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Bitterness, Rage, and Redemption: Hollywood Constructs the Disabled Vietnam Veteran

The American movie industry has represented disabled people in its products since the 1890s, but, as I have argued elsewhere, its images have only occasionally resembled the people on whom they are supposedly based. From a political perspective, we might say that such images are designed primarily to serve the needs of—indeed, perpetuate—a mainstream society that has long subjected its disabled minority to alternating rounds of paternalism, bigotry, and indifference.¹

The movie representation of disabled Vietnam veterans is very much a part of this tradition. Of all disabled movie figures, severely injured veterans have generally received the most sympathetic and favorable treatment from Hollywood filmmakers,² but such constructions, particularly ones related to Vietnam, remain problematic. Guided by the belief that people often turn to the popular culture that surrounds them for information about disability, the Vietnam War, and the intersecting concerns of the two,³ this essay examines the Hollywood construction of disabled Vietnam veterans within the contexts of the war and American society during and after the war. As I hope to show, Hollywood's images have gone well beyond simply "standing in" for actual disabled Vietnam veterans and serve as integral parts of a metaphoric framework that embraces larger aspects of America and the war, such as national identity and gender roles. If we agree with the argument that Hollywood helps maintain a patriarchal society by perpetuating conventionalized gender roles, its Vietnam-related disabled characters are something of a conundrum; as we shall see, Hollywood typically endowed such figures with the privileged status of white heterosexual masculinity but simultaneously coded them as highly disruptive "Others," in part because of their participation in a morally ambiguous war, in part because of what may be read as their symbolic castration and its potential for weakening patriar-

chal values.⁴ Faced with this representational dilemma, Hollywood typically attempted to neutralize the vets' disruptiveness in a manner consistent with the cautionary biblical tale of the prodigal son: lay blame on them, redeem them if they demonstrate a new worthiness, and then reabsorb them. This study, which also incorporates alternative interpretations of the films offered by other commentators and a comparison of the disabled Vietnam vet images with their World War II counterparts, should provide a better understanding of the sociopolitical forces that have shaped these particular movie images and the ways audiences may have received them.

Basic Narrative Patterns

The surface narratives of the films that present disabled Vietnam vets in major roles—*Coming Home* (1978), *Cutter's Way* (1981), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Scent of a Woman* (1992)—are well known and need not be recounted here in detail,⁵ but it is worth noting that they differ with regard to their points of attack; in other words, their narrative trajectories begin at different stages in the main characters' lives. *Born on the Fourth of July* commences with Ron Kovic's youth in Massapequa, New York, well before his service in Vietnam, while *Coming Home* introduces Luke Martin after he has returned from Vietnam and is undergoing rehabilitation in a VA hospital. *Cutter's Way* and *Scent of a Woman* follow a third option: they start after the lead characters (Alex Cutter and Frank Slade, respectively) have completed the rehabilitative process and returned to civilian life. If we treat the main characters' evolution as the defining narrative, however, we find that the productions follow a distinctly similar pattern: each film constructs its vet, postinjury, as a lonely, embittered substance-abuser who, after an epiphany (and often with the assistance of a politically naive character), redirects his pent-up rage toward some larger purpose.

This observation merits closer scrutiny. *Coming Home* first presents the symbolically disempowered Luke Martin as rage-filled (in a memorable scene in a VA hospital, he splatters his urine bag while thrashing about on a gurney) but then shows him becoming partially "remasculinized" through his affair with the politically ingenuous Sally Hyde. Saddled with saintly monikers, Luke becomes something of a saint himself—and completes his remasculinization process—after learning that a friend at the VA has committed suicide; he shackles himself to the gates of a Marine Corps recruitment facility in a symbolic attempt to stop others from going to Vietnam and later gives an emotional speech to high-school students about the needlessness of the war. *Cutter's Way* shows the highly abrasive Alex Cutter to

be utterly without purpose until he learns about a murder in his home town of Santa Barbara. He convinces himself that a corporate executive named J. J. Cord is guilty of the crime and relentlessly pursues him with the help of his self-centered and noncommittal friend Rich Bone, even though Cord's guilt may be entirely the product of Alex's imagination. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic evolves from a war supporter to an impassioned antiwar activist who leads a protest at the 1972 Republican National Convention. *Scent of a Woman* initially portrays Frank Slade as a suicidal misanthrope, but at the end of the film he comes to the aid of Charlie Simms, a fresh-faced young man who had been hired as Frank's caretaker and now risks losing a Harvard scholarship if he does not inform on a prep school peer.

Disabled vets who occupy relatively minor roles follow a different pattern; they are often quietly reintegrated into their society with little if any acknowledgment about Vietnam. *Alice's Restaurant* (1969) shows Jacob, an African American who lost a hand in Vietnam, as one of several people who have been unobtrusively accepted into a commune in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. In *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the severely injured Stevie is initially shown to have readjustment problems—he refuses to leave the VA hospital—but by the end of the film he has rather anonymously blended back into his circle of friends with no recognition of any moral issues surrounding Vietnam. A subnarrative of *Modern Problems* (1981) involves Brian Stills, an extremely well adjusted disabled vet who runs his own publishing company. Among the former 1960s radicals who gather for a friend's funeral in *The Big Chill* (1983) is Nick, a veteran who appears able-bodied but nevertheless alludes several times to an emasculating injury suffered in Vietnam.⁶ The title character of *Suspect* (1987), a deafened vet named Carl Wayne Anderson, is accused of committing a murder and is eventually “rescued” by a public defender and a jurist illegally collaborating on his behalf. Like most of the films cited above, however, *Suspect* avoids confronting any moral issues arising from the intersection of Vietnam and disability.

