

TRANSLATING VIETNAM INTO FICTION AND FILM

Tom Burns
UFMG

Translating, or carrying over, from one semiotic medium to another has had a lot of attention in recent years in the theories of semiotic representation, and with this work the former ideal of “fidelity to the original” has lost considerable ground. Now, it seems, fidelity—like its other meaning, chastity—is no longer a primary virtue and even the idea of an original text has been questioned. With respect to history, it is now taken for granted that we are not dealing with the “naked truth” but always with a mediating text, usually written up into some kind of organized collection of data and then transformed—translated, if you will—into an historical narrative, subject, as Hayden White tells us, to all the rhetorical rules of fictional narratives. The historical narrative must be based on documentary evidence, however, which differentiates it, in at least this respect, from a fictional historical narrative, which is usually based on some blend of factual or imagined events and characters. A documentary film therefore only seems, at first glance, to be closer to a “translation” of an historical event, but even documentaries are shaped into comprehensible narratives and the filmmaker imposes his views on the material quite as much as the author of a fictional narrative.

The critical range of the documentary may also be as wide. What we have with a film like *Dear America: Letters from Vietnam* (Bob Coutrie, 1988) is a pseudo-documentary of the war through (fragments of) letters written by men and women in the armed forces and read off-screen by an all-star cast of actors. Real footage is meant to “illustrate” the words. The confusion and curious lack of direction or resolution of the footage—often consisting of soldiers just hamming it up for the camera or firing into apparently empty brush—contrasts sharply with the constructed narratives of fiction films and is evidently intended to convey a naïve, more “realistic”

impression. The film evades any political discussion, simply giving a few clips from TV news reports or headlines; the concentration on the feelings of the individual soldier prevents any critical stance toward the war, as if not to be incompatible with sympathy for the men who fought it, the end result being a sort of celebratory sadness. The end, for example, has a grieving mother on voice-over to a shot of the monument for the American dead, followed by Bruce Springsteen singing "Born in the USA": there is no suggestion here that the young man's life and his mother's pain might have been spared. Much more critical as a historical document and cinematically effective for being more carefully structured is Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) which concentrates on the people of the devastated country. No editorial comment is used; rather, Davis ironically juxtaposes scenes of Vietnam, land and people, with fatuous interviews of US military leaders.

The Vietnam War, already a quarter of a century old, is now fading into the past but can hardly be said to have been erased from the collective North American mind; it is still present in military and political decisions in some form, and interventionism is now embarked upon with a greater caution than heretofore. The meanings of the war have been debated by historians and critics anew since the mid-1980s, after an initial decade of willed forgetfulness, and of course fiction and film based on the war continue to be produced. I would like here to consider just two films adapted from novels, written at different historical moments, that have attempted to "translate" the American combat experience in Vietnam to the cinema. The literary translations are based on history, that is, through a highly personal interpretation of events, and the adapted films are yet her personal interpretation on the texts, based on the filmmakers' own relationship to the war. It is implied by my comparison that works on Vietnam, both literary and cinematic, have changed attitude in response to changing ideas about the war. *Hearts and Minds*, for

example, was made when the US was still actively engaged, while *Dear Vietnam* was made over a decade later.

My first example is the novel *The Green Berets* (1965), the earliest work on the war and the film of the same title, *The Green Berets*, produced by John Wayne and Ray Kellogg in 1968, that is, at an early period in the US involvement. It is episodic in structure, reflecting its journalistic intention. Moore, a free-lance journalist, tells us in his preface that wanted to write an account of the Special Forces units, “a book of truth,” that was evidently too truthful, for the Pentagon informed the publisher that it could not be released as it was, an admission that the truth was not for public consumption. Moore accordingly changed names and omitted place-names and other facts, the result being that his book was (in his words) “presented as a work of fiction.”¹

The book was a best-seller and its title attached itself to other early patriotic fictions on the war, such as Peter Derrig’s *The Pride of the Green Berets* (1966), which features most of the clichés of less serious war fiction. The film adaptation was the first film on the Vietnam war, and even more than most war films has a strong ideological component. The titles of the film appear behind a sound track of a sentimental song of an unlucky but patriotic Green Beret (“he has died for the oppressed”) of the type that would never be again used in subsequent films but which resemble stirring songs from the beginnings and ends of World War II movies. Another aspect that deviates from later films on the war is the polite lack of obscenities and the glaring lack of unpleasant but distinctive features of the war such as body bags, gaping wounds and dismemberment, and most of all, the lack of civilian opposition.

