The war spangled banner : Vietnam and the fabrication of American national identity

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The American writer in the sixties had his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of the American Reality.
– Philip Roth

Few events in the twentieth century have left such deep traces in America's image of itself as the Vietnam War. To a certain extent, this was due to the arrival of television as a mass medium: the Vietnam War was a television war, a "living-room war."[1] Although the actual combat, the killing and dying went on in Indochina, 13,000 miles from home, Vietnam was there every day, every hour for more than a decade in the history of the United States. "The war seemed the central fact in American life," Michael Arlen observes. "[I]t was a changing shape beneath everything else in American life in that period, in a way that no other war we'd experienced had been" (xi). Vietnam was a presence on the front pages of *LIFE* and *The Washington Post,* in Walter Cronkite's "CBS Reports" and in the texts and tunes of popular music. In fact, this war was so much a part of dominant cultural experience that it has been referred to as the "Rock 'n' Roll War," from Michael Herr's *Dispatches* to Shapiro's very recent *Fields of Fire.*

Not surprisingly, then, the ties between the Vietnam experience and issues of American national identity are very close. At first glance, it appears that the US involvement in South East Asia from the late fifties to the mid-seventies started an intense debate on Americanness as a political and socio-cultural concept – a heated discussion that has lost none of its vigor to the present day and has ultimately resulted in a radical questioning of American

[1] As Michael Arlen observes in *Living Room War,* sixty percent of the American population got most of their information about Vietnam from television (6).

national identity. On closer inspection, however, I believe it was precisely the other way round: a problem with "Americanness" – or more precisely the changing sense of a national identity – was to a large extent responsible for America's Vietnam campaign, and the war was meant to serve as a prominent signifier for national identity. In what follows I would like first to examine the conditions that remolded the sense of Americanness between World War II and the Vietnam War, then turn to a discussion of the role mythology plays in the formation of an American national identity and finally consider how the perceived absurdity of the Vietnam War is represented in two of the most important treatments of it, Philip Caputo's *Rumor of War* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket.*

The decades between World War II and Vietnam marked a political and ideological caesura for the United States. In decisively defeating Germany and its allies, the US had been able to relive and reactivate those values it associated most closely with Americanness – frontier values like the will "to do the job," toughness, gallantry, the belief in domination as a means to civilize the brute – in short, qualities that could "make the world safe for democracy," as President Woodrow Wilson had put it decades before in his famous appeal to Congress in 1917. America's successful intervention and its resulting position as leader and guarantor of the Western alliance had been an authoritative confirmation of the country's own socio-political value system. Once the war was over, however, some of the main reference points for national identity were relegated to the background as the traditional forms of frontier thinking were replaced by popularized mass-media versions of it.

At the same time, the postwar period saw the advent of two cultural paradigm changes that had a significant influence on the way in which Western nation states would define themselves. The first of these was the growing distrust in what Lyotard had called *les grand récits*, or master narratives. For a nation that defined itself expressly in terms of an already-written narrative, ideological legitimization became disproportionally problematic. The erosion of the credibility of master narratives was further aggravated by a second large-scale change of an even more fundamental kind: the redefinition of the cultural sign. A number of critics, among them Deleuze and Baudrillard, have argued that one of the characteristics of the postwar period is the development of the *simulacrum* – a sign which no longer refers to an external, ideal essence but rather to itself, a sign which, in some cases, may even turn against itself. This phenomenon may be observed in American Pop Art of the fifties and sixties, for example in Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1954). *Flag* fore-

grounds the object status rather than the reference function of the image by emphasizing its haptic quality, its "thingness," rather than referentiality, and by collapsing the difference between the object and its representation: it is no longer clear whether *Flag* is a picture of a flag or a flag itself. By dissolving traditional notions of the relationship between reality and representation, Johns' picture becomes a *simulacrum* à la Deleuze, a sign with the potential to take over completely what it was "originally" supposed to represent. Representing itself – as a work of art in an exhibition – this flag weakens the function of the stars and stripes as a reification of patriotic gestures. *Flag* introduces an element of potential subversiveness – not because it calls Americanness into question, but because it addresses aesthetic rather than ideological issues, foregrounding the notion that national identity is a concept dependent on, if not wholly determined by, representation.[2] (It goes without saying, however, that the incorporation of Jasper Johns' masterpiece into one of the nation's foremost art collections and the subsequent heavy marketing it received has, ironically, turned the picture into one of the currently most popular visual icons of "America".)