Forrest Gump (1994), the most recent of the films discussed in this essay, presents a disabled vet who occupies a kind of middle ground; Dan Taylor, Forrest Gump's commanding officer in Vietnam, is not the film's main character, but he does appear in many scenes. Dan loses both legs above the knee during an attack and, like the major characters of the other films noted above, is constructed postinjury as extremely bitter, alcoholic, and suicidal. Unlike them, however, he does not engage in any “rescue mission.” He is instead helped out of his deep depression by the childlike Gump and eventually reabsorbed into the mainstream.

What are we to make of these images? What did *Forrest Gump* director

Robert Zemeckis mean, for instance, when he said, “I saw characters [in the film] as metaphors for different aspects of the American character”?⁷ If we accept the view that movies are politically charged commodities that contain perspectives on issues that filmmakers are asking audiences to “buy,” we are forced to ask questions about the movies described above: What are the films attempting to “sell,” and for what purpose? In particular, what are the filmmakers trying to encourage spectators into believing about disabled veterans, the Vietnam War, and American society? In a sense, the images described above are mythic icons produced by a major cultural industry ostensibly to help general audiences understand the war and its aftermath. Susan Mackey-Kallis provided a start toward understanding these figures with her general suggestion that “the image of the [disabled] Vietnam vet reconstructing his life stateside, such as Stevie in *The Deer Hunter*, Luke in *Coming Home*, Alex Cutter in *Cutter's Way*, and Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*, also became metaphoric for the American public's attempt to do likewise.”⁸ As I argue below, however, the situation is considerably more complex.

A Historical Overview of the Film Imagery

Albert Auster and Leonard Quart suggested in *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* that Hollywood initially tried to make the Vietnam War accessible to the general public—to mythologize it, in effect—through the creation of two archetypal figures: the wounded vet and the superman. The wounded-vet image took on two forms: the psychologically injured veteran frequently given to mindless rampages as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and, to a lesser extent, the physically injured vet whose wounds symbolized the guilt of the nation. The superman, on the other hand, “lived beyond conventional values [and projected] an aura of almost superhuman courage and power and personal invulnerability,” in Quart's words.⁹ Auster and Quart suggested that the madman/victim and superman metaphors ultimately failed because audiences wanted more resonant figures to have the war explained to them. “The cautiously evolved Vietnam symbols and protagonists of the 1970s (the wounded vet and the superman) had only partially filled the need for acceptable and accessible Vietnam metaphors,” they wrote. “As a matter of fact, instead of supplying a satisfying basis for any kind of Vietnam genre, [the moviemakers'] attempts succeeded in only confusing the audience—sometimes even inspiring remorse, guilt, and anxiety—and in stifling further cinematic consideration of the war.”¹⁰

Though this latter point is certainly moot, Auster and Quart's comments on the failure of these images are apt. The wounded-vet and superman archetypes, the first of which lent itself too readily to sensationalistic or pitiable representations, while the second was too closely associated with the John Wayne–Audie Murphy type of figure found in World War II era films, were eventually replaced by a round of less exaggerated images, ones that stressed the veterans' roles as "survivors" and their ability to persevere.¹¹

Coming Home serves as an important transitional film from the first wave of Vietnam vet depictions to the second. It constructs Luke Martin at first as a person mindlessly raging about (though, importantly, he does not harm anyone during such outbursts), but by the end of the film he is portrayed as a survivor: a thoughtful, impassioned antiwar activist who raises people's awareness of the war through various strategies. It helped pave the way for "survivor" films of the 1980s and 1990s such as *Cutter's Way*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Scent of a Woman*, and *Forrest Gump*.

As Auster and Quart have observed, *Cutter's Way* works particularly well as a survivor film (even though Alex is ironically the only disabled Vietnam veteran among the ones discussed in this essay to die as a result of his beliefs). "*Cutter's Way* succeeds in managing to touch upon the tortured Vietnam and the ambiguous counterculture legacies without indulging in sentimental clichés or egregious stereotypes," they wrote. "The film takes the Vietnam metaphors developed in the films of the 1970s and deepens them by creating a more complex synthesis of them. Consequently, as evoked by the character of Alex Cutter, the wounded vet no longer resembles the passive victim of earlier Vietnam films, to be either pitied or feared, nor in his moments of grandiosity is he touched by the superman romanticism that surrounds Michael Vronsky in *The Deer Hunter* or the metahistorical Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*."¹² Though the film's murder mystery is only tangentially related to Vietnam, it serves as a powerful metaphor for the Vietnam experience as seen from Alex's perspective. As I argued in a previous essay, Alex's "way" of making sense of the world around him includes seeing himself as a war protestor, the businessman Cord as a Vietnam policy-setter who demands unquestioning loyalty, the murdered teenager as a "grunt" who died as a result of power politics, and his bland, self-absorbed friend Rich Bone as an initially uncommitted citizen who eventually turns against the war. On a more abstract level, *Cutter's Way* suggests all people are disabled (or incomplete) in some way and that they need each other to achieve the wholeness necessary to accomplish moral and political goals.¹³

Coming Home, *Cutter's Way*, and the others not only represent their lead characters as survivors but, as noted above, also show them pursuing

larger goals: protesting the war on either a micro level (*Coming Home*) or a macro one (*Born on the Fourth of July*), snaring an alleged murderer (*Cutter's Way*), helping a friend in danger of losing a college scholarship (*Scent of a Woman*). Denied the heroic status bestowed on veterans of other wars, particularly World War II, they seek to become what we might call "alternative heroes." In other words, the above films construct their main characters as survivors and then as heroes of a different sort who struggle with a society that treats with them with hostility or indifference, or both.

