The war film has long been one of Hollywood’s oldest and most successful genres. The first Academy Award for Best Picture, Wings (1927), was awarded to a film about World War I, while several actors have made the war film a staple of their movie careers. For the most part, the films of this genre have followed a set pattern in their history development and characterization. As a result, the genre itself has become part of what has been termed “America’s mythic landscape” (Hellmann, 1986). The term myth is narrowly defined here to mean the stories containing a people’s image of themselves in history. These myths are extreme simplifications of reality, but they are also a necessary part of a nation’s culture and can act as a blueprint by which to examine a nation’s past or prepare for its future. “Myths may often distort or conceal, but these stories are nevertheless always true in the sense that they express deeply held beliefs” (Hellmann, 1986).

While most war films produced before the Vietnam War served as propaganda films in which the characters struggle for or against something (i.e., for the “American way of life” or against the evils of Nazism, Fascism, or
Communism), the Vietnam War film represents a distinct break with these earlier traditions. Due in part to the unpopular nature of the war, Vietnam War films have usually attempted to present warfare as a battle between individuals, rather than a battle between “isms.” The characters in these films are very often common soldiers or “grunts,” for whom the war is devoid of grand strategy. This essay will attempt to determine what myths filmmakers created or helped to maintain in a select group of Vietnam War films.

In December 1966, actor John Wayne, who was himself perhaps the greatest example of a mythic figure in American film, decided that he wished to demonstrate his support for the American war effort in Vietnam by producing a film about the Vietnam War. Wayne, who had previously traveled to Vietnam in an effort to win American support for the war, intended to adapt the novel The Green Berets, written by Robin Moore, into what would be the first film to be produced concerning American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Wayne wrote directly to President Lyndon Johnson to ask for support for the project. Presidential aide Jack Valenti, later the CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America and a professor of government at American University, reportedly informed Johnson that, “If he [Wayne] made the picture he would be saying the things we want said” (Suid, 1978). Soon after this, Wayne went to the Department of Defense with an eight-page list of the men and material he would need. The list included the following: troops of Asian descent who could pass for Vietnamese, hundreds of Caucasian soldiers to play themselves, American armaments, captured enemy weapons, armored personnel carriers, tanks, bulldozers, jeeps, trucks, ambulances, and small arms. The Green Berets was just the kind of film that the military wanted and a grateful army eventually billed Wayne’s production company a mere $18,623.64 for the material, the eighty-five hours of flying time by UH-1 helicopters, and thirty-eight hundred man-days for military personnel taken away from their regular duties (Smith, 1975).

Most of the action in The Green Berets centers around Special Forces Colonel Mike Kirby (John Wayne) and his Green Berets. Kirby was not unlike most of the other characters whom Wayne had portrayed in his earlier war
films or westerns. In fact, there was no genuine effort to develop the character of Kirby or any of the other major characters in the film. Wayne relies on the mythic figure that he had already created in American film, rather than making a film that challenges the realities of the controversial war that was being fought in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this film perhaps makes the most sense when it is viewed not as a Vietnam War film but as a World War II film or a Western.

The first half of The Green Berets, which involves the defense of the Special Forces camp, possesses many similarities to the Western film genre, where Wayne had already gained his greatest fame. A sign over the main gate of the camp announces that one is entering Dodge City. The crossbow-toting “native” scouts are strikingly similar to Crow scouts employed by the U.S. Army on the American frontier. The Montagnard peasants represent the Green Berets and "Born Killers": Myth-Making and the Vietnam War in frightened frontier farmers, while the monolithic and savage Viet Cong take the place of the Indians. Finally, the Green Berets, and most importantly John Wayne himself, are the heroic cavalry who ride to the rescue. This portion of the film would take only a change of uniforms, location, and a few actors to become a Western in which John Wayne could portray the commander of the 7th Cavalry Regiment coming to the rescue of isolated Great Plains farmers who are terrorized by Indians. One of the other obvious allusions to the Western genre is the ending of the film, in which Wayne walks into the setting sun.

