

FOUNDERS OF THE WALL



# IN THE DEER HUNTER

A MICHAEL CIMINO Film



DISCUSSION GUIDE

## How Does Film Reflect Perspectives on War?

War will always have impacts on society and culture. Within the realm of popular culture, popular films released after the end of the Vietnam War reflect a range of public perspectives about the conflict.

This lesson plan will involve a review of popular films that depict the Vietnam War, era, and veterans, as well as more recent popular films that depict more recent wars. Students will examine the perspectives of these films and how the range of perspectives was reflected in broader society following the war.



## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

# 1

### Films from Vietnam

**Ask students to create a list of movies** they have seen that have a focus on the Vietnam War, era, or veterans (for a list, see: <http://www.vvmf.org/teaching-vietnam>). Ask each student to choose a favorite from the list and explain his/her reasoning for why it's his/her favorite. If a student hasn't see any—ask him or her to choose one to watch at home. For that movie, ask students to answer the following questions:

- What issues are depicted in the movie?
- Would you say that the movie takes a position on the war? What evidence supports your answer?
- What part or parts of the movie struck you? Why?
- What do you think someone who had no background on the Vietnam War or era would take away about it from this movie?

## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

# 2

### Vietnam in Media

**Ask students to poll 10 of their siblings, friends, or even parents:** What are the top two sources from which they have any understanding of the Vietnam War and era? Place a tally mark beside each response. Discuss the students' findings as a class- which two sources came out on top?

- Movies
- Books
- Music
- Classes taken in high school or college
- Stories from family
- Personal experience

#### NOTE TO TEACHER AND/OR GUEST SPEAKER:

Some of the clips included in the presentation accompanying this guide have scenes that depict violence and include adult language. You may wish to review the presentation in advance, and distribute permission slips if the school requires it.



Cover: Poster for the 1978 film, *The Deer Hunter*

Above: Poster for the 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now*

MARLON BRANDO ROBERT DUVAL MARTIN SHEEN in APOCALYPSE NOW  
FREDERIC FORREST ALBERT HALL SAM BOTTOMS LARRY FISHBURNE and DENNIS HOPPER  
Produced and Directed by FRANCIS COPPOLA  
Written by JOHN MILIUS and FRANCIS COPPOLA Narration by MICHAEL HERR  
Co-Produced by FRED ROOS, GRAY FREDERICKSON and TOM STERNBERG  
of Photography VITTORIO STORARO Production Designer DEAN TAVOULARIS Editor RICHARD MARKS  
Sound Design by WALTER MURCH Music by CARMINE COPPOLA and FRANCIS COPPOLA  
TECHNICOLOR® DD DOLBY STEREO™ United Artists AN OMNI ZOETROPE PRODUCTION  
SELECTED THEATRES  
HIREN on EMI Records and Tapes



## IN THE CLASSROOM

# Vietnam in Media

**Begin by asking students:** Do you think that movies can play an important role in shaping popular understanding of a historical event or period? If yes, how should we interpret them?

**One of the earliest and most iconic movies** to focus on the effects of Vietnam was *The Deer Hunter*, which was released in 1978, just five years after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which ended America's combat role in Vietnam. *The Deer Hunter* traces the effects of the war on three young men who served, as well as those at home. The three protagonists all return from Vietnam changed in some way, some more than others. The ending is ambiguous, with one of three dead while the others seem to resume normal lives. Watch the trailer for *The Deer Hunter* included on slide 1. Ask students: From watching the trailer, do you think the movie takes a stance on the war? Why or why not? What issues or problems of war does the movie appear to tackle from the trailer?

**One year later in 1979**, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* was released, sharing a view of chaos and breakdown of order that came with a war that many questioned. In making the film, Coppola used Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a literary basis and parallel to tell the story of a man's descent into madness in Vietnam. Coppola has been quoted as saying "My film is not a movie about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It is what it was really like. It was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us. We had access to too much money and too much equipment, and little by little, we went insane." Watch the clip of *Apocalypse Now* included on slide 2, in which Lt. Col. Kilgore utters often quoted line "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." Ask students: What do you conclude about the war from this scene? Why do you think this particular scene and line is often referenced? Does this