The Disabled Vietnam Vet Images in Their Societal Context

The relationship between the survivors-cum-alternative-heroes and their society needs to be explored more closely. The films suggest that society had conditioned the vets to want to be heroes, rejected them as the war turned increasingly unpopular at home, and then treated them as modern-day equivalents of the biblical prodigal son by accepting them back into the fold if they had redeemed themselves by performing heroic deeds (or, in the case of the minor-character films, if they were redeemed by others) by the films' conclusion.¹⁴ The society depicted in these films is as much a part of the metaphoric design as the vets themselves, as a closer examination reveals.

Born on the Fourth of July is perhaps the most self-conscious of the films in its attempt to metaphorize different aspects of the war and American society. The trope at the heart of both the film and the autobiography is simple yet powerful: America is the disabled Vietnam veteran, and vice versa. In other words, Ron Kovic and his country, coincidentally "born" on the same day, undergo a similar maturation; his evolution from a war supporter crippled by his beliefs to an antiwar activist parallels the country's own development from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The filmmakers were quite conscious of the America/Kovic metaphor and emphasized it frequently in interviews. Tom Cruise, the actor who played Kovic, stressed the point that *Born on the Fourth of July* is more than a simple coming-to-terms kind of story: "The film isn't about a man in a wheelchair. [It's about] the country, what it went through, was, became. You know, an invalid . . . It was a crippling time for this country, and you had to get beyond this man and a chair." The film's director, Oliver Stone, expressed similar sentiments. "We wanted to show America, and Tom, and through Tom, Ron, being put in a wheelchair, losing their potency," he said. "We wanted to show America being forced to redefine its concept of heroism."¹⁵

For some reviewers, this trope proved too heavy-handed and discouraged audiences from regarding the Kovic character as a fully fleshed-out human being. Writing in *Commonweal*, Christian Appy suggested that many of the film's individual moments "may seem on the mark—the way it really was—but Stone is constantly basting them with a mythic sauce. And so what comes out this time is not a searching examination of Ron Kovic's life, but a symbolic life, the effort to make Kovic's experience represent the history of an entire nation." His perspective echoes that of *Newsweek* reviewer David Ansen, who suggested that the film is "trying so hard to be archetypal it ends up feeling unreal. You can't connect to the characters because they've been deprived of personality: they're simply white-bread symbols of deluded American patriotism."¹⁶

In my view, the America/Kovic metaphor fails for another reason; in both the book and the movie, Kovic spends considerable time separating himself (or finding himself separated) from the very society that the filmmakers insist he "is." For example, the free-verse poem that begins the autobiography, and which was later adapted into a bit of Kovic's dialogue for the film's demonstration scene at the 1972 Republican National Convention, features an "I-You" strategy that serves mainly to differentiate Kovic from his country:

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels
I am your yankee doodle dandy
your john wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave¹⁷

In *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, Robert Burgoyne has read into *Born on the Fourth of July* an alternative (and richer) metaphor, one that hinges on gender roles, national identity, and Freud's notion of "rescue": America is a woman that needs to be saved. "Linking the symbolism of nationalism to the iconography of gender in an overt way, the film anatomizes the failure of masculinist national ideals in the Vietnam period, offering in its closing scenes an alternative image of nation based on the metaphor of a maternal, social body America," he wrote. On the other hand, the film "restores the privileged place of the male hero by appealing to another cultural paradigm, what Freud called 'the rescue fantasy' in which the male hero gains authority by 'rescuing' the nation, figured as a woman, from its own weakness. In its portrait of the Vietnam veteran as

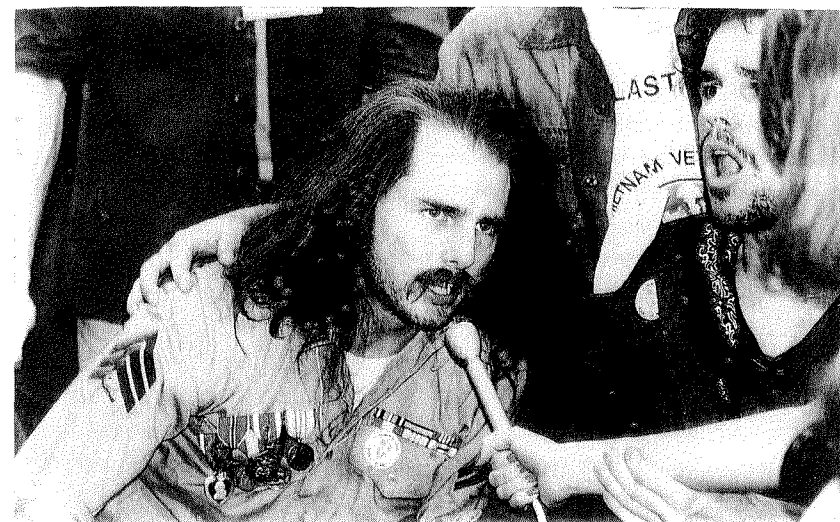


FIG. 3. *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) reclaims his manhood by protesting his government's policies in Vietnam.

victim of patriarchy on the one hand and as savior of the nation on the other, *Born on the Fourth of July* solicits a more complex reading of masculine agency in the Vietnam film than has been given to date."¹⁸

Whether or not we agree fully with Burgoyne's Freudian interpretation, it should be clear that gender issues have played a pivotal role in the construction of national identity in *Born on the Fourth of July* and, by extension, the other films discussed in this essay. As Susan Jeffords has argued convincingly in her book, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, "gender is the matrix through which Vietnam is read, interpreted and reframed in dominant American culture."¹⁹ Issues of sexual difference also loomed large in World War II era films that presented the state-side reintegration of disabled veterans, and a comparison of the movie constructions of disabled Vietnam vets, their World War II counterparts, and their respective societies will help bring these issues into sharper focus. Though Auster and Quart have insisted that the permanent injuries of Hollywood's World War II disabled veterans "were mainly symbols of anxiety and fear over the adjustment to postwar American society," while "the Vietnam-produced wounds were marks of equivocation, disillusion, and rage with war itself,"²⁰ I maintain that the intersection of disability, war, gender, and American identity makes for a more intricate reading.