The second half of The Green Berets, which involves the elements of an espionage thriller, possesses many similarities to the World War II film genre, which had long been Wayne’s second home after the Western. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) general is an obvious copy of a suave and sophisticated Nazi officer on occupation duty in Vichy France. With his fancy quarters, a French staff car, and a decadent and bourgeois weakness for caviar, champagne, and a beautiful nightclub singer, who also happens to be a double agent, this character appears to have been taken out of any number of World War II films.
The Green Berets has been roundly criticized as a gross oversimplification of the war, or as James C. Wilson states, “...the cowboys and Indians, good versus evil melodrama” (Wilson, 1982). Likewise, Richard Schickel’s review of the film in Life was equally dismissive: His [Wayne’s] reference point is not life but movie tradition -- that long gray line of barracks’ humor, fighting speeches and small-unit bravery ... the contemplation of which stirs neither the peasants’ hearts nor minds, only such nostalgia as one feels for matinees of childhood (Hellmann, 1986). What is perhaps most interesting about these comments is that the film’s critics have failed to acknowledge that Wayne’s film was showing Middle-America its preferred myth about itself. Americans are portrayed as rugged, yet pure-hearted individualists, on a frontier landscape, aiding pastoral natives against both wild savages (the Viet Cong) and robot-like soldiers (the NVA), (Hellmann, 1986). The American people responded positively to this vision of themselves, despite picketing, protests, and even bomb-threats, the film was a great financial success.

Despite the financial success of The Green Berets, Hollywood’s movers and shakers felt that the Vietnam War was far too controversial, and therefore unprofitable, a topic for film and for a ten-year period no other films about the war were produced (Bregman, 1987). The next film to be made about American involvement in the Vietnam War was Go Tell the Spartans (1978). Go Tell the Spartans was based on the novel Incident at Muc Wa written by Daniel Ford. The title of the film refers to Herodotus’ account of tactical blunders and suicidal heroism at the Battle of Thermopylae. It was at that battle that three hundred Spartans defended a mountain pass to the death against a vastly superior Persian force. Herodotus claims that defenders left behind the message, “Stranger when you find us lying here, go tell the Spartans we obeyed their orders.”

The events of Go Tell the Spartans take place in Penang, South Vietnam, in 1964, when there were only a small number of Americans in Vietnam and their role was almost exclusively that of advisors. The story centers around Major Asa Barker (Burt Lancaster) and the unit he commands, Team 7 of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (the precursor of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam or MAC-V). Major Barker is a worn out “old
man" who is fighting in his third war and whose military career has become stagnant due to the dual problems of alcohol and womanizing. Barker’s character is an example of a classic mythic anti-hero. Despite his problems with alcohol and women, Barker is an inherently brave man who would never shirk his duty, nor would he ever fail to do the “right thing.” It is his devotion to duty and to his fellow soldiers that will eventually cost Barker his life.

While The Green Berets operated under an older system of myths, which had been used for World War II films and Westerns, Go Tell the Spartans begins to establish a new series of myths concerning American involvement in Vietnam. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), America’s ally, is presented as decadent and corrupt French-speaking officers and officials; vicious and unthinking noncommissioned officers (noncoms); and inept and poorly trained peasants among those who filled the ranks of the common soldiers. In addition, the American characters include: gung-ho generals who wish to expand American involvement in the war; a McNamara-esque, flowchart and computer intelligence officer spouting technical and psychological jargon; ambitious and cynical or brave but stupid junior officers; burnt-out non-coms; and drug-addicted common soldiers (Auster & Quart, 1988). These characterizations have been used in subsequent films and quickly became part of America’s mythic perception of the war in Vietnam. Go Tell the Spartans, therefore, represents an attempt do deal with the Vietnam War in myths that had been created explicitly for the war.