Left: Poster for the 1978 film, *The Deer Hunter*

Middle: Poster for the 1982 film, *First Blood*

Right: Poster for the 1986 film, *Platoon*

Opposite: Poster for the 1984 film, *Missing in Action*

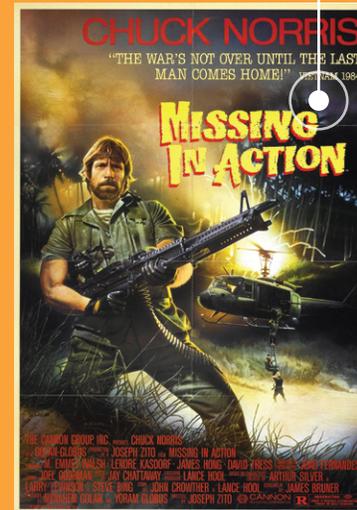
depiction of Vietnam conform or stray from your understanding of the war?

**While *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*** offer a largely critical view of the war and its lasting effects, a few movies produced in the wake of Vietnam offered an alternative view. One of these was *Rambo*, the first in the series released in 1982. In the first of the *Rambo* series, *First Blood*, John Rambo is seen as a Vietnam veteran who cannot quite find his place in a post-Vietnam America. In one of the most referenced scenes from the movie, Rambo proclaims "I did what I had to do to win! But somebody wouldn't let us win! And I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me? Who are they? Unless they've been me and been there and know what the hell they're yelling about!" Watch the trailer for *First Blood* included on slide 3. Ask students: How does the trailer's depiction of John Rambo, a Vietnam veteran, compare to the depictions of veteran characters in *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*? Which view of Vietnam and its lasting effects do you find more convincing? Why? Do you think from the trailer the movie takes a stance on the war? Why or why not?

**Similarly, 1984's *Missing in Action*** tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who takes matters into his own hands, seemingly against the wills of all else, politicians and public alike. In the movie, Vietnam veteran James Braddock works to liberate remaining prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam, the existence of which has been denied by Vietnamese officials. Despite the release of the last American POWs in 1973, movies such as *Missing in Action* and the *Rambo* series perpetuated the belief that some remained despite government claims. Watch the clip from *Missing in Action* included on slide 4. Ask students: How would you characterize Braddock? How does the depiction of this veteran compare to the protagonists of the previous films? How does this clip carry forward the popular belief that the war was mishandled by those outside the military?

**In 1986, *Oliver Stone, a Vietnam veteran***, released the landmark film *Platoon*, which tells the story of a young man's loss of innocence as he gets entrenched in the war. The film paints a grim picture of Americans in Vietnam, in which troops—many of whom represent America's working class-- turn against each other and turn to drugs as a sense of futility in their efforts increases. Watch the clip of the movie included on slide 5. Ask students: What popular discourse about the war do you find reflected in this scene? Do you think from watching this scene that the movie takes a stance on the war? How would you characterize protagonist Chris Taylor?

**1987's *Good Morning Vietnam*** explored some similar themes in a lighter context, telling the story of a radio DJ in Vietnam who becomes popular with the "grunts" in Vietnam and becomes involved with a local Vietnamese girl. Though the movie is a comedy, it is a popular film set in Vietnam that has also come to inform public understanding of what the war was like. Watch the trailer for the movie included on slide 6. How does this depiction of Vietnam compare with the depiction in *Platoon*? What do you conclude about the war from this trailer? Do you think from this trailer the movie takes a stance on the war?



**Oliver Stone went on to create another film** about Vietnam titled *Born on the Fourth of July*, released in 1989. *Born on the Fourth of July* tells the story of Ron Kovic, a real Vietnam veteran who become a prominent activist against the war. After enlisting to serve in Vietnam, Kovic is wounded and paralyzed. He returns to the US, struggles to readjust to his new life, and eventually joins Vietnam Veterans Against the War to protest US involvement in Vietnam. Watch the clip of the movie included on slide 7. Ask students: How would you characterize protagonist Ron Kovic? Would you characterize him as a hero, an anti-hero, or a victim? What popular discourse about the war do you find reflected in this scene?