The Evolving Image of Disabled Veterans since the 1940s

The manifest narratives of the World War II era films that represented disabled veterans had among their chief concerns the vets' rehabilitation and successful reentry into civilian life. In film after film—*Since You Went Away* (1944), *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944), *The Enchanted Cottage* (1945), *Pride of the Marines* (1945), *Till the End of Time* (1946), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Home of the Brave* (1949), *The Men* (1951), *Bright Victory* (1951), and doubtless others—the disabled vets' psychological conflicts, readjustment problems, and ultimate rehabilitation took up significant screen time. In the exemplary and justly famous film *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a sailor who lost both hands in a shipboard accident is one of three ex-servicemen who find the road to readjustment rough, if, with the support of friends and family, eventually maneuverable.

As a number of historians have observed, post-World War II American society was deeply divided about the returning vets; it wanted to welcome them but at the same time was concerned about the disruptive effects that these millions of demobilized men, able-bodied and disabled alike, might have on it.²¹ The films that depicted disabled veterans reflected these anxieties on a subtextual level, but their surface stories revealed a very different perspective, one redolent of "spin control": they suggested that the vets were returning to a mostly unified and welcoming society that shared in their triumph when they inevitably overcame physical and psychological obstacles.

The films' preoccupation with the successful reabsorption of disabled veterans into society is traceable in part to concerns both political and economic. During the early years of American involvement in World War II, Hollywood combined patriotic sentiments with a desire to protect profitable overseas markets and began turning out numerous products that promoted the war effort. By the latter years of the conflict and throughout the postwar period, a time when disabled veterans were on the minds of many,²² it often included disabled-vet characters in its productions. Since the industry's general philosophy dictated that almost every American veteran it depicted would automatically wear the mantle of heroism, Hollywood found itself in the peculiar position of having to resolve a paradox largely of its own making; it somehow had to inscribe the heavily masculinized notion of heroism upon symbolically castrated, feminized males to demonstrate that patriarchal values had not been permanently vitiated. In previous decades, Hollywood frequently resorted to the repaternizing

"miracle cure" scenario to reward disabled characters coded as "good" (for example, almost half of the approximately 200 disability-related feature films produced during the 1920s showed the disabled characters undergoing a cure),²³ but, by World War II, most filmmakers realized that audiences were no longer buying that facile idea, if they ever did.²⁴ A partial solution was to cast virile actors such as Van Johnson ("the rhapsodized dream boy of virtually every romantic female fan," according to *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther)²⁵ and Marlon Brando in several of the roles (in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* and *The Men*, respectively) while concomitantly having the women in the vets' lives remasculinize them by serving as both wives and mothers to them. These films insisted that the veterans needed to be heroized, remasculinized, and reassimilated into society at all costs, and that the women on the home front were the primary agents for these tasks.²⁶

This cycle of disabled-vet films continued into the 1950s, but the onset of the Korean War and fears of a global Communist menace led filmmakers to reconsider their position. They were no doubt influenced by the box-office failure of *The Men*, a study of wheelchair-using World War II veterans whose title left little doubt about the way its makers wanted the vets to be perceived. Though it received widespread critical acclaim, *The Men* had the misfortune of opening two weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War. "Designed as a post-war picture it was suddenly facing a pre-war mentality," wrote its director, Fred Zinnemann. "No wonder that people whose sons, husbands and fathers were going to fight could not bear to watch a movie such as ours. It folded in two weeks."²⁷ Filmmakers were still interested in exploring the lives of disabled World War II veterans but, in the wake of the new war, began altering their strategies for representing them. The severely injured veteran at the center of *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954) amply demonstrates his karate and judo expertise in his one-person battle against townspeople who had murdered a Japanese-American during World War II, for example, while *The Eternal Sea* (1955) and *The Wings of Eagles* (1957) show their disabled vets fighting for, and receiving, the chance to return to wartime duty after their rehabilitation. We may surmise that filmmakers in the 1950s found it insufficient to show the vets merely blending into mainstream society; with the Cold War as their backdrop, they began showing postrehabilitative disabled vets in more traditionally heroic situations with women playing little if any role in their remasculinization.²⁸

The major films discussed in this essay went a step beyond this latter set of World War II disabled-vet films by showing the veterans as maladjusted and alienated from women from the start. Several early Vietnam vet films—*Coming Home*, *Modern Problems*, *The Big Chill*—do eventually show women

acting as remasculinizing agents but in ways more problematic than in the World War II films: *Coming Home*, which was widely criticized for its conflation of political and romantic issues,²⁹ presents Luke committing adultery with the woman who had been an early target of his rage; *Modern Problems* shows Brian (an avatar of the “modern problem” of Vietnam, perhaps) developing a loving relationship with a woman but well after his success as a businessman; and *The Big Chill* has Nick spending the night with the quirky, enigmatic girlfriend of the man whom he and his friends had just buried.³⁰ The other films treat female figures in a very different way; the women are either ineffective or, worse, carry blame for the vets’ misfortune. This scenario is most powerfully realized in *Born on the Fourth of July*, which splits the mother-spouse construction so prevalent in the World War II era films into separate characters with disastrous results for its lead character: Kovic’s mother is demonized for having pushed him into the war and his war-protestor girlfriend Donna, despite her platitudes about wanting to help him, plays no role in his remasculinization. He turns to a Mexican prostitute in desperation, and she seems sympathetic at first, but he soon realizes that her interest in him is related solely to her role as a sex-for-hire mercenary.