In the same year that Go Tell the Spartans premiered, director Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter (1978) became only the third American film whose subject matter dealt with American participation in the Vietnam War. Green Berets and "Born Killers": Myth-Making and the Vietnam War in Cimino has publicly stated that he did not intend to make a “Vietnam film.” He wanted “... to make a film about these kind of people -- Middle American steelworkers in a Slavic community. Like most ordinary people, they can be extraordinary in the face of crises. So the war is simply a means of testing their courage and will power” (Wilson, 1982). The main setting of the film is a tightly knit, ethnic community in the Pennsylvania steel town of Clairton. Three young men from this immigrant community, Michael Vronsky (Robert DeNiro), Nicholas Cevotarevich (Christopher Walken), and Steven (John
Savage), who have been best friends since childhood, willingly enlist in the army to fight in Vietnam. These central characters, however, will be irrevocably changed by their experiences in Vietnam.

The Deer Hunter is composed of three parts: before, during, and after the three friends’ tour of duty in Vietnam. The first part of the film focuses on the friends and their hometown of Clairton. The town is rendered as a seemingly idyllic blue-collar portrait of a mythic middle America that supposedly existed before the social chaos created by the Vietnam War and the economic decline of the 1970’s. The central image in this first sequence is the hunting trip. During a hunting trip, the personalities of the three main characters are established: Michael, as with every other experience, turns hunting into an intensely serious affair; Nick is both warmhearted and good-natured, but also rather bumbling; while Steven is quite shy. The character of Michael is clearly based on the myth of the frontier hero established by the central character of Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper’s novel, The Deerslayer. Both characters are chaste and honorable outsiders, who revere nature and are given to a purity of purpose embodied in the deer-hunting gospel of the one-shot kill (Quart, 1990). Likewise, Michael also possesses many similarities to the Western hero. The male-bonding, Michael’s repressed love for a “good woman,” and the confrontation with savages in a hostile landscape are all classic elements of the Western (Hellmann, 1986).

The second part of the film focuses on the three central characters during their service in Vietnam. It is in Vietnam that Michael finally rises to the occasion and begins to perform to mythic proportions. As the hunter of frontier myth, who often alluded to Indian folklore, Michael now wears a cloth headband and war paint (camouflage) (Hellmann, 1991). While Nick and Steven serve in a “normal” infantry unit, Michael serves as an airborne ranger, a highly trained, elite force, whose members are very often expected to operate independently. The brief sequence during which Michael is seen in combat has him performing actions suitable to a mythic frontier hero. The three characters are then captured by the Viet Cong and forced to participate in a game of Russian roulette. While Nick is terrified by the “game,” Michael remains outwardly defiant, shouting
encouragement and displaying an immense strength of will, which allows him, in truly mythic proportions, to almost singlehandedly kill his captors and rescue his friends.

The Vietnam War takes a heavy toll on the three characters. By the final section of the film, we see the results of the war on these men. A traumatized Nick has become addicted to heroin and is so psychologically crippled that he becomes a star in Saigon’s Russian roulette circuit. Steven is a despondent triple-amputee, who hides in a Veteran’s Administration hospital rather than returning home to his wife and child. Michael, while physically unharmed, is uncomfortable around his old friends and surroundings. Even his once favorite activity of hunting no longer holds its old allure for Michael, as he now views killing quite differently. Finally, Michael is even willing to break his self-imposed mythic Western hero’s chastity by sleeping with Nick’s old girlfriend, Linda (Meryl Streep).

After “giving in” to his own humanity, Michael attempts to return some sense of normalcy to the lives of his friends (Auster & Quart, 1988). Michael forces Steven to leave the VA hospital and return to his wife and child (despite his desire to remain isolated). Michael then returns to Saigon, during the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, to search for Nick, but when he finds him, Nick does not even recognize Michael. In an effort to spark Nick’s memory, Michael buys his way into a game of Russian roulette against Nick. At the moment Nick finally recognizes his old friend, he pulls the trigger and is instantly killed. The final sequence of the movie depicts Nick’s funeral back in Clairton. After the funeral, Michael and his friends gather in silence for breakfast, only to have that silence broken by a tearful rendition of “God Bless America.”