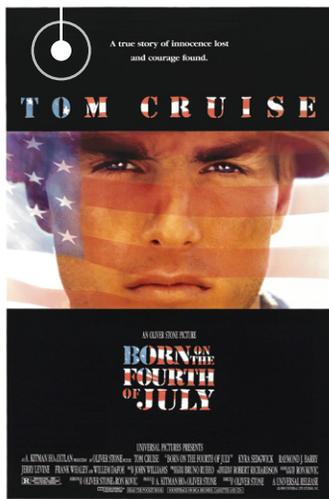
**Undoubtedly, many students today have seen** the 1994 drama-comedy *Forrest Gump*. While *Forrest Gump* is not primarily focused on the Vietnam War, the movie depicts the title character Forrest Gump's time in Vietnam, the antiwar protests that spanned the nation, as well as the process of returning to civilian life following the war. Watch the clip of the movie included on slide 8, in which Forrest Gump is pulled into an antiwar rally on the National Mall to speak on behalf of Vietnam veterans. Ask students: What impression of the war and era does this scene give viewers? How does this Vietnam-era America compare with the one depicted in *Born on the Fourth of July*?

**The legacy and history of Vietnam** continues to be examined in popular film, sometimes expanding upon new subjects or time periods. For example, in 2002 a film adaptation was made of Graham Greene's 1955 novel *The Quiet American*, which tells the story of a British journalist and an American CIA agent who live and work together in Vietnam during the period of the war against the French in the early 1950's. The film was popular in theaters and presented to viewers a nuanced perspective of American involvement in Vietnam, without any clear-cut answers. View the clip of the movie included on slide 9, in which American Pyle and British Fowler meet and discuss communism, liberty, and the French pursuit in Vietnam. How does this snapshot of Vietnam in *The Quiet American* compare to depictions like those in *Apocalypse Now*, for example?

Left: Poster for the 1987 film, *Good Morning Vietnam*

Middle: Poster for the 1989 film, *Born on the Fourth of July*

Right: Poster for the 2014 film, *American Sniper*



**In the past 15 years, a number of films** have continued the legacy set by the films produced in the wake of Vietnam by interpreting more recent conflicts and the veteran experience. Included on slides 10-12 are clips from three movies: *Three Kings* (1999), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *American Sniper* (2014). *Three Kings* is set during the 1990 Gulf War, and tells the story of American soldiers who set out to return gold plundered from Kuwait during the war; *The Hurt Locker* is set in the 2003 Iraq War, and tells the story of a divisive sergeant who works with a bomb disposal team; *American Sniper* is also set in the recent Iraq War, and tells a fictionalized account of real-life Navy SEAL Chris Kyle and his struggle to readjust at home after serving as a sniper during the war. View these clips with students and ask them to compare:

- How soldiers or veterans are depicted in each, and how those depictions compare with depictions in Vietnam films;
- Whether the movies seem to take a stance on the respective wars;
- Whether and how popular debates about the respective wars can be seen within the clips

**Since the Vietnam era, film has been used to reflect a range of perspectives on war, a tradition which continues into the 21st century.** Some films continue to interpret the Vietnam experience, such as 2002's *We Were Soldiers*, which tells the story of the Battle of Ia Drang, considered to be the first major battle between US forces and North Vietnamese forces. Now a part of the story of our nation's history of the war, the Vietnam Memorial is featured in the film as a place where the protagonist goes to find peace (slide 13).

## POST-VISIT ACTIVITY

### Speeches and Film

Ask students to review a few prominent speeches that analyze Vietnam and its legacy in the post-war period, such as:

[Jimmy Carter - 1977 University of Notre Dame Commencement Address](#)

[Ronald Reagan - 1984 University of Texas Commencement Address](#)

For each of the above speeches, ask students to identify a film reviewed in the classroom (or previously seen) that has a tone that most closely matches the tone of the speech, and then have them answer the following question through writing or discussion: Do you think it is fair to say that the writers/directors of those films have shaped the collective memory of the war and era? Why or why not?

### FURTHER SUGGESTED READING

**Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War.**

Devine, Jeremy M.  
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

**From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film.**

Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud.  
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

### Common Core Standards

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6**

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9**

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6**

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7**

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9**

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

### College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Standards

#### **D.1.1.9-12**

Explain how a question reflects an enduring issue in the field

#### **D1.5.9-12**

Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple viewpoints represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.

#### **D2.Civ.10.9-12**

Analyze the impact and appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

#### **D2.His.6.9-12**

Analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history that they produced.

#### **D2.His.7.9-12**

Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past

#### **D2.His.11.9-12**

Critique the usefulness of historical sources for specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

#### **D2.His.16.9-12**

Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.



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