the accounts of these men to show that the experience was so horrible on so many levels that any favoritism shown by the application of the draft system was
woefully unfair. Appy’s method demonstrates a wide variety of useless suffering.

By the late sixties, soldiers turned against the war in droves.\textsuperscript{48} Many of them wrote UUUU on their helmets, representing “the unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary, for the ungrateful”. In order to understand why so many of the troops felt so unappreciated, one must understand the cumulative effect of the war’s many anxieties.

The suffering of any American soldier in Vietnam began with the serious problems presented by walking. In Tim O’Brien’s \textit{If I Die in a Combat Zone}, he explains that his unit met with enemy fire only once in his entire tour of duty. That was because the tactics utilized by the North Vietnamese forced American troops to walk endlessly in search of a hidden enemy. As a result, mines were a constant concern, often a greater concern than enemy troops.\textsuperscript{49} During one five week period in 1966, a Marine infantry company of 175 men lost 64 due to deaths and injuries caused by mines and only three other casualties. Even during lulls in combat, mines killed. During July of 1969, when there were few clashes between opposing armies


\textsuperscript{49} ibid. 170.
in the four northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, mines caused 41 percent of casualties.\textsuperscript{50} The mental anguish at second-guessing every step repeatedly preyed on the minds of the American soldiers.

Even if the anxiety of mines had been removed, walking was still very dangerous and was responsible for thousands of American deaths.\textsuperscript{51} During the periods of warmest weather, deaths from heat exhaustion exceeded death from combat. Victor Bellotti, a member of Bravo Company, told of an occasion when the men of Bravo Company drank so much of their own sweat that they became sick. Then they continued the practice hoping to be sent to an air-conditioned hospital.\textsuperscript{52} The troops walked for twenty days without a sign of the enemy, yet in the first three days of the march sixty-five men had to be flown out due to heat exhaustion. Often enemy Vietnamese would wait until the men were so exhausted that they were ineffective before they would strike.

Even successes sometimes bred damaging psychological effects. Often when troops were finally able to engage and defeat the enemy in the battlefield, the land fought for

\textsuperscript{50} Appy. 176.
\textsuperscript{51} ibid. 180.
\textsuperscript{52} ibid. 181.
was soon abandoned.\cite{Appy226} This reinforced the idea that the men were simply killers and that the war was about nothing more than endlessly killing the enemy, not about borders or occupation. The military command’s top priority was to produce a high enemy body count.\cite{ibid156} The news reported the count daily. Therefore, the average American thought of kills as a measure of progress.

The fact that officers often used troops as bait to lure out the enemy bred a great deal of resentment among troops.\cite{ibid162} Stanley Goff, a decorated machine gunner described how this strategy worked:

The purpose of [night movement] was for you to walk up on Charlie and for him to hit you, and then for our hardware to wipe them out... That was all we were--bait. They couldn’t find Charlie any other way. They knew there was a regiment out there. They weren’t looking for just a handful of VC. Actually, they’d love for us to run into a regiment that would just wipe us out. Then they could plaster the regiment [with air strikes and artillery] and they’d have a big body count. The General gets another damned medal. He gets promoted. “Oh, I only lost two hundred men, but I killed two thousand.”\cite{ibid184}

Many of these air strikes killed American soldiers.\cite{ibid185}
As the war continued, these anxieties resulted in a growing anger among the troops. When members of a platoon were killed, hopes of revenge motivated many American troops. The meticulous attention many soldiers paid to their kill counts was payback for every bit of suffering they have endured while in Vietnam. Veteran Frank Matthews describes what a motivational factor payback was for his marine unit:

After about a month I had a friend—as much friendship as you can make in a month—get shot. He said, ‘Pay ‘em back for me.’ From then on, if anybody got hurt we wanted revenge more than anything else. Every time we got psyched up for a patrol it was to pay ‘em back. If another company down the road got waxed the night before, we were going out that night and pay ‘em back. Payback was all we were doing.

Another way soldiers processed the unreality around them was to think of the war as a movie. Many soldiers told of both acting in and watching the war simultaneously. Appy writes, “[T]he metaphor of motion pictures helps explain a two-sided emotion: the feeling of participating in events far beyond ordinary experience (blown up on a huge screen) yet being powerless to control the outcome of the story. He feels at once the heady self-importance of the movie star and the helplessness of the

58 Appy. 229.
59 ibid. 229.
moviegoer, impotent to affect the actions unfolding on the screen.”

Veteran Frank Matthews, describes how dangerous that kind of thinking could be:

Once in the middle of a firefight I decided to pull a John Wayne stunt. I saw a VC wide open, but it was just too easy [to kill him immediately]. So I hollered at him first so he’d see me. Then I took off toward this log, jumped over, wanting to pop up shooting on the other side. But I broke my arm trying to pull that stunt. I wrote a letter to John Wayne telling him there was no damn way that stunt could work cause I broke my wrist trying it. I never got an answer, but I sure wrote him.