In The Deer Hunter, Cimino has created a film which harkens back to the mythic traditions of the Western or the frontier novel. The central character of Michael, who most clearly exhibits the characteristics of the Western or frontier hero, finds little relevance in the old European traditions of his hometown and turns to nature in order to find himself. This outsider status causes Michael to be regarded by his own friends with something between respectful awe and uneasy perplexity. Interestingly, the arrogant, boastful, and promiscuous Stanley (John
Cazale) represents the darkened mirror image of everything that Michael represses in himself, just as the villain in a Western is usually the mirror image of the hero (Hellmann, 1986)

The Russian roulette scene, which is undoubtedly one of the most enduring images of the film, is taken almost directly from the Western or frontier myth. The Indian captivity narrative, in which innocent whites are subjected to hideous tortures, is one of the oldest myths of American literature, making early appearances in the works of Puritan writers. The Viet Cong grin, drink beer, and bet money while forcing their captives to play Russian roulette, thereby exhibiting the cruelty which would have been attributed to the Iroquois in the Puritan narratives.

As in the Puritan captivity narratives, there are only two possible reactions for those who have been held in captivity: passive submission or violent retribution (Skotkin, 1973). Steven's physical mutilation causes him to be passively submissive. Michael purges his violent need for retribution by killing his captors, but by no means does he become completely passively submissive. Nick, unable to purge his need for violent retribution, will eventually follow both courses. Unable to call Linda, Nick turns his unleashed impulse to destroy back upon himself by playing Russian roulette.

The last film to premiere during the 1970's that dealt with American participation in the Vietnam War was Apocalypse Now (1979). Apocalypse Now, with pre-photographic work beginning as early as 1975, was a much anticipated film when it finally premiered in 1979. Most of the photography for the film, which was done on location in the Phillippines, was scheduled to last for only sixteen weeks, but it took more than a year before it was finished. During that time, the film’s sets were completely destroyed by a hurricane, leading man Martin Sheen suffered a heart attack, and director Francis Ford Coppola made almost daily changes to the film’s script.

The screenplay for Apocalypse Now was loosely based on the novel Heart of Darkness by Polish-born author Joseph Conrad. The main character of Conrad’s book was Marlow, who worked for a Belgian trading company. Marlow journeys up the Congo River to bring under control a renegade agent, Kurtz, who has succumbed to greed.
and madness, becoming a human god worshiped by a primitive tribe (Wilson, 1982). In Coppola’s film, Marlow has become Captain Benjamin L. Willard (Martin Sheen), a U.S. Army officer who works as an unofficial assassin. Willard has been ordered to travel up the Nung River into Cambodia to locate and “terminate the command” of a renegade Green Beret officer, Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando). Kurtz, whose methods the generals refer to as “unsound,” has organized a private army of Montagnard tribesmen and American deserters, and his main crime appears to be that he is successfully waging the war on his own terms.

Apocalypse Now begins in Saigon, where Willard sits drunk and half-crazed in a hotel room waiting for a mission. And for his sins, Willard states, he is given a mission. After receiving his orders, Willard begins his journey in a U.S. Navy patrol boat. Willard’s journey up the Nung River, which encompasses the first two-thirds of the film, is also a mythic journey of examination of both Vietnam’s past and the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Western world that caused both France and the United States to fight in Vietnam. Willard immediately recognizes this hypocrisy by stating that his mission to assassinate Kurtz as a murderer “. . . in this place [Vietnam] was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500.”

The character of Willard is, interestingly, very much a mythic anti-hero in the vain of the hard-boiled detective novels of the 1930’s. In Apocalypse Now, Willard is summoned from his seedy hotel room to receive his mission from a general who sits over an elegant lunch in an elaborately furnished trailer. In the hard-boiled detective novel, the private eye is very often summoned from his seedy downtown office by a wealthy and powerful individual who receives him in an impressive mansion and presents him a case for investigation. Similarly, Willard’s mission, like a detective’s case, will lead him on a journey of discovery during which he will become increasingly repulsed by the pervasive corruption of society and will finally feel so isolated from society that his judgement of the criminal will be completely undercut (Hellmann, 1986).