Similar sentiments guided other films in this tradition. Until their concluding moments, *Scent of a Woman* and *Forrest Gump* show prostitutes to be the only possible female partners for Frank Slade and Dan Taylor, while Alex Cutter’s adulterous and heavily depressed wife Mo communicates mainly by hurling verbal barbs at her disabled husband or lapsing into silence. Unless we accept Robert Burgoyne’s reading of America in *Born on the Fourth of July* as a woman in need of rescue and extend it to the other films, we find that the female imagery in the disabled Vietnam vet films consists largely of demons, whores, and do-nothings.

Concluding Thoughts

To “help” audiences understand the Vietnam War, these films suggested that the vets had sought their manhood in Vietnam and with high irony lost it there, and that, as participants in an unpopular war, they did not deserve the traditional remasculinization process afforded the World War II vets. The seemingly automatic reabsorption of disabled veterans into American society (and, typically, into the waiting arms of adoring women) so commonly represented in the World War II films found little expression in the Vietnam films a generation later; instead, the major-character vets had to “prove” their heroism and manhood (to paraphrase Don Kunz, they had to fight to reclaim their masculinity in this country, having lost it in another)

before a reintegration could possibly occur. On this point, Christian Appy’s commentary on *Born on the Fourth of July* applies equally well to the other main movies discussed in this essay: “The film’s nagging implication is that the real motive behind Kovic’s antiwar activities is the desire to recover his manhood; that he found in this crusade an outlet for the heroic self-expression he had been looking for his whole life.” In some cases, that reintegration is epitomized by mainstream romance or, at least, the promise of it. Near the end of *Scent of a Woman*, for example, Frank offers a spirited, heroic defense of Charlie at the youth’s disciplinary hearing and then, heady with his success, flirts with a female teacher shortly thereafter. She is not unreceptive to his forwardness, raising the distinct possibility that women other than prostitutes might now take an interest in this newly remasculinized figure. The film concludes with the sense that Frank has taken the first steps toward a successful reentry into his society.³¹

Forrest Gump, with its secondary character of Dan, merits special attention for its unusual strategy of heroizing a relatively passive if undeniably rage-filled veteran. As revealed in the film’s closing moments, the “vet reclamation” process is already under way on a number of fronts. Firstly, the film shows Dan as newly reconstituted; when he appears at Forrest and Jenny’s wedding, he wears prostheses under his formal attire and looks “whole” for the first time since his accident. Forrest greets him with “You’ve got new legs—new legs,” to which Dan replies, “Yeah, I got new legs.” Secondly, the film associates him with an exceptionally high-ranking group of heroic icons: astronauts. Earlier in the film, when Forrest mentions that he plans to harvest shrimp for a living, Dan taunts him by cackling drunkenly, “If you’re ever a shrimp boat captain, that’s the day I’m an astronaut.” Forrest does eventually become a shrimp boat captain, a highly successful one at that, and hires Dan as his first mate. Now, at Forrest and Jenny’s wedding, Dan notes that his prostheses are made of a titanium alloy, pointedly adding that “it’s what they use on the space shuttle.” The *Forrest Gump* filmmakers thus manage to heroize Dan, if in an oblique way, by linking him with astronaut imagery. The film leaves no doubt about the thoroughness of his remasculinization when he introduces Forrest and Jenny to his fiancée, Susan. Though Susan is a marginal figure (she is on screen for less than a minute and speaks but one line—“Hi, Forrest”), her presence speaks volumes.

The films as a whole carry other perspectives that can charitably be labeled as questionable, some relating to the rather bland and politically naive helper/rescuers who serve as foils to the often overheated veterans, others to the vets themselves. For example, the filmmakers would have their

audiences believe that characters such as Forrest Gump, Charlie Simms, Rich Bone, and Sally Hyde are stand-ins for America as it wanted to see itself. As an advertising tagline for *Forrest Gump* puts it, "Forrest is the embodiment of an era, an innocent at large in an America that is losing its innocence." More disturbingly, the makers of the three most recent films—*Born on the Fourth of July*, *Scent of a Woman*, and *Forrest Gump*—imply that the veterans themselves were responsible for their injuries. As Eben Muse has noted of *Born on the Fourth of July*, "Kovic seems to believe that his crippling wounds are divine justice for his accidentally shooting a young soldier in his squad,"³² while *Scent of a Woman*'s Frank Slade had inadvertently blinded himself in a stunt with a hand grenade after being passed over for a promotion. In the case of *Forrest Gump*, its makers hold Dan Taylor up to ridicule for wanting to die on the battlefield in the tradition of his forebears. As he snarls to Forrest, his erstwhile rescuer, "I was supposed to die in the field, with honor. That was my destiny, and you cheated me out of it!" In addition, a brief montage of images shows Dan's Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War I, and World War II ancestors—all played by Gary Sinise, the same actor who portrayed Dan—comically collapsing and expiring in battle while Forrest intones offscreen: "I guess you could say he had a lot to live up to."