The feeling of the unreality of their surroundings manifest itself in the way Americans talked about their setting. American troops referred to the United States as “The World”. Troops routinely used the phrase, “When I get back to the World...” to indicate what they would do when they returned to their homes in America. This terminology sets Vietnam in opposition to the world as they knew it. Appy wrote, “The war proved so pointless, so contradictory, and so alien to any common assumption about life, they could not even locate the experience in the known world.” Vietnam contained so many different kinds of tortures, that

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60 ibid. 281.
61 Appy. 281.
62 ibid. 281.
63 ibid. 290.
the troops located this hellish place on a metaphysical plane. It could not be a geographical place on the Earth they knew. Making this psychological jump to a world without familiar moral structures allowed the soldiers to justify any kind of behavior. Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*, describes the phenomenon this way:

As for the United States, we did not call it ‘the World’ for nothing; it might as well have been on another planet. There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no newspapers, or any of the restraining influences without which the earth’s population of virtuous people would be reduced by ninety-five percent. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state.

**Platoon Depicts Useless Suffering**

Stone begins *Platoon* with an ironic Biblical quote—Ecclesiastes 11:9—“Rejoice young man in thy youth.” Immediately Stone begins with a religious message for his religious conservative critics. That message is this, in Vietnam, no one could follow this command. Stone continues to methodically depicts the countless anxieties and tortures pointed out by Appy that make Vietnam an impossible place for young men to rejoice.

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64 ibid. 290.
65 Appy. 252.
Stone shows repeatedly the aimless wandering and fatigue of the platoon. In one scene Barnes accuses a private of damaging his own feet and then forces the soldier to continue marching despite the injury.

Taylor and some of the other heads grew increasingly frustrated at the administration of the war. Bates describes the disillusionment felt by Taylor at learning “that the same system of class privilege obtains in the military, where the warrior ethos has given way to the ethos of the corporate manager.” One such calculation places the battalion near the Cambodian border, within striking distance of an NVA regiment. Taylor says, “We knew we were going to be the bait to lure them out.” Phantom jets bomb both sides, causing heavy casualties on the part of the battalion in order to win the battle.

Stone depicts the revenge drive in Platoon with the assault Barnes leads on the village that supported the VC that killed a platoon member. Taylor describes Barnes as their “Ahab” and “the center of their rage”. Payback remains a crucial theme throughout the film. As the Platoon degenerates, the object of vengeance shifts from the Vietnamese to themselves. Chris takes revenge on Barnes.

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66 ibid. 252.
Lust for revenge, the heat, the kill count, the specter of ambushes and landmines, being used as bait all amount to unending suffering and anxiety on the part of American soldiers. Most of the soldiers in these films are sympathetic characters that viewers are made to identify with by skilled directors, screenwriters and actors. Theoretically, any Christian conservative should be swayed by this horrific display of useless suffering.

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67 Bates. lll.
A common trait of the Vietnam combat film is that of the morality tale. The filmmakers of this genre are so interested in the morality of the war that common Judeo-Christian morality codes dramatized by means of ethical dilemmas recur throughout these films. Brian DePalma’s *Casualties of War*, Terry George’s *A Bright Shining Lie*, Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* and Stone’s *Platoon* all question the morality of the behavior of soldiers in Vietnam.

Before the first scene of 1989’s *Casualties of War* we read these words on a title screen, “This film is based on an actual event that occurred during the Vietnam War. It was first reported by Daniel Lang in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1969.” Before the film begins we know we’re going to be watching a true story, or at least a Hollywood version of a true story. Telling us this minimizes escapism. Everything that happens in the story is judged by the audience who, in turn, question what they would do in each scenario. This method creates a greater communal response.
Before Private Ericksonn (Michael J. Fox) encounters his moral dilemma, he first has to come to terms with the amorality of Vietnam. He learns quickly. In the first battle scene he is nearly killed by falling into a VC booby trap. Sergeant Meserve (Sean Penn) saves him. Not much later we see Ericksonn playing with small South Vietnamese children. He wants to connect with the Vietnamese people. He’s interested in their farming. This lasts until a VC in a supposedly pacified village kills the beloved short-timer, Brown (Jack Gwaltney).

With Brown gone, Meserve becomes leader of the squad. On their next mission the squad kidnaps and eventually rapes a South Vietnamese teenager. Meserve insists that she’s VC even though everyone knows that is not true. A grunt named Hatch (John C. Reilly) thinks of Meserve as a born again Ghengis Khan and the girl as spoils of war.

When Ericksonn refuses to rape the girl, Meserve brazenly points out that Ericksonn could be killed by friendly fire at any time. He even accuses Ericksonn of being a Vietcong sympathizer. Later, a calm Meserve offers Ericksonn a different way to look at it. He explains, “It’s just, we’re out here right? It’s the boonies. We got the Cong

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68 Short-timers are troops with few days left in their tour of duty.
hiding in every tree waiting to grease us out of existence. We hump 5-6 hours a day through the ugliest snakes and stinging spiders. What do we got in all that but each other?” Meserve justifies his behavior by calling attention to the absurdity of their surroundings. He paraphrases badly from the bible to make his point, “Yay, though I walk through the valley of evil I fear no death. Because I am the meanest motherfucker in the valley.”