In the face of the weakening of national icons and myths, some survived and were recycled. Such was the case of the frontier myth. Because what was perceived as "frontier experience" had a constitutive function on a sociocultural level during large stretches of American history, the frontier myth became an essential reference point for political orientation and reorientation in critical moments. And so, despite the backgrounding of this myth in the post-war years, John F. Kennedy told the American people in his acceptance speech as Democratic candidate that they were "on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s" and asked them to be "pioneers on that New Frontier" (JFK Library website). Likewise, it was the central metaphor of Lyndon B. Johnson's inaugural speech in 1965: "For this is what America is all about. It is the uncrossed desert and the unclimbed ridge. It is the star that is not reached and the harvest sleeping in the unplowed ground" (*Inaugural Addresses*).

Richard Slotkin has argued in his studies of the mythological foundations of Americanness that the frontier myth, which is one of the nation's fundamental myths, is based on the utter denial of the other. Such an attitude of denial dates back to the days of the early colonists, for whom "[i]t was far

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[2] It seems that the Director of Collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, was fully aware of these implications and did not buy Johns' *Flag* because he was afraid the trustees would see it as anti-American. Instead, he got the architect Philip Johnson to buy it and present it to the Museum of Modern Art as a gift.

easier to define their cultural identity by negative means, through attacking or condemning alien elements in their society" (22). Definition by repudiation was also recognized as a particularly effective means of establishing a collective identity by Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued that the frontier was a location that highlighted alterity – the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (3) – and was thus instrumental in promoting "the formation of a composite nationality for the American people" (22).

Despite its prelapsarian ring of innocence, the frontier is inextricably connected with the use of force. In fact, it is the very possibility to exercise power in the frontier situation that brings out its identity-shaping capacity. Identity – whether individual or collective – depends on the negation of difference and, as Laclau contends, it is therefore always closely associated with power. The establishment of an identity is an act of power, "power is the prerequisite of any identity" (33) – "identity as such is power" (31). By the same token, this also means that the exercise of power constitutes identity, or may at least be believed to establish identity. How closely the two have always been linked in the public's perception can be observed on the title page of the first edition of the most popular American war comic book, Timely's *Captain America:*

> Defender of the good in a perfectly Manichean world, Captain America knocks out Hitler nine months before the United States enters the war and more than four years before the defeat of the German army. Practically overnight the figure dressed in the American flag made the series an incredible success. Monthly circulation was close to one million copies, a stunning figure if one considers that *Time* magazine sold about 700,000 copies weekly during the same period.[3]

About a year later, the government, in its turn, began seriously to work on finding icons to represent American ideals and national patriotism. Shocked and enlightened by Germany's impressive motion picture propaganda, the Roosevelt Administration realized the importance of the medium for political purposes and made a priority of collaborating with Hollywood in the production of propagandistic motion pictures.[4] Falling back onto the tried

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[3] Captain America's runaway success is a result of its welcome function as a projection screen for patriotic feelings in a time of war. Still, the figure is certainly more complex in that it also appealed to a number of particular American sensitivities at the time. Metamorphosing from a scrawny youth rejected by the army into a model of strength and ideal leadership by means of a secret serum, the figure bore strong resemblances to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was a respected and charismatic leader from the Depression to World War II.

[4] In December 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt made Lowell Mellett Coordinator of Government Films to officially mobilize Hollywood for war. Another six months later, the Office of War

and true, the government and Hollywood secured the services of John Wayne, arch-icon of American values, and produced a number of films designed to strengthen national morale, among them *Flying Tigers* and *The Fighting Seabees* (1944). Seamlessly tying in with the traditional frontier values of the Westerns represented by Wayne, films like these and others such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) created and maintained an enormously powerful mythology of the national hero and reified Americanness to the point of triviality.