It is appropriate that John Wayne should have co-directed and starred in this film, with his image of the tough, heroic leader of so many World War II movies and the mythic films of the Old West. In one scene lacking in the film, the American team shows a western movie to its

¹ O’NAN, Stewart. *The Vietnam Reader*. New York: Anchor, 1998. p. 17-18.

South Vietnamese allies, who identify themselves with the cowboys and perceive the Indians as Viet Cong. It is also worthy of note that Wayne wrote personally to President Lyndon Johnson, soliciting the cooperation of the Pentagon in making the film, and it complied with the loan of military hardware. One might nearly say, therefore, that this film is the “official” or authorized fiction film on Vietnam; it certainly does its best to be pro-war propaganda.

It begins, for example, with a didactic scene of a Special Forces team giving individual reports on their military skills. It teaches us that such a team consists of a small mixed group of officers and enlisted men who each have specialist training and cross-training in a number of military skills (small arms, field medicine, intelligence, interrogation techniques, transportation, etc.) and meant to serve as an autonomously functioning unit. Eerily, several of the team members with language skills begin by speaking German, although the relevance of that language for Vietnam, as opposed to French, is hard to perceive; perhaps it is an entirely unconscious nod to the Nazis to whom American troops would be compared in later years as the war went on and US atrocities became known.

Another didactic scene follows, with the soldiers’ clever answers getting the better of naive journalists, which is evidently meant to justify the war to doubting spectators at that stage when public ignorance was still considerable, but the basic questions of the war are evaded. “Communist world domination” is given as the reason for our presence in that far-off conflict. The “proof” offered is a pile of weapons and ammunition taken in Vietnam that come from different Communist countries, as if weapons in any war are not purchased at the lowest cost from any supplier, regardless of ideology, or there was ever any doubt that countries who considered the US an enemy would not be eager to supply a people fighting a war with it. A black soldier gives a supposedly parallel example of “our own” country being invaded, which is ahistorical, since we have never been invaded, and in this case, wildly irrelevant, since in this

case *we* are the invaders. Another soldier gives the example of the US colonies, which, again, is inappropriate for reversing the true roles: an imperial power invading a colonized people fighting for their freedom. The historically correct analogy is that we Americans in Vietnam were the British, the Vietnamese the American colonists. The rhetoric of the film, however insists on Americans in their allegedly traditional role of supporting freedom round the globe are coming to the aid of a country resolutely resisting Communist tyranny. There is no possibility in the film that Vietnam was undergoing a civil war for control by rival governments. What the film offers is the Korean War revisited.

A skeptical journalist from a liberal newspaper (David Janssen) goes along on team's mission as an observer; the American military is confident that when he sees the reality of the war he will come around to supporting it. What happened historically, of course, is precisely the opposite: the soldiers themselves gave increasingly confused answers as to the meaning of our presence there. Liberal journalists, however, were annoying to the government: correspondents like David Halberstam (New York Times) and Neill Sheehan (UP international) did not in fact question the justification of containing Communism, but they did argue, fairly early, that the war was being lost; Kennedy even tried to have Halberstam recalled.²

In the Vietnam scenes, no year is given, and the location is imprecise: a "camp" or outpost on the Laotian border undergoing all-out night attacks, which are the main action aspect of the film. The camp is taken by the North Vietnamese and then retaken with the help of an air-strike. A liberal journalist, whose credentials are at first established by his indignation at the cruelty of an interrogation of a prisoner, ends up being converted, working as an ammunition bearer in the counter-attack. The clichés that will reoccur in subsequent films on the war include: the winning

² HERRING, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*. Second Edition. New York: Knopf, 1986. p. 92.

of “hearts and minds” by friendly soldiers looking after wounded Vietnamese civilians and offering food and protection to villagers; the comic-relief scrounger of other people’s supplies befriending a Vietnamese orphan, only to be killed by a booby-trap (an unconscious preview of the youths enlisted to repel US forces); the portrayal of the Viet Cong (who are confused in the film with North Vietnamese regulars) as depraved criminals—kidnapping, raping, and murdering women and children, actions that later would prove to be perpetrated by American soldiers. There is no suggestion that these people may be fighting for a just cause or even that they have any positive values at all.