Meserve’s immorality is reinforced by his superiors. Ericksonn’s immediate supervisor, Lt. Reilly (Ving Rhames), responds to the charges by breaking up the squad and saying, “You can’t expect anything different in a combat zone.” Reilly’s superior, Captain Hill (Dale Dye), actually believes that Ericksonn is more damaging to the military than Meserve and the rest of the squad. He blames Ericksonn for wanting to embarrass the military.

In the end Ericksonn persists and gets the rapists in his squad court-martialed. Each of the four men received significant sentences ranging from eight years to life. We see Ericksonn later, as a grizzled short-timer explaining to another soldier why morality is important in Vietnam. He says,

This Goddamned thing is turning us on our heads. We’re getting it backwards, man. Just because at any second each of us may be
blown away, everybody’s acting like we can
do anything, man. And it don’t matter what
we do. But I’m thinking maybe it’s the
other way around. Maybe it’s just the
opposite. Because we might be dead in the
next split second maybe we should be extra
careful what we do. Maybe it matters more.
Jesus, maybe it matters more than we know.

With this epiphany Ericksson also becomes another of the
customs of the Vietnam Film, a good man who eventually
does the right thing.

In A Bright Shining Lie we follow the true story of
John Paul Vann’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Early in
the film, Vann looks forward to going to Vietnam. He calls
it the war of the future. In the days before escalated
U.S. involvement he is given his assignment, as an advisor
to the South Vietnamese command. Vann, however, takes the
initiative. When U.S. lives are lost, an emotional Vann
demands that the South Vietnamese general (Van Cao) hold
the line. In this scene we begin to see that U.S. lives
are sacred and South Vietnamese troops can be sacrificed to
save Americans. Slowly the U.S. takes control of the war
effort and the South Vietnamese become alienated from the
war.

Vann’s morals are tested in two ways in the film. The
first test comes from his commanders. A general (Harve
Presnell) explains to Vann that a clear loss in the outback
should be considered a victory and that he “better not spread any defeatist bullshit”. Vann responds to this by promptly going to the media and telling the truth, on the record, about what was going on in Vietnam. In Vann’s assessment the South Vietnamese had no desire to fight the communists. South Vietnamese officers cared more about Diem staying in power than they did about beating the North. He revealed that American kill counts were often inflated. Guns that were given to the South Vietnamese are quickly turned over to the VC. In his assessment the U.S. Army Advisory Program was totally ineffective. This makes Vann a press hero. Of course, this meant that the inner ranks closed him out of the war.

As successful as Vann is at telling the truth about the war, he is an equal failure in his marriage. In Vietnam, Vann begins an adulterous affair with a Vietnamese teacher (Vivian Wu). This is complicated by the fact that Vann had a prior indiscretion with a sixteen-year-old babysitter. After getting divorced from his wife Vann returns to Vietnam where he is forced to marry a young local woman whom he has impregnated. Vann devotes all of his time to the war and is never there for his wife and child.
Jean Paul Vann was killed suddenly when his helicopter crashed in bad weather. Though Vann is the rare unredeemed main character in a Vietnam War movie, his (true) story clearly illustrates that the immorality of the war breeds immorality in the people who fight in it.

In 1987, Stanley Kubrick finally released Full Metal Jacket. The only character in this film with a noticeable moral compass, Joker (Matthew Modine), is largely content to observe the immorality around him. Kubrick shows Joker's moral strength in a scene from boot camp on Parris Island. The Drill Instructor (R. Lee Ermy) demands that Joker profess his love for the Virgin Mary. Joker declines on the grounds that reversal would be worse than disobedience. Impressed the Drill Instructor promotes Joker to squad leader.

For the rest of the film Joker does not openly resist any of the injustice or immorality that takes place around him--on Parris Island or in Vietnam. Unlike Casualties of War, none of the troops are in the least bit inclined to report any of the atrocities fellow soldiers commit.

Kubrick establishes the hellish nature of South Vietnam by repeatedly showing how much the Americans and the South Vietnamese--allies in the war--hated one another. In the first scene in Saigon a teen South Vietnamese
prostitute repeats the line “me so horny”. Moments later a Vietcong steals a camera from Joker and his photographer Rafterman.

In the next scene Rafterman expresses his dislike to Joker. He says, “You know what pisses me off about these people? We’re supposed to be here to help them but they shit all over us.” Later, Joker and Rafterman are taken by helicopter to rendezvous with Cowboy’s platoon. In the chopper, a deranged soldier is shooting every Vietnamese in sight. He explains, “Anyone who runs is a VC. Anyone who stands still is a well disciplined VC.” A Corporal that Joker meets later tells him that the United States is here because “inside every gook is an American dying to get out.” Even egregious racism toward African-American troops is ignored by African-Americans. A white soldier, Animal Mother, tells a black soldier that “All niggers must hang,” and “thank God for the sickle-cell”. No one bats an eye. The unreality of Vietnam has overcome the simplest of moral scruples.

Aside from the rampant racism, Kubrick shows the immorality of the war in the official language used to report on the war. The Editor of the newspaper that Joker and Rafterman work for, Stars and Stripes, informs his reporters of some of the linguistic mistakes they’ve made.
A North Vietnamese army regular is a soldier. If Americans move Vietnamese they are evacuees, not refugees. Instead of seek and destroy, the reporters should use the term sweep and clear.