The filmmakers, in their rewriting of U.S. history from the 1960s onward, chose to minimize or negate the long-standing place of war within American national identity. By absolving the general populace of blame and concomitantly pinning the Vietnam War on a few self-destructive and "Otherized" soldiers—to make them bear, in Quart and Auster's words, "the stigma of guilt for the whole society"³³—the filmmakers turned their historical revisionism into a denial of massive proportions. Their basic attitudes toward the veterans, which can be summarized as "blame and then save the wayward victims," are unsettling, to say the least, and undermine whatever good intentions they had in attempting to present the lifestyles of newly disabled military men.

In this regard, the vets bear more than a passing resemblance to a well-known biblical figure alluded to several times in this essay: the prodigal son. As noted in Luke 15:11–32 (King James Version), the son "gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living." The passage suggests that he had spent huge sums on whores—he "hath devoured thy [bequest] with harlots," his elder brother tells their father—and it is certainly worth pointing out that prostitutes figure prominently in *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Scent of a Woman*, and *Forrest Gump*. Later, the young man sees the error of his ways and returns to

his father, saying "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son," whereupon the father welcomes him with a feast. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found," he proclaims. Though the prodigal son does not engage in any alternative heroics on the level of Luke Martin, Alex Cutter, Ron Kovic, or Frank Slade, we might argue that his simple acts of returning to the father—or, perhaps more appropriately, to the Law of the Father—and admitting guilt take courage, just as the veterans' deeds do. The vets for their part typically do not admit guilt or ask for forgiveness (if they do, it is with high reticence),³⁴ but the films seem to argue that their heroic acts are tantamount to admissions of culpability: that is, that the vets embark on these acts in part to assuage their guilt. And, as the Bible, one of American society's defining texts, makes clear, the proper action for a society encountering Others defined as repentant sinners is to rejoice and embrace them.

With few exceptions, films that depict disabled Vietnam veterans are ultimately concerned with the reintegration of these highly Otherized figures. In the case of the major-character productions, the filmmakers, realizing that audiences no longer accept the idea of "miracle cures," give the vets the opportunity to redeem themselves; in other words, they are "cured" in a different way. In a sense, they cure themselves with help from able-bodied people before their reentry into society. As for the films that offer disabled Vietnam veterans as minor characters, they show the preferred outcome that the other films struggle toward: the vets' relatively unobtrusive integration.

Though not commenting specifically on these films, the philosopher Roland Barthes offered some insights into mainstream society that may help explain the decisions of the filmmakers responsible for this imagery. In his seminal book *Mythologies*, Barthes suggested that a mainstream society typically acts on its fear of Others and their potentially disruptive power by either transforming them into parts of itself or condemning them. "Any otherness is reduced to sameness," he wrote, "because the Other is a scandal which threatens [mainstream] existence." It is essentially a "cure or kill" philosophy, as Robin Wood has suggested in his extension of Barthes's views. The majority society deals with Otherness, Wood argued, "either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself."³⁵

By bestowing a double stigma on disabled Vietnam veterans (i.e., disabled status and involvement in an unpopular war), society thus coded them to be among its most Otherized and potentially troublesome people. In response, filmmakers working on behalf of mainstream society have mostly

advocated the "cure" option; with the exception of Alex Cutter, whose Otherness is so extreme that it leads to his death, these highly marginalized figures are eventually reabsorbed into mainstream society. They have "come home," in effect—a point underscored by Ron Kovic's final words in *Born on the Fourth of July*: "Just lately I've felt like [pause] I'm home. You know, like, uh, maybe we're home." Indeed, the later Vietnam films are typified, in Michael Clark's words, by "a vision of historical continuity that represents the veteran's presence in Vietnam as a memory of home; our collective relation to the past as a family reunion; and the restoration of the prodigal son as our national identity."³⁶ Though we can perhaps take heart in knowing that Hollywood has not routinely advocated the rejection or annihilation of disabled Vietnam veterans, its use of them to further a political agenda concerned with the perpetuation of patriarchal values remains highly problematic and troubling.

NOTES

1. Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 314.

2. *Ibid.*, 318–20.

3. This point is vividly illustrated by an anecdote concerning Holly Koester, a former army captain whose vertebra was crushed at the T7 level in a 1990 vehicular accident near Huntsville, Alabama. "When my doctor told me I was going to a V.A. hospital, I cried," she said. "I had just seen *Born on the Fourth of July* and was convinced I would live the same nightmare as Tom Cruise did in the movie if I went to one of these medical centers." Quoted in Cynthia Bizal, "The 'Real' G.I. Jane," *Paraplegia News*, November 1997, 47.

4. Susan Jeffords suggests that the term *masculinity* refers to "the set of images, values, interests, and activities held important to a successful achievement of male adulthood in American cultures" and is "the category of privilege in patriarchy." We might argue that a patriarchal society regards disabled Vietnam vets as one of several groups described by Jeffords as "oppressed via defined categories of difference [and] treated as women—'feminized'—and made subject to domination." Their "remasculinization," simply put, is the reclamation of their manhood and the reestablishment, on a micro level, of patriarchal values. See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xii.

5. For more information on these narratives, see the corresponding entries in *Vietnam War Films*, ed. Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994). See also Martin F. Norden, "The Disabled Vietnam Veteran in Hollywood Films," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13 (spring 1985): 16–23, and "Hollywood's Disabled Vietnam Vet Revisited," in *In the Eye of the Beholder: Critical Perspectives in Popular Film and Television*, ed. Gary Edgerton, Michael Marsden, and Jack Nachbar (Bowling

Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 179–90. Major cast and crew credits may be found in the filmography at the end of this essay.