Practically all of the major sources dealing critically with Vietnam show that the ideology Americans had been spoon-fed via a long series of Westerns and War movies determined to a large degree their notions of what this war was and why the country's young men should be fighting it. Hence Philip Caputo's immediate reaction after winning a close-quarter fight without suffering any casualties: "I was John Wayne in *Iwo Jima.* I was Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*" (269). Or, as Joker quips sarcastically in *Full Metal Jacket*: "Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?" And even in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* the first thing the narrator thinks of after having been shot are all the Gene Autry movies he had seen as a child (189). Sooner or later, without exception, every American in Vietnam would experience what Michael Herr, with inimitable terseness, dubbed in *Dispatches* the "mythopathic moment" (46).

In the history of the Vietnam War, the "mythopathic moment" manifested itself in August of 1964 in the guise of the Tonkin Gulf Incident. At a loss for identificatory reference points after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, American politics needed to reconstruct a sense of national selfhood. In Laclau's view, identities can only establish themselves in the presence of an antagonizing force. And he continues, quoting Saint-Just: "What constitutes the unity of the republic is the total destruction of what is opposed to it" (21). Ever since the end of World War II and the establishment of the Truman Doctrine as a fixed reference point for US politics, communism had served as the potential "other." With the Tonkin Gulf Incident and the resolution that passed with only two dissenting votes in the Senate and none in the House of Representatives a few days later, communist North Vietnam became the object of identity-creating antagonism.[5]

However, the war that was supposed to turn American national identity into a palpable reality again very soon began to develop its own dynamics – that of loss and death. Combat reality caught up swiftly, not only with the Marines but also with the general public. In April 1965, barely eight months after the Tonkin Gulf resolution, *LIFE* magazine ran Larry Burrows' harrowing account of a helicopter airlift mission near Da Nang that ended in death and destruction. The cover photograph of the issue, in stark black and white (the only one of the entire year), shows a shocked crew chief at the machine gun, shouting for assistance, gesturing helplessly, and a pilot

[5] For further details on the Tonkin Incident, see Karnow ("Disorder and Decision," 364-402).

bleeding to death on the bullet-riddled chopper floor.[6] Although clearly meant to document the courage of the American troops to a general public that had at best diffuse notions of the true nature of the war that was beginning to evolve in South-East Asia, the deeper significance of the report lies in its powerful dismantling of the myth of courage. Courage of the kind Burrows documented, the photographs reveal, is not only inextricably linked with death but actually *conditioned* by it. Such courage could only manifest itself in the presence of violent death – a situation faithfully echoed in the cover headline "With a brave crew in a deadly fight." As a result, the "reality-conferring function" (Scarry 121) of the injured body not only endorses the truth-value of the courage it documents but simultaneously discredits it as paradoxically but fundamentally destructive.

In November of the same year, the first major engagement between elements of the American and the North Vietnamese Armies took place, the Battle of Ia Drang. After two days of savage fighting, what had looked like a standard mission – a helicopter assault into an unoccupied landing zone – resulted in well over two hundred dead and as many seriously injured troops. Only a few weeks later, in a secret memorandum, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reacted to these losses by informing President Johnson that he considered US withdrawal a serious option. The odds of success, he argued, even in the case of a massive increase in the deployment of ground troops, were at best "one out of three, or one on two" (Moore 401). But despite the patent evidence that the war had completely changed, the United States, firmly in the grip of the frontier myths it had conjured up, continued to create its own reality of Vietnam.

In its socio-cultural and political dimension, the Vietnam War had been from the start, and continued to be, a battle for the claim to represent reality. Government reports on major events of the war, the Tonkin Gulf Incident, the Battle of Ia Drang or the Battle of Khe Sanh years later, were found to be serious misrepresentations of actual events and situations. While President Johnson insisted in a diplomatic note sent to Hanoi that the first clash between North Vietnam and the US was "unprovoked," the opposite was true: in conceivable violation of North Vietnam's territorial sovereignty, two American destroyers had not only carried out electronic intelligence activities but had actually been involved in covert attacks by South Vietnamese commandos against North Vietnamese installations. What is more, the sec-

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[6] Interestingly enough, the international edition in which Burrows' report was reprinted (May 3, 1965) appeared with a perfectly innocuous cover picture showing a diminutive, large-eyed tarsier and a different, perfectly non-committal title: "The Helicopter War."

ond communist attack, the official *casus belli*, most likely never actually occurred. While not deliberately faked, a "fuzzy set of circumstances" (Karnow 389) became the pretext for military action that Johnson had been looking for. Research by both official and unofficial investigators, Karnow sums up, "has indicated with almost total certainty that the second communist attack never happened" (389).