The editor tries to explain to Joker that he should be interested in making American soldiers feel good. “We run two basic stories,” he says, “Grunts who give half of their pay to buy gooks toothbrushes--the winning of hearts and minds, ok--and combat action that results in a kill--winning the war.” Again we see that killing is winning. The editor tells Joker to add a kill to his combat story. Joker protests that there was no proof of any kill. The editor responds, “That’s why we have the law of probability.” He tells Joker to write it again and “this time give it a happy ending.” The editor suggests that the kill could even be an officer.

Joker’s trek finally produces an ethical dilemma he can not walk away from. After losing three of their men, including Joker’s friend Cowboy, the troops find the sniper responsible--the very prostitute they had encountered in the ville. Rafterman shoots her, but leaves her alive and in extreme pain. Animal Mother, now the senior officer, orders the troops to leave her for the rats. As the dying Vietnamese girl begs someone to shoot her, Joker must
choose between compassion, killing her; or spite, letting her suffer for what she did to their friends. Joker finally chooses the moral high road and shoots the sniper, ending her suffering. For this he is both ridiculed and respected by different members of the platoon.

In Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, the main character, Chris Taylor’s moral dilemma is what brings him to Vietnam in the first place. He tells members of the platoon that he volunteered for active duty because he didn’t think it was fair that rich kids always get away with everything in society.

Like Ericksonn, Taylor quickly learns how unfair Vietnam could be. After waking another soldier, Junior, for his shift, Taylor goes to sleep. He wakes up shortly to find that Junior has fallen asleep and they are about to be ambushed by NVA. After the ambush—in which a soldier dies—Junior turns on Taylor and blames him for sleeping on watch. Although Taylor makes the most important moral decision at the end of the film, throughout most of the film questions about the morality of the war center more on Staff Sergeant Barnes.

John Stone argues that the hero/protagonist in the morality plays is important, but only insofar as he serves as a vehicle for examining characterizations of moral
extremes. The characterizations of good, and to a greater extent evil, provide the parameters for understanding what can be expected and, more significantly, what must be accepted in these environments. Oliver Stone fictionalizes a real event, the My Lai massacre, to further show how Barnes and his camp represent one moral extreme.

The platoon returns to a nearby village seeking revenge for the killing of one of their own. Numerous members of the platoon commit atrocities. The sequence in which the village atrocities are carried out is an attempt to show what Obst tried to show with his story about My Lai. The difference is that nobody was held accountable in the film, whereas in reality the people had Lieutenant Calley as a scapegoat.

Taylor’s final ethical dilemma comes at the end of the film when he is given the opportunity to kill Barnes. If he does it, he can avenge Elias’s murder and he can end Barnes immoral behavior once and for all. The problem is that killing is a categorically immoral act. If Platoon is a morality play, then it is vital to decipher the symbolism of Taylor’s climatic murder of Barnes. Richard Corliss writes,

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In the movie theaters, this illegal shooting usually gets a big hand. Good guy kills bad guy. But can Chris or the audience take moral satisfaction in this deed? Has Chris become like Elias, back from the grave to avenge his own murder? “You have to fight evil if you are going to be a good man,” Stone says. “That's why Chris killed Barnes. Because Barnes deserved killing.”

Chris is forced into the space between good and evil--he has to make a moral judgment about evil and he doesn’t back away from it.

Has Taylor become like Barnes in order to kill him?

Stone has another answer:

I also wanted to show that Chris came out of the war stained and soiled--like all of us, every vet. I want vets to face up to it and be proud they came back. So what if there was some bad in us? That's the price you pay. Chris pays a big price. He becomes a murderer.

Of all these morality plays, Platoon represents the morality of Vietnam the best, because the main character is left with the least appealing choice.

Each of these films shows a fundamentally decent central character tempted to commit amoral acts, acts which are not in keeping with America’s Judeo-Christian ethic. Again the Christian conservatives are being addressed.

None of these

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70 Corliss, Richard. “Platoon; Vietnam, the way it really was on film” Time; Jan 26 1987. 54.
moral dilemmas would be moral dilemmas if they weren’t set in Vietnam. It is the amoral surroundings of the war that allow these ethical men to have their souls placed in peril. The point being communicated by the liberals to the conservatives is this: allow this war to happen and your code of ethics no longer exists.

CHAPTER 6
VIETNAM VETERANS: MORE SUFFERING AND DEMONIZATION

After their tours of duty ended, Vietnam veterans who had faced the terrors of the war returned to the world to find a new set of difficulties. According to Marilyn Young, as of 1991, one quarter to one third of the homeless were Vietnam Veterans. Symptons stemming from the trauma of service--flashbacks, severe distress, sleep problems, depression and rage--manifested years later. Doctors incorrectly treated victims of postwar trauma for post-traumatic stress disorder. These treatments did not necessarily take war-related causes under consideration.

