

## **Movies against the war in Vietnam**

### The war in Vietnam

- November 1955 – April 1975 (Fall of Saigon)
- North Vietnam (supported by China and other communist allies) vs. South Vietnam (supported by USA and other anti-communist countries)
- U.S. involvement to prevent the spreading of communism
- 1976 North and South Vietnam merged to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam
- First war the USA lost since the war of 1812 (despite great military supremacy)
- The Vietnam War drastically raised the awareness of military losses throughout the U.S.-population (even though the losses on side of the US [~58k] were disproportionate to those on side of the Vietnamese population [~800k-3million])

### The Deer Hunter

- Film is divided into 3 equal acts
- First act: Presentation of the characters, steel workers from Clairton (Pennsylvania), Mike (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken) and Steven (John Savage), Steven gets married to Angela (big Orthodox wedding) and there Nick promises Linda (Meryl Streep) to marry her one day, in the last scene of act 1 the friends go on their last deer hunt before going to Vietnam
- Second act: The three friends meet again somewhere in Vietnam, fighting North Vietnamese Soldiers by whom they get captured. The guards force the prisoners to play Russian roulette and gamble on the outcome. All three are forced to play, but Steven breaks down and is put into an underwater cage as punishment. Mike and Nick have to play against each other and Mike convinces the guards to let them play with three bullets instead of one which they then use to kill all their captors. They escape and use a tree branch to float down the river where a helicopter sees them. Nick manages to get in the helicopter but Steven is too weak and drops back into the river, Mike jumps into the water as well to save Steven and the helicopter leaves without them. Mike manages to get Steven back to their allies. Last scene of act 2: Nick, who's psychologically damaged, hasn't heard from his friends since he got off with the helicopter, he stumbles through Saigon and gets to a gambling den where men

play Russian roulette for money. Mike, who's there as well, sees Nick and tries to get to him, but he runs off without noticing him.

- Third act: Back in the U.S., Mike returns home but has problems to reconnect with all the people he hasn't seen in a long time. He and Linda grow close but only because of the friend (Nick) they both think they've lost. Mike goes deer hunting one more time with a few friends but isn't able to shoot a deer when he has the chance to. Then he visits Steven, who's lost both legs, in a hospital and finds out that someone has sent large amounts of money to Steven over the last months. He figures out that it has to be from Nick, who's still in Saigon. Mike travels to Saigon just before its fall in 1975. Mike tracks down Nick in a crowded roulette club, but Nick has no recollection of his friends or his home. Mike desperately tries to bring Nick's memories back and even sits down to play the roulette against him one more time. After a while Nick finally starts to recognize him, smiles and tells him "One Shot" (a theme well known from their past deer hunts where Mike used to kill deer with only one shot), but he raises the gun to his temple and pulls the trigger. This time he gets the bullet and kills himself.
- Epilogue: Back home there's a funeral for Nick and Mike, Steven, Linda and their friends sing "God bless America" - The End.

## Coming Home

- Post-Vietnam traumas
  - Different perspective than in "The Deer-Hunter" -> paralyzed vets & left- home wives
  - Marine sergeant Luke Martin (Jon Voigt) struggles with his disability after being wounded in combat
  - In the veteran hospital he meets Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda), wife of marine captain Bob (Bruce Dern)
  - Luke & Sally fall in love and start a relationship (both connect through their opposition to the war)
  - When Bob returns from Vietnam, he is a double victim, disillusioned and paralyzed by the war and finding his marital situation destroyed
  - He confronts the lovers, ends up turning against himself, however, and swims out to the sea, probably to kill himself
  - Luke talks to High-School students about the horrors and immorality of war trying to prevent them from joining the army
- American war victims dealing with their traumas in different ways
  - No actual war scenes
  - No historical background of the war
  - One-sided narrative; only Americans as victims

## Conclusion

- Like already mentioned, the Vietnam-War left American society with a great trauma which still exists today
- A counterculture & widespread anti-war spirit emerged

- Making of conventional war movies, depicting “good wars”, spurred on by noble objectives would have been ludicrous at the time
- Best received Vietnam films appeared to capture the intense anti-war feelings of a generation, influenced by the lengthy military debacle, the radicalism of the new left, and the experimental sensibilities of the counter-culture
- Still, most of these movies have similarities to earlier war movies

## Criticism

- Vietnam War primarily as American experience
  - ➔ Vietnam only used as dramatic backdrop for action/ adventure scenes
- U.S. military forces in Vietnam portrayed as noble grunts, innocent, illiterate kids/ Americans as the sad, unfortunate victims
- Vietnamese people stereotyped as Oriental Threat or ignored altogether. Rarely presented as sympathetic victims
- War-is-hell theme used as excuse for extreme violence
  - ➔ No scenes of systematic destruction that took place for years in Vietnam
- None of the films attempts to establish the broader historical and political context of the Vietnam era
  - ➔ Fully detached from governmental and military decision-making apparatus

## Primary Sources

- Coming Home. Dir. Hal Ashby. With Jane Fonda, Jon Voigt, Bruce Dern. United Artists. DVD
- The Deer Hunter. Dir. Michael Cimino. With Robert De Niro, Christopher Walken, John Savage, Meryl Streep. Universal Pictures. DVD

## Secondary Sources

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