By the time we come to my second example, Ron Kovic’s novel, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), the war is over and the public view of the American intervention has turned critical. This is also a narrative of conversion, though politically in the opposite direction. The style of Kovic’s autobiographical novel is naive, sentimental at times, and replete with clichés: “They were men who had played with death and cheated it at a very young age.” “In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon in May we were trying to heal them and set them free.”³ Oliver Stone’s film adaptation manages to avoid these weak textual aspects. Kovic’s narrative flashes backward and forward in time for ironic effect, which Stone eschews in favor of a straightforward transformation narrative, counting on powerful images to make his political point.

Kovic is hit by a bullet, and, unable to move or feel anything, is taken out of Vietnam to recover at Ward I-C, a veteran’s hospital in Queens, near his own neighborhood. The hospital is right out of Ken Kesey, with crippled men in beds lined up for their enemas, “the Six O’Clock Special,” with their rear ends sticking out of the bed-frames, and the various indignities of being

³KOVIC, Ron., *Born on the Fourth of July*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976. p. 29, 140.

hosed down for a shower, of having to urinate through a tube, of having rats nibble at their unfeeling toes at night. As Kovic gradually becomes aware that his condition is permanent, that his life is in effect over, he takes refuge in memories, including the Saturday afternoon war movies that were a part of his culture. His two major heroes are Mickey Mantle, the baseball player, and John Wayne playing Sergeant Striker in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, who significantly dies at the end of the film.

All through Kovic's text, the Fifties culture of war is contrasted to what war really implies, and a connection is made between the ideology of war films and the consciousness of the young men who are so eager to go off to fight. Stone manages to convey this contrast in the film, showing how Kovic soaks up the post-war anti-Communist ideology in his Catholic home and at school. Sharp Marine recruiters appear at his high-school right before graduation and he is suitably dazzled: "It was like all the movies and all the books and all the dreams of becoming a hero come true," and when he shakes their hands, "I couldn't help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy."⁴ These explicit references to a military film culture are not shown directly (we don't see Kovic watching war movies, for example) but translated by Stone in different ways, some more successful than others: here, through the rapt expression and lost dreams of glory on Tom Cruise's face, which the knowing spectator can easily identify as a face that has been taught to think of war as an opportunity for achieving manhood. For Kovic, of course, manhood in more than one sense is what he is robbed of when he has to live in a wheelchair and can only be recovered figuratively by a repudiation of the lies of his past and a courageous embarking on political action that still involves physical risk, such as the scene where he is beaten by right-wing policemen (one of whom was a veteran), symbolically the American

⁴ KOVIC, p. 73-74.

military in Vietnam now on the streets oppressing American minorities and repressing anti-war dissent.

The scene of Kovic in his uniform riding in a convertible to a hometown Fourth of July parade is another illustration of effective translation. In Kovic, the crowd, while appropriately noisy, was somehow different from the way he remembered it:

He couldn't tell at first exactly what it was, but something was not the same, they were not waving and they just seemed to be standing staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren't even there...they'd have been flooding into the streets, stomping their feet and screaming and cheering the way they did for him and Eddie at the Little League games. They'd have been swelling into the streets, trying to shake their hands just like in the movies, when the boys had come home from the other wars...⁵.

Again, his disbelief and disappointment stem from the image of war movies, here frustrated by the historical reality of public hostility. In the film, this feeling is conveyed by Cruise's scared and bewildered face, but even more effectively by his involuntary ducking at the fireworks, as if they were the small-arms fire he had been trained to duck in battle: in purely cinematic terms, the battle is still going on, in the fields of Vietnam and in the streets of the United States.