6. For example, Nick extinguishes an amorous woman's passion by asking, "Did I ever tell you what happened to me in Vietnam?" and later informs a male friend that "the equipment doesn't work at all." We can only surmise that Nick's impotence is the result of a physical injury, however; the film never explicitly indicates whether it is physically or psychologically based, or some combination of the two. There is also a remote possibility that he is simply lying about his impotence to avoid relationship commitments.

7. Quoted in Jerry Adler, "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple," *Newsweek*, August 1, 1994, 59.

8. Susan Mackey-Kallis, *Oliver Stone's America* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 73.

9. Leonard Quart, "The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 159. Auster and Quart discuss the superman throughout their book, arguing that this larger-than-life figure is best epitomized by Michael Vronsky of *The Deer Hunter*, Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and John Rambo of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). See Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

10. Auster and Quart, *How War Was Remembered*, 85.

11. *Ibid.*, 130.

12. *Ibid.*, 88.

13. Martin F. Norden, "Portrait of a Disabled Vietnam Veteran: Alex Cutter of *Cutter's Way*," in Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 217–25.

14. On this latter point, *Cutter's Way* is a notable exception.

15. Tom Cruise, interview, *The Today Show*, NBC-TV, December 19, 1989; Stone quoted in Paul Chutkow, "Cruise Declares Independence," *Providence Sunday Journal*, January 7, 1990, as reprinted in Don Kunz, "Oliver Stone's Film Adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July*: Redefining Masculine Heroism," in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 160.

16. Christian Appy, "Vietnam according to Oliver Stone," *Commonweal*, March 23, 1990, 187; David Ansen, "Bringing It All Back Home," *Newsweek*, December 25, 1989, 74.

17. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 11.

18. Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 13–14.

19. Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, 53.

20. Auster and Quart, *How War Was Remembered*, 42.

21. For example, see David A. Gerber's essay in this volume.

22. See Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation*, 167–68.

23. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

24. *Pride of the Marines*, which presents the story of blinded veteran Al Schmid, is one of the very few World War II era films to raise the possibility of a miracle cure. It concludes with the suggestion that Schmid's vision is starting to return—a situation that did not happen to the actual veteran on whose life the film was based. See David A. Ger-

ber, "In Search of Al Schmid: War Hero, Blinded Veteran, Everyman," *Journal of American Studies* 29 (April 1995): 1-32.

25. Bosley Crowther, "Hollywood's New Fair-Haired Boys," *New York Times*, July 15, 1945, sec. 6, p. 14.

26. For a case study, see Martin F. Norden, "Resexualization of the Disabled War Hero in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23 (summer 1995): 50-55.

27. Fred Zinnemann, *A Life in the Movies: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 85. History almost repeated itself 40 years later when CBS-TV was preparing for the network-television premiere of *Born on the Fourth of July*. The film was scheduled for broadcast in early 1991, but network executives decided to shelve it indefinitely because of the Gulf War. As Oliver Stone noted, "They basically said that if there's no war, we'll air it, and if there is a war, we'll pull it." The movie eventually had its network premiere on January 21, 1992. Stone quoted in Monica Collins, "Bringing *Born on the Fourth of July* to TV," *TV Guide*, December 28, 1991-January 3, 1992, 27.

28. Further discussions of these films may be found in Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation*, 196-201.

29. See, for example, Michael Anderegg, "Hollywood and Vietnam: John Wayne and Jane Fonda as Discourse," in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 21-22; and Tony Williams, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," in Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 122.

30. Though technically outside the scope of this essay, the 1977 made-for-TV production *Just a Little Inconvenience*, about a disabled Vietnam veteran ultimately rehabilitated by the love of a good woman, is perhaps the closest in spirit to the World War II disabled-vet films; in fact, Jill Beerman expressly links it to such films as *Pride of the Marines*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *The Men*. See Jill Beerman, "Just a Little Inconvenience," in Malo and Williams, *Vietnam War Films*, 226-27. See also Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 93-94.

31. Kunz, "Oliver Stone's Film Adaptation," 161; Appy, "Vietnam according to Stone," 188-89.

32. Muse, *The Land of Nam*, 148.

33. Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, "The Wounded Vet in Postwar Film," *Social Policy* 13 (fall 1982): 31.

34. An example is Ron Kovic's confession to the Wilsons, the family of the young man whom he believes he accidentally shot in Vietnam. Though he does not ask for forgiveness, he does say (with his voice trailing off), "I think I was the one that killed your son that night. I was the one. I was the one." Luke Martin is more indirect about any feelings of culpability; he tells a group of high-school students that he does not "feel good about" having killed for his country and that certain unstated things he did are now "hard to live with." His contrition is foreshadowed in the film's very first sequence; the camera slowly zooms in on him as he lies on a hospital gurney, deep in thought, while another veteran speaks offscreen: "I have to justify being paralyzed, I have to justify killing people, so I say [fighting in Vietnam] was OK. But how many guys you know can make the reality and say 'What I did was wrong, and what all this other shit was

wrong, man?' And still be able to live with themselves 'cause they're crippled for the rest of their fuckin' life?'"

35. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 151; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 73.

36. Michael Clark, "Remembering Vietnam," in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, ed. John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 204.