Robert J. Lifton argues in his book, Home From the War, that veterans of other wars could make a much easier transition from combat back into society. Those veterans reconciled the evils of their war by focusing on the purpose for which they fought. After other wars, the greater purpose of the war would be repeatedly affirmed upon returning home. The stated purposes of the Vietnam

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72 Appy. 311.
73 ibid. 322.
War—to expel the invading NVA and to protect freedom and democracy for the South Vietnamese people—were continually contradicted by the soldiers’ experience during the war and by the clear lack of affirmation upon returning home. A greater number of veterans have committed suicide than the number of American soldiers killed during the Vietnam War.\footnote{Appy. 324.}

Film narratives about Vietnam veterans implicate Vietnam as an extremely evil place that transformed our soldiers into antisocial monsters. Beginning with Oliver Stone’s account of Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic’s autobiography \textit{Born on the Fourth of July}, I will examine these films in order to show how the filmmakers of this genre have consistently used the damaged psyche of the main character to demonstrate the evils of the war.

\textbf{Continuing To Suffer}

The beginning sequence of \textit{Born on the Fourth of July} shows clips from Kovic’s working-class 1950s childhood. These clips segue to an athletic Kovic competing as a wrestler while in high school. These scenes symbolize what will be lost when Kovic returns paralyzed from the war.

The young men of his working class town know little about what they are getting into. Kovic is so excited about going to fight in the war he tells his friends, “If
we don’t sign up soon we could miss it.” These young men believed that “communism is moving in everywhere”. When one of Kovic’s friends, Stevie, admits his reluctance to go to Vietnam, the others emasculate him. Even the local high school girls think the war is “neat”. Kovic speaks of fighting the war in terms of service to his country. He longs to prove himself by “freedom fighting” like past generations did in World War II and Korea.

After being paralyzed in the war, Kovic returns home with a sense of entitlement that quickly gives way to disillusionment. Kovic encounters many horrors in the Veterans’ hospital. An insensitive nurse tells him that “no one around here cares about your Vietnam.” Later, an inattentive nurse leaves him staring at his own vomit for hours. Another fails to understand why a paralyzed veteran would care to keep a broken leg. When Kovic finally gets to see a doctor, the doctor apologizes for all the budget cuts and their inability to take care of the wounded vets properly.

When he moves back in with his parents he finds that his brother is adamantly opposed to the war. The rejection manifests itself in alcoholism. One night while drinking he tells a friend that during the attack that paralyzed him, he was initially shot in the foot. He then tells this
friend that he wishes he had stayed down and not tried to be a hero. He describes his counter-attack as acting like John Wayne. Kovic describes the impact patriotic war films had on his youth.

Every Saturday afternoon we’d all go down to the movies in the shopping center and watch... war movies with John Wayne and Audie Murphy... I’ll never forget Audie Murphy in To Hell and Back. At the end he jumps on top of a flaming tank that’s just about to explode and grabs the machine gun blasting it into the German lines. There were gasoline flames roaring around his legs, but he just kept firing that machine gun. It was the greatest movie I ever saw in my life... after it was over Castiglia and I crawled all over the back yard playing guns and army, making commando raids all summer into Ackerman’s housing project blasting away at the imaginary enemy... throwing dirt bombs and rocks into the windows, making loud explosions like hand grenades with our voices then charging in with our Matty Mattel machine guns blazing. I bandaged up the German who was still alive and had Castiglia question him as I threw a couple more grenades. 

Eventually Kovic learns of a place in Mexico where disabled vets have congregated. The place represents a sort of city on a hill for handicapped vets. In a futile attempt to regain their lost sexuality they surround themselves with cheap prostitutes.

Fed up, Kovic returns home and becomes a part of the

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antiwar movement. Stone explains how the return home could turn a person against the war as effectively as service could. He writes, “I can't tell you how cold a homecoming it was. In my experience, however, the majority of the American people didn't really care either way because they were making an enormous amount of money at the time; under Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society had started and an economic boom was underway.”

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic returns home to find that a friend who had avoided the war now owned a successful restaurant. After mocking Kovic’s belief in the domino theory he offers Kovic a job as cashier. The men who went to war missed the opportunities, and many never recovered. “So,” Stone said, “we fought two wars back to back, and the one at home was, in some respects, a struggle against our society's indifference to and denial of the one overseas: a denial of Vietnam, a denial of pain, a denial of people like Ron Kovic and myself.”

In Martin Scorsese’s 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, we see a Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle (Robert DiNiro), struggle to reintegrate into society. Bickle becomes a taxi driver because he can’t sleep nights. While applying for the job

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76 Stone, Oliver. 3.
77 ibid.
he makes a subtle statement about the Vietnam War--“My driving record is clean, like my conscience.” Bickle is extremely disillusioned with the moral climate of New York City. He wishes for “a real rain to wash the scum off the streets”. Bickle falls for a high-class campaign volunteer (Cybil Sheppard). He thinks of her as a pure angel emerging from a filthy mass.

When the presidential candidate that she supports asks Bickle what bothers him the most about America, Bickle answers that he would really like to see someone clean up New York. Bickle’s behavior gradually darkens as he becomes more and more obsessed with Sheppard’s character. He stalks the candidate. Bickle buys several guns and decides to assassinate the candidate. He is blocked from doing so, but he soon befriends a young prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), who provides him with a new target for his angst. Though he harshly, self-righteously assaults her morality, Bickle--now wearing a Mohawk--kills her pimp in order to set Iris free.