A comparable case of systematic misrepresentation of actual facts was the Battle of Khe Sanh, one of the most highly publicized and most controversial battles of the entire Vietnam War. To gain control over infiltration routes south of the Demilitarized Zone and close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as the official argument ran, the former French outpost near Khe Sanh was fortified and close to 6,000 American and South Vietnamese were moved in to secure the base. A subsequent massive buildup of the North Vietnamese Army brought the number of the opposing communist forces to some 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers. Very quickly, the ghost of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu rose and the American government and military leaders began to systematically draw parallels between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu. President Johnson – who, as a senior member of the Senate armed services committee, had opposed US intervention on behalf of the French in 1954 – was not only concerned but obsessed with the preservation of the Khe Sanh base. In an unprecedented demand to his top officers he urged them to sign a written guarantee that the Marines could hold Khe Sanh. In the ensuing battle, which lasted more than nine weeks from January to April 1968, massive American bombings and artillery shellings killed an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 North Vietnamese while the Americans lost 205 men. Viewed in the light of actual fact, any comparison with Dien Bien Phu was preposterous. While the French, trapped in a remote valley, were underequipped and without any air support, the Americans at Khe Sanh could rely on continual supply from the air, their wounded were flown out and replacements brought in, they had excellent artillery support from two nearby firebases and their air superiority was unparalleled in the history of warfare.

Before anyone realized it, Khe Sanh had become a key political symbol. And thus General Westmoreland confidently asserted after the lifting of the siege in April: "[W]e broke [the enemy's] back and he has not regained his strength since" (*Khe Sanh*).[7] The strategic significance of Khe Sanh, however, was at best dubious, as many experts agreed at the time. Major General

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[7] This and all subsequent references to *Khe Sanh* are to the 1969 motion picture produced by the Department of Defense. It features a number of interviews with government and military officials.

Lowell English, a US marine commander at Khe Sanh, contends that the base "'wasn't worth a damn,'" nothing but a bloody trap which lured the Americans into spending "'absolutely unreasonable amounts of men and matériel'" (quoted in Karnow 555). In fact, Walter Cronkite had informed his viewers at the conclusion of his February 27, 1968 CBS broadcast that – contrary to all claims made by Westmoreland – Khe Sanh was "no longer the key to the rest of the northern regions" (581). How accurate these views were can be concluded from Khe Sanh's fate after the American victory: barely two months later the fortress was abandoned completely, without any further ado, and in secret, to prevent public outrage.[8]

What had happened? In 1968, the United States found themselves in the worst crisis so far in the Vietnam War. On January 31 of the same year, North Vietnamese regulars and Vietcong forces had started the Tet Offensive which, while being a tactical defeat for the communists, turned out to be the most decisive event after America's entry into the war as it ultimately cost the US government the support and the confidence of the public. Manifest, quantifiable success became an absolute priority for the military – and that was precisely what this war did not yield. In painful contrast to traditional wars like World War II, where military progress could be measured in terms of territorial gains, territorial dominion in Vietnam was practically nonexistent and only temporary.

In its despair, the military command turned to records of enemy casualties as a measure of success. The estimated 10,000 to 15,000 enemy casualties compared to about 200 US casualties resulted in a very favorable "kill rate," supposedly demonstrating to the communist enemy what President Johnson called "the utter futility of his attempts to win a military victory in the South" (*Khe Sanh*). It goes without saying that, except for a few isolated instances, body-count turned out to be perfectly useless. It was soon universally regarded as not only dehumanizing but also perversely absurd; since Americans were often unable to tell friend from foe, that is, civilians from Vietcong, and since Vietnamese were often both, civilians and Vietcong, any such quantification was meaningless. In *A Rumor of War* Caputo exemplifies the absurd effects of the military's twisted logic when he recalls how, in order to avoid the killing of innocent people, brigade ordered that "in guerilla-controlled areas no fire be directed at unarmed Vietnamese unless they were

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[8] Officially, the cause for the seemingly irrational change of politics was strategic reasoning, as the voice-over at the end of the government propaganda motion picture on Khe Sanh lamely claims: "[T]he defenders have gone as the changing nature of a changing war imposes new requirements on military strategy" (*Khe Sanh*).

running. A running Vietnamese was a fair target" (74). When this leaves the officers uneasy and confused, the commander adds: "'Look, I don't know what this is supposed to mean, but I talked to battalion and as far as they're concerned, if he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC'" (74).