FILMOGRAPHY

Alice's Restaurant (1969). United Artists. Produced by Hillard Elkins and Joe Manduke. Directed by Arthur Penn. Screenplay by Venable Herndon and Arthur Penn, based on the song "The Alice's Restaurant Massacre" by Arlo Guthrie. Photographed by Mike Nebbia. Edited by Dede Allen. Music by Arlo Guthrie, Woody Guthrie, Joni Mitchell, and Gerry Sherman. With Arlo Guthrie (Arlo), Pat Quinn (Alice), James Broderick (Ray), Simm Landres (Jacob).

The Big Chill (1983). Columbia. Produced by Michael Shamberg. Directed by Lawrence Kasdan. Written by Lawrence Kasdan and Barbara Benedek. Photographed by John Bailey. Edited by Carol Littleton. Original music by Meg Kasdan. With Tom Berenger (Sam), Glenn Close (Sarah), Jeff Goldblum (Michael), William Hurt (Nick), Kevin Kline (Harold), Mary Kay Place (Meg), Meg Tilly (Chloe), JoBeth Williams (Karen).

Born on the Fourth of July (1989). Universal. Produced by A. Kitman Ho and Oliver Stone. Directed by Oliver Stone. Written by Oliver Stone and Ron Kovic, based on Kovic's 1976 autobiography. Photographed by Robert Richardson. Edited by David Brenner. Music by John Williams. With Tom Cruise (Ron Kovic), Kyrá Sedgwick (Donna), Raymond J. Barry (Mr. Kovic), Caroline Kava (Mrs. Kovic), Willem Dafoe (Charlie), Cordelia Gonzalez (Maria Elena).

Coming Home (1978). United Artists. Produced by Jerome Hellman. Directed by Hal Ashby. Screenplay by Waldo Salt and Robert C. Jones, based on a story by Nancy Dowd. Photographed by Haskell Wexler. Edited by Don Zimmerman. Music edited by George Brand. With Jane Fonda (Sally Hyde), Jon Voight (Luke Martin), Bruce Dern (Bob Hyde), Robert Carradine (Billy Munson).

Cutter's Way, a.k.a. *Cutter and Bone* (1981). United Artists. Produced by Paul R. Gurian. Directed by Ivan Passer. Screenplay by Jeffrey Fiskin, based on the novel by Newton Thornburg. Photographed by Jordan Cronenweth. Edited by Carol Ferriol. Music by Jack Nitzsche. With John Heard (Alex Cutter III), Jeff Bridges (Rich Bone), Lisa Eichhorn (Mo Cutter), Ann Dusenberry (Valerie Duran), Stephen Elliott (J. J. Cord).

The Deer Hunter (1978). Universal. Produced by Barry Spikings, Michael Deeley, Michael Cimino, and John Peverall. Directed by Michael Cimino. Screenplay by Derek Washburn. Photographed by Vilmos Zsigmond. Edited by Peter Zinner. Music by Stanley Myers. With Robert De Niro (Michael Vronsky), Christopher Walken (Nick), Meryl Streep (Linda), John Savage (Stevie), John Cazale (Stanley).

Forrest Gump (1994). Paramount. Produced by Wendy Fineman, Steve Tisch, and Steve Starkey. Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Screenplay by Eric Roth, based on the novel by Winston Groom. Photographed by Don Burgess. Edited by Arthur Schmidt. Music by Alan Silvestri. With Tom Hanks (Forrest Gump), Robin Wright (Jenny Curran), Mykelti Williamson (Bubba Blue), Gary Sinise (Dan Taylor), Sally Field (Mrs. Gump).

Modern Problems (1981). 20th Century-Fox. Produced by Alan Greisman and Michael Shamberg. Directed by Ken Shapiro. Screenplay by Ken Shapiro, Tom Sherohman, and Arthur Sellers. Photographed by Edmond Koons. Edited by Michael Jablow. Music by Dominic Frontiere. With Chevy Chase (Max), Patti D'Arbanville (Darcy), Mary Kay Place (Lorraine), Dabney Coleman (Mark), Nell Carter (Dorita), Brian Doyle-Murray (Brian).

Scent of a Woman (1992). Universal. Produced and directed by Martin Brest. Screenplay by Bo Goldman, based on the 1974 film *Profumo di Donna*. Photographed by Donald Thorin. Edited by Harvey Rosenstock and William Steinkamp. Music by Thomas Newman. With Al Pacino (Frank Slade), Chris O'Donnell (Charlie Simms), James Rebhorn (Mr. Trask), Gabrielle Anwar (Donna).

Suspect (1987). Tri-Star Pictures. Produced by Daniel A. Sherkow. Directed by Peter Yates. Screenplay by Eric Roth. Photographed by Billy Williams. Edited by Ray Lovejoy. Music by Michael Kamen. With Cher (Kathleen Riley), Dennis Quaid (Eddie Sanger), Liam Neeson (Carl Wayne Anderson), John Mahoney (Judge Helms).

Other productions have included disabled Vietnam veterans, but, in my view, they lack the significance of the films I discussed in this essay. (Some disappeared from theaters very quickly and are difficult to access today; others were originally created for television or went straight to video, and still others are non-U.S. productions that received limited distribution in this country.) I provide a simple listing of them below. Information on all may be found in *Vietnam War Films*, ed. Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994). These films are: *Article 99* (1991), *Beg, Borrow . . . or Steal* (1973), *Blind Fury* (1989), *Cage* (1989), *Coach of the Year* (1980), *The Desperate Miles* (1975), *Enemy Territory* (1987), *Just a Little Inconvenience* (1977), *The P.O.W.* (1973), *Riders of the Storm* (1988), *Savage Dawn* (1985), *To Kill a Clown* (1972), *Vietnam War Story* ("Home" episode) (1989-90).

II. PUBLIC POLICY