In 1990’s Jacob’s Ladder the angst of reintegration manifests itself in a much more spiritual fashion. Jacob (Tim Robbins) plays a soldier killed in Vietnam. The film unfolds in three different time frames--before the war, during the war, and after the war. Even though he dies in
the war, we see his life after the war, during which Jacob suffers greatly. This timeframe acts as a Samsara like burning away of the parts of his life that Jacob can’t let go. The demons haunting him do so because, though he has died, he can not relinquish the pain of losing his son and the fact that his regiment in Vietnam slaughtered each other. They did so after they were given experimental drugs by the government meant to enhance the aggressiveness of the demoralized troops. Though no one has ever proved that such experiments took place, “Sixty Minutes” has long maintained that experiments happened. A CIA radical hunts Jacob down and explains that the drugs the government gave them resulted in the troops killing one another like animals.

The ghouls that haunt Jacob’s post-Vietnam life are another way of describing the war as evil. Anything that could create such spiritual angst must have been a living hell. When Jacob finally receives the spiritual guidance he needs (from a cherub disguised as a chiropractor) he is finally able to get over the horrors of the war. A bright light consumes him and he is taken into Nirvana. The film then cuts to a makeshift hospital in Vietnam where we learn

Jacob has died. A doctor covers his body with a blanket and says, “He put up a hell of a fight.”

**Veteran Exploitation Films**

*Born on the Fourth of July*, *Taxi Driver* and *Jacob’s Ladder* are three of the more credible examples of films about Vietnam veterans. Many of the films that have depicted them create a false myth of antisocial monsters. While *Taxi Driver* comes close to this, Travis Bickle manages to act according to a morality code. The stereotyping of the Vietnam veteran came from the desire of filmmakers in the sixties and seventies to make films about Vietnam without a budget sufficient to film combat sequences.\(^7^9\)

These films often made murderers out of veterans with their reasoning being that war itself turns men into killers and that their return to society would not stop their murderous urges. A psychotic veteran is diagnosed by a psychiatrist in the 1973 film *The Stone Killers*.\(^8^0\) The doctor explains the main character—Lipper’s—problem,

> Aggression and violence are part of the learning process. They’re habit forming. Now Lipper was a type of addict. We tend to count the victims among the innocent. Now, that’s not always so Lieutenant. After we’ve shed our pity for the basketcases and

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\(^7^9\) Muse, Eben J. *The Land of Nam*; Scarecrow Press, Inc.; Lanham, Maryland; 1995. 54.

\(^8^0\) ibid. 55.
the burned children, we’ve nothing left for the psychopath we’ve created. Vietnam doesn’t make heroes; it makes a generation of Lippers.

No other war produced such monsters, yet films about the antisocial Vietnam veteran became a genre. That genre soon mutated and quickly became fodder for horror films. In *The Ravager*, a little known 1970 horror film—and only one of many horror films to use veterans as monsters, a soldier who witnessed atrocities committed by the Vietcong returns home and begins to bomb lovers in their vehicles. Less supernatural fare, such as 1968’s *Tiger By the Tail* and 1971’s *The Bus is Coming* both tell the story of a confused veteran who kills his brother because he could not separate the reality of the war from the home front. In Elia Kazan’s *The Visitors* (1972) a scenario much like the one from *Casualties of War* spills over to the home front. The main character, Mike, is stalked by two soldiers from his squad in Vietnam that Mike had testified against for the rape of a Vietnamese woman. In order to gain their revenge they nonchalantly rape Mike’s girlfriend. Films about Vietnam vets were also conveniently merged with other genres in order to create antagonists who have been shaped by something profound and something other than race. The

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81 Muse. 56.
82 ibid. 58.
blaxploitation films of the seventies often made their stars (Jim Brown or Fred Williamson) veterans. The biker films genre also became synonymous with the veteran exploitation film.

While Vietnam veterans were rarely cast in the sillier slasher roles after the initial onslaught of these films in the seventies, the damaged Vietnam veteran has made a couple of recent appearances. John Goodman played a veteran still obsessed with the injustices of Vietnam in the Cohen brothers’ film *The Big Lebowski* (1997). Emilio Estevez played a Veteran who has lost all ability to function socially in *The War at Home* (1996). All of these movies used Veterans as characters with a subtext. They had all become at the very least abnormal because of their experience in Vietnam. These films—which far-outnumbered Vietnam combat films—repeatedly communicate to Christian conservatives that some horrible evil lurked in the Vietnam War and that allowing it to happen again would be un-Christian.
The reemergence of liberalism in Hollywood did not take hold until the early seventies. Anti-Vietnam War films didn’t start appearing with frequency until the late seventies. Into this void came 1968’s *The Green Berets*. This film was despised by critics, both for its political message as well as its aesthetics. It was perhaps so despised that up and coming filmmakers were motivated to respond to it and were encouraged that their responses would be well received because of the negative reviews.

