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One Shot, One Soul: The Fractured Selves of Vietnam War Cinema

Vietnam War films serve as a lens through which audiences can explore the complex and often controversial aspects of one of the most divisive conflicts in modern history. These films portray war as chaotic, morally ambiguous, and psychologically devastating. They tend to focus on the individual soldier's experience rather than grand military strategy and specifically show loss of innocence, psychological scars, the brutality of combat, and the disintegration of moral clarity. *The Deer Hunter* (1978) follows three working-class American friends from a steel town in Pennsylvania, Michael (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Steven (John Savage), whose lives are irrevocably changed after they are drafted. Spanning the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the film moves between their familiar hometown and the brutal, disorienting landscapes of Vietnam, portraying how war fractures identity and community. In contrast, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), focuses on Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen), a special operations officer sent upriver through Vietnam and Cambodia on a classified mission to assassinate Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a once-decorated officer who has gone rogue. Loosely adapted from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the film navigates surreal, nightmarish terrains that reflect the internal moral collapse of its characters. Released in the wake of America's withdrawal from Vietnam, both films serve as meditations on the psychological toll of war and as postmodern critiques of meaning itself, questioning the legitimacy of national narratives, morality, and identity in a world where order has given way to chaos. In both *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, dialogue operates not merely as exposition but as a reflection of fractured psyches and collapsing moral frameworks, revealing how the Vietnam War becomes a postmodern crucible in which meaning dissolves, identities blur, and reality itself becomes unstable. Through sparse, disoriented conversations

set within surreal and chaotic contexts, both films portray war not as a site of ideological conflict but as an absurd landscape where traditional narratives of heroism and morality disintegrate under the weight of violence, trauma, and existential uncertainty.

Both films explore how war fractures the human mind, eroding sanity and identity. While Willard's mission upriver sees his sanity and humanity gradually falling away, he is already damaged even before the mission begins. We hear in his voiceover at the beginning of the film, "When I was home after my first tour, it was worse… I hardly said a word to my wife until I said yes to a divorce" (*Apocalypse Now* 00:05:12), he does this as he fights/trains with himself in the mirror like Robert De Niro in Taxi Driver, another film about mental deterioration. Similarly, in The Deer Hunter, Michael's emotional detachment upon returning home means he is incapable of expressing his suffering. We see this when he visits Steven in the hospital and avoids discussing the war, instead trying to avoid the subject by bringing Steven out of the hospital and saying, "Let's go home… I'm gonna take you home." (*The Deer Hunter* 02:15:03). Both characters symbolize soldiers who survive physically but remain emotionally shattered reinforcing the idea that war never truly ends for those who experience it. In “They Look at Me and See Something Else”, Sean Boyle explains how these films expose the fragility of traditional masculinity. He argues that *The Deer Hunter* explores the crisis of white masculinity through the fragmentation of the 'self-made' man, a figure associated with toughness, rationality, and dominance (Boyle 886). Boyle also draws on Brannon and David's "No Sissy Stuff" rule, noting that men are expected to repress emotions and reject vulnerability (Boyle 888), traits embodied by Michael and Willard. However, as war erodes these façades, their identities fragment. Within a postmodern framework, the psychological fragmentation experienced by the characters in The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now reveals the collapse of coherent identity under the pressures of war. Meaning itself becomes unstable, dialogue becomes irrelevant, and the traditional narratives of heroism dissolve. The characters' inner disintegration reflects what theorist Jean Baudrillard might call hyperreality, a

condition in which a representation of reality becomes more real than reality itself. In the context of war, this refers to a violence so extreme and surreal that it obliterates the line between truth and fiction, leaving only trauma, confusion, and the horror of existence. War can be seen not as reality, but as a representation of it, an experience so often mediated through images, symbols, and political narratives that the brutal, lived experience becomes secondary to its constructed meaning. Through Baudrillard's lens, war becomes a simulacrum: a copy with no original, where televised images, propaganda, and cinema recast war as noble or strategic, while concealing its senseless and deeply personal reality (Baudrillard 1). *Apocalypse Now* embraces this spectacle through surreal sequences like Lt Kilgore's (Robert Duvall) napalm obsession and his iconic line, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning," (*Apocalypse Now* 00:49:10) reducing devastation to a performance. Likewise, in The Deer Hunter, the ritualized game of Russian roulette becomes a haunting, mythic image, an exaggerated symbol of randomness and destruction, turning personal trauma into cinematic metaphor. In both films, war is no longer a grounded reality but a stylized, detached hyperreality, where trauma is aestheticized, and the horror of existence becomes a spectacle consumed through fractured language and broken psyches.