Another effective scene is the one that takes place in the Village of the Sun in Mexico, a place that specializes in prostitutes for crippled veteran, an episode that has a pathos which goes beyond Kovic's own anguish as a young man in his prime who can no longer function sexually. Even while Kovic and Stone do not explicitly make the connection, the young Mexican girls prostituting themselves for American dollars inevitably recall their counterparts in Southeast Asia and the immense brothel that was the city of Saigon.

In at least one case, the visual equivalent in the filmic translation is not so effective as the written text. It is sadly ironic for a man like Kovic, who found his youthful self-affirmation in athletic skill, that it is his useless body, rather than the new ideas and information he learns in

⁵ KOVIC, pp. 103-104.

college, which synthesizes his disgust with the war. It is precisely his crippled body that becomes the visible source of his authority: “I could see that this thing—this body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse—was to mean much more than I had ever realized.”⁶ (149). In the film, the wheelchair and the fumbling with the urine bag say this visually but here, the comparison of his living but useless body to a corpse is lost. [When Kovic is arrested during an anti-war demonstration, and policemen, one of whom turns out to be veteran, beat him and call him a traitor, his body speaks for him: “They see my scars and the rubber catheter tube going into my penis and they begin to think they have made a mistake...They have just beaten up a half-dead man, and they know it.”⁷ This scene is, by contrast, can be and is effectively conveyed by visual means in the film.

Three combat incidents that are recalled in flashback end the book. The first is the incident that has been gnawing at his conscience, but which has not been effectively incorporated into the narrative—his accidental shooting of a corporal from Georgia: “He’d never figured it would ever happen this way. It never did in the movies. There were always the good guys and the bad guys, the cowboys and the Indians.”⁸ In the film, he faces the boy’s family. In the second incident, he takes his squad on a night ambush on a village, but a faulty intelligence report has them shoot up a group of civilians, including children. In both cases, there are no consequences for him; in the third incident, there is. He fantasizes cinematically: “There were ten men armed to the teeth, walking in a sweeping line toward the village. It was beautiful, just like the movies,” but in the midst of the firefight, the narrator to the reality of his body: “I had been shot. The war had finally caught up with my body.”⁹

⁶ KOVIC, p. 149.

⁷ KOVIC, p. 155.

⁸ KOVIC, p. 195.

⁹ KOVIC, p. 220.

Stone's cinematic version of Kovac's novel is a considerable improvement over his far more celebrated film *Platoon*, which despite its impressive battle scenes is an uncritical and formulaic combat film,—with a psychological emphasis on the stress and fear of the individual in battle, with historical references at a minimum. This kind of fiction was established in American literature by Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) but the primal experience of the naïve participant in Crane is undercut by the ironic distance, lacking in *Platoon* and countless other films of the Second World Wars, which the action scenes provide the vicarious experience of danger for the spectator. The basic pattern is clear from Crane to Stone: the young man, inexperienced and uncertain as to why he is there beyond some vague notions of personal duty and honor, undergoing trial by fire and emerging wounded, shaky but confirmed in the experience. The real enemies usually turn out to be within one's own unit or the army itself.

Different translations of the Vietnam experience have been shown to be possible. *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970), which treats the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians at Sand Creek is an allegory of the My Lai massacre of civilians in Vietnam. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is probably the most famous adaptation, though the literary text on which it is based, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), with the narrator's journey up-river to a primitive outpost in Africa and encounter with evil, offers a clue to the film's meaning, which seems to not so much a film about the Vietnam War as about Kurtz's moral corruption, with the war serving as the modern American equivalent of the old British imperialism. Even before the skull-ringed camp of Kurtz, the actions of the men on Captain Willard's boat, like the shooting of some fishermen, are hardly blameless and suggest real events. Finally, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) seems to be two movies: one about the training of Marine recruits and the unit in actual combat. It eventually becomes clear that the break in continuity is thematic as well as structural, as the training of the men, designed to make them killing machines, is inappropriate

to the war they actually have to fight. The critique manages to be military, social, and political, though not in a straightforward propagandistic way.