John Wayne--a long time conservative voice in Hollywood--made *The Green Berets* in 1968, with the intention of reversing the growth in the antiwar movement.\textsuperscript{83} In a letter to President Johnson, Wayne wrote, “[It is] extremely important that not only the people of the United States but those all over the world should know why it is necessary for us to be there.”\textsuperscript{84} The Pentagon agreed to contribute to the film under the conditions that South Vietnamese brutality not be depicted and that the war in Vietnam not be referred to as a civil war.
These points were conveyed to the audience via the character of Sergeant Muldoon (Aldo Ray). When Muldoon is asked why the United States was participating in the war, he answered, “A soldier goes where he is told and fights whoever he is told to fight.” Another reporter asks why the United States should get involved in a war between the Vietnamese people. Muldoon points to weapons seized from the Vietnamese that had been made by the Soviets, the Chinese and the Czechs. He says, “What’s involved here is Communist domination of the world.”

This skeptical reporter’s character represents the antiwar movement. Over the course of the film, he travels to Vietnam with Col. Mike Kirby (Wayne) and gradually comes to embrace U.S. involvement in the war to such an extent that he picks up a rifle and becomes part of the war.

**What Is a Conservative Film?**

It took ten years for another significant Vietnam combat film to be made—though Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* went into production in 1974. These films were part of the liberal reemergence in Hollywood that Georgakas described. Conservative film critic Spencer Warren believes the rebirth of the conservative film came with the making of

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83 Gianos. 158.
84 Ibid. 159.
85 Gianos. 159.
George Lucas’s *Star Wars*. Warren recently defined the conventions of the conservative film. He calls for films that honor “God and country, tradition and family, freedom and resistance to tyranny, individual achievement and the American Dream”. He believes that films should celebrate America’s business creativity and should demonize collectivism. Warren decries the antiwar films of the seventies and eighties and celebrates Lucas for returning films to “American” themes of good versus evil.

The run of anti-Vietnam War films did not go unchallenged by conservative politicians either. In 1987, during Republican Representative from California Robert K. Dornan’s fifth term--he would later run for president and become an Emmy winning television personality--he lashed out at Hollywood for what he considered to be the unfair conventions of the Vietnam War film genre. Dornan served in the U.S. Air Force from 1953 to 1958 before covering the Vietnam War as a television journalist. As a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and House Veterans Committee, Dornan ripped Hollywood filmmakers, issuing the following statement.

> It is obvious the political Left in Hollywood is still feeling powerful pangs of

guilt over the bloody aftermath of the Vietnam War. After actively seeking a North
Vietnamese victory (euphemistically called American withdrawal), the Hollywood
‘liberals’ now refuse to accept any responsibility for the slaughter that followed, and vilify as ‘right-wing
fanatics’ and ‘fascists’ those who question the wisdom or motives of the antiwar
faction. In this respect, Hollywood has much in common with America’s self-anointed
intelligentsia, which still refuses to accept the obvious immorality of its antiwar, or more accurately, pro-Hanoi
position. To perpetuate the myth that Vietnam was anything but the ‘noble cause’
Ronald Reagan said it was, Hollywood has produced a string of movies that
consistently put the war and our fighting men in the most unflattering light.
*Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, and now the Academy Award-winning
*Platoon* all depict our fighting men as neurotics, drug addicts, rapists, or murderers. It makes one wonder how, with
armed forces like that, the United States managed to fight for two centuries without ever losing a significant military
engagement.

**Tigerland** and **We Were Soldiers**

Since the attacks of 9-11, Vietnam Syndrome has
apparently waned. Since then, President George W. Bush has
prosecuted two overseas wars. The militaristic phase that
Oliver Stone believed his film *Platoon* may have helped
stave off in 1986, has clearly returned in the wake of 9-
11. The last two Vietnam films—*Tigerland* (2000) and *We
Were Soldiers* (2002)—show how quickly the political voice
of the genre changed.
Tigerland

The last Vietnam film to come out before 9-11 was *Tigerland*. *Tigerland*—which is about training for the war and is never actually set in Vietnam—follows in the footsteps of other conventional anti-Vietnam War films. The movie makes Vietnam out to be an evil event and the characters face the similar moral dilemmas to the ones faced by the characters in the other Vietnam morality tales.

Based on the experiences of co-screenwriter Ross Klavan, the eponymous Tigerland is the final training zone for Army recruits before they are sent to Vietnam. The main character of the film, Roland Bozz (Colin Ferrel) deeply distrusts authority figures. He spends most of the film trying to devise ways to get out of the war or to get others out of it. Along the way he becomes a sergeant and also an alternate authority, as the privates trust him more than any of the Army’s leaders.

Bozz befriends Private Paxson (Matthew Davis). Together the two plot to get kicked out of the army before they can be sent to Vietnam. In this sequence, we see the same draft anxiety faced by Chris Taylor and some of Ron Kovic’s friends. Paxson and Bozz stand on top of a metal shed and agree to jump off in order to break their legs and
get discharged. They quickly think better of it. Paxson suggests Canada and Bozz counters with Mexico. Paxson tells Bozz that he is unable to leave anyway because he volunteered and if he ran, someone else would have to be drafted to take his place. Therefore, running would be unethical because another person may be killed in his place.