Increasingly, the war began to be tainted with absurdity – by both those who fought it and those who heard or read about it. For the latter to treat the war as an illogicality was a way to deal with the confidence gap that grew wider with every day that the war progressed. As early as 1968, Walter Cronkite had vented his doubts about the truthfulness of governmental information in a nationwide CBS broadcast. America, he contended, had too often been disappointed by the unfounded optimism of its civil and military authorities "to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds" (581). And for the former – the soldiers in-country who were trying to square what they perceived as senseless death and suffering with the mythical views and visions they were offered as a rationale for their anguish – a sense of absurdity was one of the few means they had of resisting the destructive power of immediate experience. Characteristically, a majority of the successful literary and cinematographic criticism of the Vietnam War has made absurdity its key cipher.

Philip Caputo's *Rumor of War* operates on the premise that war creates a new reality, one in which the traditional reference points indispensable for moral/ethical orientation and the maintenance of human identity are lost. An early indication of such a change of perspective occurs not far into the text when the protagonist notices how the war has changed his perception of the geographical reality around him: "Landscape was no longer scenery to me but terrain, and I judged it for tactical rather than aesthetic value" (21). As he is soon to learn in-country, perception itself is severely impaired in the dense jungle, with visibility often limited to a few yards, sometimes even inches. Frequently, "[t]he company seemed to be marching into a vacuum, haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see" (85). Such continual disorientation and confusion was aggravated by the frequent impression that none of their actions had any military significance but bordered on the absurd. Fighting an invisible enemy ("The guerillas were everywhere, which is another way of saying they were nowhere" [113]), whose losses it was frequently impossible to quantify, the troops were thrown back upon their own casualties – which became all the more haunting as they were largely due to mines, booby traps and sniper fire rather than "open" enemy action. At the same time, Caputo insists, combat itself had a strangely schizophrenic effect on those who participated in it:

it was an experience characterized by utmost contradictoriness, "as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel" (xvii). The continual, inescapable exposure to absurdity – logical as well as emotional – sooner or later led to ethical disorientation and malfunction, to the point where Caputo was "soaring high, very high in a delirium of violence" (269). In conjunction with the staggering losses suffered by some of the front units, a rapid erosion of ethics set in, and officers and soldiers alike were ready "to kill people for a few cans of beer and the time to drink them" (311). Caputo's meticulous account of his own involvement in violent acts is doubtless an attempt to come to terms with the guilt he feels. But it is at least as much a meticulous and conscientious analysis of the events which led to the ethical breakdown he and those around him had suffered. Exploring the no-man's-land between "facts" and "the truth" during the five months' preparation for his testimony in court, the war appears to him increasingly as the epitome of absurdity, and "worse than folly" (334).

Absurdity also pervades Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket,* from the bizarre Parris Island boot-camp masculinity rites of the first half to the eerie shots in the ruins of Hue during the Tet offensive that conclude the second part.[9] In fact, the only way for the film's protagonist to cope with a situation that would otherwise cost him his sanity is to embrace completely the absurdity of the *Dasein* into which he is thrown in Vietnam. A sharp thinker with a cynical strain, he signals this conviction by wearing a helmet with the inscription "BORN TO KILL" and a peace button pinned to the front of his uniform jacket. Later, when interviewed by a documentary crew about the reasons for his presence in Vietnam, he answers, ironically, true to his nickname, Joker: "I wanted to meet interesting, stimulating people from an ancient land . . . and kill them." Kubrick also clearly insists on absurdity in the two chilling climaxes of the movie. In the first, at the end of basic training, the apparently weakest of all recruits turns out to be the deadliest when he kills the drill sergeant and then commits suicide in the barracks latrine. The second is the sniper scene, where an invisible enemy wounds and kills several men. After their buddies manage to infiltrate the building it turns out that the sniper is a young Vietcong girl, a circumstance so unexpected that it perplexes them to the point of hysteria. Barely alive, she begs the men to kill her, which Joker does, after considerable hesitation. His motives are not

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[9] By far the most relentless cinematographic treatment of Vietnam in terms of absurdity are Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and, to an even greater extent, *Apocalypse Now Redux*. Coppola's masterpieces are so dense and complex that I would like to discuss them separately on a future occasion.

made clear in the movie – he may have acted out of a desire for retribution or out of a sense of compassion – and the scene comes across as concealing an even darker underside.