The first stop on Willard’s journey is the smoking ruin of a Vietnamese village which has just been laid to waste by Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) and his men of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 1st
Kilgore, an almost mythical air cavalry officer who knows no fear and definitely enjoys his work, once sadly remarks that “. . . someday this war’s gonna end.” Kilgore represents America’s efforts in Vietnam, but he like America seems to have a short attention span and often loses interest in the task at hand. In order to escort Willard’s boat to the proper location, Kilgore decides to attack an NVA-controlled village. In what may be the most famous sequence of the film, Kilgore and helicopter-borne men attack the village, while he plays Wagner’s “The Ride of the Valkyries” over loudspeakers on the helicopters. Once on the beach, Kilgore appears to be more concerned with surfing than with the battle. After he calls in an air-strike on NVA positions in the adjoining jungle, Kilgore utters the most famous line of dialogue of the film: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning, it smells like victory.” Willard comments on Kilgore by saying: “If that’s how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz. It wasn’t just insanity and murder. There was enough of that to go around for everyone.”

The next stop on Willard’s mythical journey of investigation is the U.S. Army Transportation Command Green Berets and "Born Killers": Myth-Making and the Vietnam War in outpost at Hau Phat. At Hau Phat, the army has brought in three Playboy Playmates, who are dressed respectively as a cavalryman, an Indian, and a cowboy, as part of a U.S.O. show. This scene reflects on the profiteering and dehumanizing sex that were undermining the American war effort in Vietnam. The costumes of the playmates also represent attempts by society to place Vietnam in the continuum with American historical myth (Hellmann, 1986).

The boat’s next stop is at the Do Lung Bridge, a completely chaotic place where no one appears to be in command. Each night the Viet Cong blows up the bridge, and the next day, the Americans rebuild the bridge, “. . . so that the generals can say that the road is open.” This scene alludes to the final stages of the French colonial occupation of Vietnam, especially the siege of Dien Bien Phu. The French occupied fortified positions in the middle of the jungle for no apparent reason, and during the night, the French would be at the mercy of the Viet
Minh, who controlled the countryside. Coppola appears to be alluding to the fact that the Americans will fare no better in Vietnam than the French did before them.

The next scene in the trip backward through time should have been what has been referred to as the French plantation sequence. This scene, which Coppola eventually edited out of the film before its theatrical release, can be found in the documentary Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse, which is a documentary about the making of Apocalypse Now. The French plantation scene harkens back to the pre-World War II era in Vietnamese history during which the French colonialists lived in such comfort and luxury that it was easy for them to forget that they were not still in France. The final step in Willard’s journey, before his meeting with Kurtz, is the arrow attack on the boat by Kurtz’s Montagnards. In this sequence, the patrol boat, which bristles with modern machine-guns, is attacked with arrows, and one of the characters is killed by a spear. All of the modern technology of the boat is, therefore, unable to protect the men from what awaits them in the primitive jungle.

The last third of the film deals with Willard’s meeting with Kurtz in Cambodia. Kurtz’s followers, who include Willard’s predecessor – the zombified Captain Colby, occupy a compound that is strewn with the remains of those individuals who have displeased Kurtz. Also among Kurtz’s followers is a counter-cultural American photojournalist (Dennis Hopper), who continually praises Kurtz and his accomplishments in mystical terms. Willard is quickly captured by Kurtz’s followers, who, in an effort to break Willard, imprison him in a tiger cage. Kurtz then terrorizes Willard by throwing the severed head of one of his compatriots in his lap.