The filmmakers of Tigerland (a collaboration of director Joel Schumacher and screenwriters Klavan and Michael McGruther) construct a dualism along the lines of Stone’s good versus evil embodied by the battle between Elias and Barnes. In their dualism Bozz (non-conformist eccentric) is pit against Private Wilson (Shea Whigham playing a conformist sociopath). This dichotomy is clever, because it still stresses extremes, but these are the extremes of people deeply affected by the training experience. Bozz could never follow anyone other than himself and Wilson was driven mad by the rejection of Bozz and eventually the military establishment. So, on both sides of this dichotomy we see major flaws in the authoritarian strategy of American military training.
We Were Soldiers

Randall Wallace’s 2002 film We Were Soldiers was the first Vietnam War movie released after 9-11, and shows a remarkably different side of the war. For the first time soldiers are upstanding, moral, churchgoing, family men.

Recently Oliver Stone spoke out against We Were Soldiers, saying, “We Were Soldiers is a desecration of memory and the press supported it.” The reason Stone is so furious about this film is because it takes an event from early in the War—the epic battle in November 1965 for the La Drang Valley—and systematically responds to each of the moral concerns of the antiwar movement, which had not developed by that time.

Mel Gibson portrays Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, leader of the seventh Calvary regiment—the same regiment led by General Custer. Gibson embodies the prevailing social norms of the fifties and early sixties. He’s a deeply religious man, caring father, and loving husband. He counters every authority figure depicted in Vietnam combat films since Green Berets. He’s not cynical like Elias, not brutal like Barnes, not incompetent or incapable like the leaders Appy describes. An educated, erudite, warrior poet, Moore—who holds a masters degree—
continuously breaks the stereotype of the Vietnam era military authority figure.

The horrific tribulations of the war are brushed aside in one training scene. Moore trains his men to “ignore explosions, heat, dust, screams of the wounded” because in battle these are normal. Repeatedly characters affirm that they know what the war is about and support the reasoning behind it. At the end of the film, Moore returns home to his wife and family affected by the war, but functional, unlike Ron Kovic.

Moore and Joe Galloway, the authors of Moore’s biography We Were Soldiers Once...and Young, would only sell the film rights to Wallace after a long, personal courtship. Wallace described the process, “I would send them copies of two scripts to show them the kind of work I did and what I believed in and what my values were.”

Wallace is a devout Catholic with a seminary background. He acknowledges that his take on the Vietnam War film is not politically correct by Hollywood’s standards. Wallace financed the film himself. Through his relationship with Gibson—who won an Oscar for

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directing Wallace’s script for the film *Braveheart*—he was able to secure a distribution deal without ever subjecting the material to Hollywood’s editorial process.

When asked about liberal discrimination in Hollywood, Wallace said,

> Well, I've been in meetings where people who I like and respect have said things like, 'Don't do business with so and so. He's a Republican.' To me, that's like saying we ought to get together a blacklist, figure out who the conservatives are and make sure they don't have work. As for my own politics, I've voted both ways and will continue to. I often find there's a problem when people know that I come from a seminary background. I'll get this expectation that I should support their cause or be involved. I find people who want to use that, and I despise it." 90

Wallace believes that *We Were Soldiers* showed a side of the soldiers that no Vietnam War film has ever shown.

> "What we think of as a Vietnam-era film is men killing babies, raping civilians, or napalming innocents," Wallace said.

### Conclusion

The liberal/conservative divide began opening after World War II and became a clearly polarized rift in American ideology during the Vietnam War era. The film industry, fuelled by the radical students of 1960s who

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90 Chadwell. 2.
became the radical directors of the 1970s, repeatedly used the Vietnam War film as a political statement directed at conservatives. Combat images of all things un-Christian were meticulously made to seem real on the big screens of movie theaters in every town in America. Other films showed veterans returning home profoundly damaged. If this is the nature of the war, liberals were saying, then Christians should want nothing to do with it or any future war like it.

Hollywood has used the Vietnam War as subject material for a very long time. So long in fact that it could be argued that after the first wave of anti-Vietnam War films (1978-1979), all subsequent films set in Vietnam have been about liberal fear of what they have at least perceived to be aggression on the part of conservative foreign policy makers. Oliver Stone understood that even though *Platoon* was a story set in Vietnam—perhaps the most realistic film ever made about the war—the political results of the film were felt on the 1986 political landscape. If the film altered foreign policy it altered the foreign policy of Ronald Reagan, not Lyndon Johnson.

I believe that the approach I have used in this thesis can be broadened to include other fronts within the liberal/conservative divide. An example of one such genre
could be the political film. Recent works such as *All the Presidents Men*, *JFK*, *Nixon*, *Primary Colors*, *The Contender*, *Bob Roberts*, and *Cradle Will Rock* all reflect the reemergence of the liberal film industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century. An argument can be made that almost all films are political and can be read within a conservative or liberal framework. If this is the case, then Politics and Film could be just as fertile an area for interdisciplinary study as Religion and Film has been.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jay M. Allbritton was born on August 15, 1974, in the city of Los Angeles, California. He received the Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Florida in May of 2000. He then enrolled as a graduate student in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida in August of 2001. An aspiring writer, Jay is close to finishing his first novel, a science fiction comedy, which remains untitled. He also has co-wrote a screenplay (with fellow U.F. alumni, Kevin Kerins), which is in production in and around North Central Florida at the time of this writing.