Another common theme is how war strips men of their idealism and humanity. In *The Deer Hunter*, the transition from the pre-war scenes in Pennsylvania to the violent, chaotic Vietnam is deliberately jarring, marking the irreversible transformation of Michael, Nick, and Steven from carefree young men into traumatized survivors. Bianca Berman further elaborates on the psychological toll in “The Soldier as Victim and Aggressor”, asserting that Willard is "haunted by trauma and slowly descending into evil" (Berman 969). Nick's final scene is one of The Deer Hunter's most powerful representations of lost innocence. He refuses to return home and instead participates in a fatal game of Russian roulette, repeating over and over only the words "one shot" (*The Deer Hunter* 02:53:41), showing his descent into corruption, bloodthirst and madness. Boyle describes this as the collapse of the

'self-made' man and argues that war films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* critique war as a proving ground for masculinity, showing that neither stoicism nor hyper-masculinity offer salvation (Boyle 893). In *Apocalypse Now*, we have the young surfer turned soldier, Lance (Sam Bottoms), who begins the mission as a relative innocent, concerned with his own safety, asking, "Don't you think it's a little risky for R&R?" when Kilgore wants to go surfing during a firefight. However, he gradually embraces war's absurdity. By the end, he has succumbed to madness, painting his face like a savage warrior (02:16:22) and joining Kurtz (Marlon Brando) 's army. War becomes a site of cultural and moral erosion, collapsing distinctions between civilization and savagery, self and other. Berman notes how both films trace the transformation of soldiers from idealists to disillusioned survivors, and how their time in Vietnam shatters their innocence and reduces them to broken shells (Berman 962), presenting them as "nameless, faceless figures" (Berman 972). The 'Ride of the Valkyries' scene, in which violence is paired with triumphant music, shows how war demands a psychological detachment for survival (Berman 965). Their initial innocence, once grounded in community and purpose, is stripped away by the chaos of war. This loss reveals Judith Butler's concept of the fragility of identity, which is easily dismantled when the systems that shape it collapse. In the postmodern world of these films, identity is no longer fixed, it is unstable, performative, and easily erased (Butler).

Along with identity, these films challenge traditional notions of good and evil, depicting war as an environment where moral lines cease to exist. Kurtz delivers a haunting monologue about the necessity of embracing brutality, stating, "horror… horror has a face… and you must make a friend of horror" (*Apocalypse Now* 02:31:08). This speech forces Willard to confront the collapse of moral binaries, a hallmark of the postmodern condition in which clear distinctions between right and wrong dissolve into ambiguity. In *The Deer Hunter*, war similarly functions as a force that erodes traditional values. Michael is compelled to play Russian roulette, an act that strips human life of meaning and transforms violence into play. These moments signal moral compromise and total moral disintegration,

illustrating a world where the old codes of ethics no longer apply. From a postmodern perspective, war becomes a space of moral hyperreality, where ideological constructs like justice, patriotism, or heroism are exposed as hollow performances masking chaos and cruelty. Tim O'Brien underscores this in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, recounting how "we burned the village, and then we stood around in the ashes, wondering what it all meant" (O'Brien 78), emphasizing the existential confusion and moral void left in the aftermath of destruction. In both films, as in O'Brien's memoir, morality is not merely blurred but rendered irrelevant, replaced by a surreal logic in which violence is normalized, and horror becomes mundane. This dissolution of ethical coherence speaks to a broader postmodern anxiety: that in the face of overwhelming trauma and institutional absurdity, meaning itself becomes a casualty of war.

The soldiers have become detached from their actions. This aimless destruction is what Coppola and Cimino capture in their films: war as a meaningless, never-ending cycle of violence. From a postmodern perspective, these films show detachment, reflecting the fragmentation of meaning and identity. In both *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, war is not framed as a coherent moral crusade but as a series of surreal, decontextualized spectacles, destruction as sport. Sporadic sounds of Wagner render violence operatic and absurd, reducing civilians to background noise in a military performance. Kilgore's casual line, "Charlie don't surf," trivializes suffering and reasserts American dominance through leisure, revealing a world where warfare and entertainment blur. Similarly, the repeated Russian roulette scenes in *The Deer Hunter* transform mortality into a brutal game, a stylized ritual of masculine performance divorced from any strategic purpose. The dialogue throughout these films often emphasizes disorientation rather than clarity; characters speak in fragmented, cryptic phrases that mirror their crumbling psyches. These men are no longer guided by ideology or conviction; instead, they become malleable vessels shaped by chaos, fear, and performance. These films ask us to consider the cost of constructing identity through power, repression, and violence, especially in a postmodern world where the grand narratives that once offered moral certainty have collapsed. In this landscape, man

becomes not a hero but a site of contestation, shaped by forces beyond his control and stripped of agency. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* challenge us to see war not just as a political failure but as a crisis of meaning itself, where trauma, spectacle, and disintegration leave behind not lessons but lingering wounds and unanswered questions.

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