After resisting these attempts to break him, Willard is brought before Kurtz. Kurtz tells Willard that he has rejected the corruption and decadence of American society in a search for the purity of purpose that he believes the Viet Cong possess. Kurtz relates the story of a village where the Viet Cong cut off the arms of all of the children whom he had inoculated. “You have to have men who are moral and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgement -- without judgement -- because it’s judgement that defeats us.” As in the hard-boiled detective novels, Willard, while being intrigued by
his adversary, ultimately rejects him as indeed being a murderer without “. . . any method at all.” To complete his mission, however, Willard is aware that he requires at least Kurtz’s tacit approval in order to perform the assassination, which is just what he receives. “Everyone wanted me to do it, him most of all.”

Kurtz has turned his back on civilization in order to find strength and virtue in nature, which has long been an enduring American myth. Willard discovers, however, that Kurtz’s rejection of civilization illuminates the essential lie of his nation’s Vietnam venture to be the American myths of special character and mission. By killing Kurtz, Willard destroys the American myths of special character and mission that have already been revealed as false gods, just as Kurtz himself has been a false god to the Montagnards. Willard then refuses the temptation to replace Kurtz as Montagnard’s ‘god.’ The message of the film, therefore, seems to be that the Vietnam War revealed the flaws in America’s mythic perception of itself (Hellmann, 1986).

After the release of Apocalypse Now, another long period followed during which no films were produced that dealt with the subject of the Vietnam War. Finally, however, Oliver Stone wrote and directed the film Platoon (1986), which many critics consider the best Vietnam War movie ever made. Stone, born to affluence and a Yale dropout, had volunteered for service in Vietnam and his experiences served as the basis for Platoon. “My first day in Vietnam,” Stone says, “I realized, like Chris in Platoon, that I’d made a terrible mistake” (Corliss, 1987). The central character of the film, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), is also a college drop who volunteered for service in Vietnam. Stone’s unit, like Taylor’s, was divided into antagonistic groups. On one side were the lifers, the juicers [heavy drinkers] and the moron white element. Guys like Sergeant Barnes -- and there really was a sergeant as scarred and obsessed as Barnes -- were in this group. On the other side was a progressive, hippie, dope-smoking group: some blacks, some urban whites, Indians, random characters from odd places. Guys like Elias -- and there really was an Elias, Green Berets and "Born Killers": Myth-Making and the Vietnam War in handsome, electric, the Cary Grant of the trenches (Corliss, 1987). Many other incidents of the film, such as Taylor’s rescue of a girl who was being raped by American soldiers, were also taken directly from Stone’s experiences.
The story of Platoon follows the actions of the men of one of the platoons from Bravo Company, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, near the Cambodian border during September 1967. The film’s greatest strength is its concerted effort to present the day to day happenings of an American infantry platoon in the Vietnam War. Whether it is the ants, the heat, the mud, the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release at the base camp, the terror of ambushes, or the chaos and cacophony of night firefights, Platoon gives a “grunt’s eye view” of the Vietnam War (Auster & Quart, 1988).

The platoon’s commanding officer is an inept young man, who generally defers to the opinions of his Platoon Sergeant, Robert Barnes (Tom Berenger). The loyalties of the men in the platoon are divided between Barnes and Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe), one of the squad leaders. Both sergeants are competent and experienced volunteers, but they have very different attitudes about how to fight the war. Barnes is, as Taylor describes him, “Our Ahab,” not only because he carries Ahab’s lust for revenge but also since he has been wounded seven times and half of his face is horribly scarred. Elias, on the other hand, is as expert a killer as Barnes, but he is also identified with traditional Christian iconography, especially during his death (Kinney, 1991). These two men fight for control of the platoon, but, what is more important, they fight for control of Taylor’s soul. Barnes and Elias are different sides of the same coin, and Taylor realizes that it would not take much for him to “go over” completely to either of the two sides.