Not surprisingly then, Kubrick, in an interview for *American Film*, explained the sniper scene as a moment in which "humanity rear[ed] its ugly head" (Gilliatt 22). A second look at the scene reveals its extreme complexity. It is impossible to determine beyond doubt the motives of the dying woman for asking the men to shoot her. Is she simply asking for mercy? Or is this taunting? Is this the weak humiliating the strong – who are proud of having achieved a kill rate of three to one? Or is it the dying mocking the living – for not being able to be touched any more? For Joker, there is neither a way out of this situation nor, indeed, a right way of dealing with it. Once he has been asked to kill her, he cannot ignore the choice: walking away would mean turning down the request. In the longest uninterrupted take of Joker's face in the entire movie we see him weighing the odds with mounting desperation. Is the *coup de grâce* a humanitarian gesture? Or would he be doing a favor to the enemy who has killed three of his comrades? Does refusing to shoot make him a coward? Is not the killing of a defenseless human being a supreme act of cowardice? When Joker finally pulls the trigger he does so in disgust – perhaps because he is appalled by his decision, perhaps because he is nauseated by the act of killing, or perhaps out of disgust for the enemy. Most likely for all three reasons.[10] Still, whatever the complexities involved, if "humanity" is the issue as Kubrick suggests, the scene ultimately revolves around a basic paradox: Joker can only be human by violating the most fundamental of all human laws – that not to kill. Clearly, Joker's dilemma becomes a symbol for the whole war. Vietnam is a *surd* first and foremost in the sense Bacon gives it in *The Advancement of Learning* (ii. xxv.4), as something that conveys no sense or meaning, but also in the modern sense of "irrational" or "mute."

The only way to deal with Vietnam, Kubrick suggests, is through emphasizing absurdity. This becomes very clear in the final scene of the film where the platoon moves out and down to the river for the night. Silhouetted against raging fires and black smoke like the damned souls in Dante's *Inferno,* they intone the Mickey Mouse theme song. Apart from its thinly veiled political irony ("Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me? Mickey Mouse!"), the song becomes a forceful emblem of the mental

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[10] That there is, in fact, no right decision for Joker is made quite clear by the reaction of his buddies: "We're gonna have to put you up for the Congressional medal of . . . Ugly" and "Hardcore man . . . Fucking hardcore."

state of the platoon with their fears, needs and desires. The invocation of the cartoon figure catapults them out of the reality of death and destruction into the bliss of a never-never land, whose inhabitants are not only immortal but also perfectly innocent. Singing like children in the dark, the Marines raise their voices – not so much to drive away their fears as to reach out for their lost innocence.

When the war was lost seven years later, the senselessness of the enterprise became patent and undeniable. Instead of becoming an icon of American superiority, both moral and military, Vietnam turned into a cipher of dismay, abhorrence and disgust. The American myth was so radically called into question that it ceased to be functional. "On the deepest level," as John Hellman claims, "the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future" (x). America has reached what Slotkin calls a "liminal" stage, a phase in which the traditional self-definition through Puritan and frontier myths no longer functions. The problem is, however, that America and its people have at the same time arrived at a point where they have become masters of reality – to the point where they risk "being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them" (Boorstin 240).

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Apocalypse Now Redux. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, Laurence Fishburne, Dennis Hopper and Robert Duvall. United Artists, 2001.
Battle Cry. Dir. Raoul Walsh. Perf. Aldo Ray. Warner Bros, 1955.
The Fighting Seabees. Dir. Edward Ludwig. Perf. John Wayne and Susan Hayward. Republic Pictures Corporation, 1944.
Flying Tigers. Dir. David (I) Miller. Perf. John Wayne. Republic Pictures Corporation, 1942.
Full Metal Jacket. By Michael Herr and Gustav Hasford. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Matthew Modin and Vincent D'Onofrio. Warner Bros., 1987.
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The Sands of Iwo Jima. Dir. Allan Dwan. Perf. John Wayne. Republic Pictures Corporation, 1949.