The battle over the platoon culminates when Barnes murders a civilian in an effort to extract information about the whereabouts of the Viet Cong. Elias reports the incident to the company commander, and it becomes clear that, once the company returns from the field, Barnes will be court-martialed. The next time that the platoon goes into combat, however, Barnes uses the opportunity to shoot and, he believes, kill Elias. As the platoon is being airlifted to safety, however, the wounded Elias suddenly appears below them, inexplicably resurrected, pursued by the Viet Cong. Elias’ death scene takes place as he runs through a small jungle clearing, with a ruined church in the background, culminating with Elias spreading his arms in a gesture of Christ crucified,
beseeching an ascending helicopter (or Heaven) for deliverance (Kinney, 1991). (There seems to be little irony that Dafoe later plays Jesus in The Last Temptation of Christ.) At the end of the film, in an effort at both revenge and redemption, Taylor kills Barnes, who had again survived a horrible battle in which he was badly wounded. Killing Barnes, however, did not make things right, and Taylor acknowledged that he would always be the son of two fathers -- Barnes and Elias.

Platoon is heavy-handed in its use of symbolism to advance its mythic design. The battle between good and evil embodied in Elias and Barnes, Elias’ Christlike death, and Taylor’s almost ritualistic killing of Barnes at the end of the film are only the most obvious examples of the use of symbolism in the film. Likewise, the men who fought in Vietnam are presented by Stone as being Homeric in stature. Vietnam itself exists only as a battleground for characters that Stone has described as the “angry Achilles” and the “conscious-stricken Hector” (Muse, 1993).

After the release and success of Platoon, a boom period began in Hollywood during which several Vietnam War films were produced. Director Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (1987) was among the best of the Vietnam War films to appear at that time. Kubrick’s film is best understood when it is divided between the first half, the basic training sequence at Parris Island, South Carolina, and the second half, in Da Nang and Hue during the Tet Offense of 1968. The first half of the film is a critique of the sadistic and dehumanizing process by which the Marine Corps strips young men of their identities and shapes them into killing machines. Kubrick advances the theory that the American strategy for warfare in Vietnam required the production of soldiers who were inculcated with the myths of American national and racial superiority, as well as the inferiority of Third World peoples. Additionally, these soldiers were also imparted with the myth of male gender superiority. All of these myths, however, would eventually be disproved by the Vietnam War (Klein, 1990).

The second half of Full Metal Jacket presents two of the Marines from the first half of the film, Joker (Matthew Modine) and Cowboy (Arliss Howard), in Vietnam where everything that they were taught in basic training is being put to the test. When a squad of Marines led by Cowboy comes under fire from a Viet Cong
sniper, instead of order and discipline, there is only panic and recrimination. The Marines eventually track down the sniper and discover that four of their friends have been killed by a petite and frail-looking Vietnamese girl. Kubrick makes a Vietnamese woman responsible for the deaths of the Marines in order to disprove the myth, presented by their Drill Sergeant, that American males could not be defeated. Full Metal Jacket also plays on other existing American myths Green Berets and "Born Killers": Myth-Making and the Vietnam War in such as the way Joker impersonates John Wayne and the fact that Joker’s best friend is nicknamed Cowboy (Schweitzer, 1990). Another scene contains a Marine who likens the Americans to cowboys: “Who’ll be the Indians? Hey, we’ll let the gooks play the Indians.”

The most important Vietnam War films were produced over a twenty-year span of time. From The Green Berets in 1968 to Full Metal Jacket in 1987, there has been a radical shift in public opinion regarding the war and the men who fought it. Americans no longer wish to be presented with the same tired myths of American moral superiority with which the Vietnam War began. These myths were used to attempt to convince the American people that the war was a noble effort which was worth the lives of more than fifty thousand young American men. Since no nation profits from holding onto a myth that cannot plausibly include recent historical experience, most Vietnam War films have sought to find the implications of the American defeat in Vietnam. The message of these films does not seem to be that Americans should reject the myth of American uniqueness. Rather, the message seems to be that Americans should learn from the failure of the Vietnam War that the uniqueness of American character can be put to use defending both good and ill intentions.

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