Inventing Vietnam
The War in Film and Television


This anthology follows on the heels of other anthologies on Vietnam and culture that at least stress film, some with more seasoned contributors, such as From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film (edited by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud; Rutgers University Press) and The Vietnam War and American Culture (edited by John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, Columbia University Press). It also follows Susan Jeffords' thoughtful monograph The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Indiana University Press). Anderegg's anthology may have its strongest value in alerting academics to approaches in current research, although it may not inspire them.

The 14 disparate contributions were not, apparently, written around a common objective. They do share an unarticulated approach—roughly a literary-criticism-derived one that teases implications out of narrative and dialogue. They mostly share an also unarticulated understanding of the relevant data, which is big-name, fictional industry productions with a centrist or liberal perspective from 1978–80 and 1985–89. In terms of time, the film Casualties of War would seem the outer limits of the publishing schedule; it is barely touched on. In terms of ideology, right-wing films hold little interest as such for most of these writers, a major exception being Tony Williams (who sees them as an instrument for “conservative ideological forces” to “regroup”).

Even so, the authors do not overlap much in their subject matter, which tends to be a discrete facet or two of the phenomenon—Oliver Stone’s films: Tour of Duty; Rambo. Two intriguing exceptions are David Desser’s impressive survey of images of Vietnamese in recent films and the editor’s comparison of John Wayne and Jane Fonda’s celebrity status in relation to the war.

The question of whether the “Vietnam film” is a genre, and if so in what it consists, is addressed by some authors and not by others. Two writers venture beyond subject matter alone to find Vietnamese themes. Cynthia Fuchs argues that Taxi Driver is actually about the “unrepresentability” of the war, although this point appears more posited than demonstrated. Ellen Draper argues that action films better express how “the displaced trauma of Vietnam recurs as the failure of American culture” than do Vietnam films. This argument rests, however, on her prior equation of Vietnam with “the collapse of American culture on every level.” (Curiously, with the exception of one sentence in the whole anthology, there is no discussion of covert “Vietnam films” such as the war-era Soldier Blue and Little Big Man.)

The style of most essays hovers midway between the obscurantism of some theoretical film journals and the lucidity and breadth of, say, J. Hoberman’s brilliant “Vietnam: The Remake” in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani’s Remaking History (Seattle: Bay Press). An attentive editor might have flagged sentences like “Platoon (1986) illustrates Bakhtin’s recognition of the bildungsroman’s antihistorical tendencies” (118) and “[Travis Bickle’s] radical decentering into violence begins with his attempt to derail his ‘morbid self-attention’ through association with the self-threatening Other, named and mastered, as it was in Vietnam, through the mythology of mission” (39). (And maybe it’s time for personal computer spellcheckers to include counts with alarm systems on words such as “rigorous,” “trope,” “diagnostic,” and “representation.”)

Thomas Slater’s essay on teaching Vietnam films is invigorating for several reasons. Virtually alone in the volume, he considers film as more than a story line and set of characters, asking questions about, for instance, editing and camera perspective. He makes historical comparisons between films on similar subjects. He clearly has investigated the production context of the films he uses (and indeed has invited producers into his class).

Many of the essays by contrast suffer from a kind of textual tunnel vision, which they share with much academic writing on popular culture. This is doubly unfortunate because it is so unnecessary. Current and recent popular films offer a rich variety of data for critics and analysts far beyond the text itself, including newspaper and magazine articles, especially in trade magazines, often superbly indexed; film-makers, who are often available for at least a phone interview; sociological and historical analysis of related issues; and memories and attitudes of university students who viewed and review the films. With these resources and others it is possible to go beyond speculation when, for instance, one wants to know why the industry suddenly began bankrolling Vietnam films or whether other social groups share white liberals’ critiques of Rambo.

Carolyn Reed Vartanian’s essay on “China Beach”
uses production information well to bolster her argument that the TV show constructed the Vietnam vet as a traditional hero.

Students and beginning researchers will be helped by the selective bibliography and the nicely annotated filmography, although each person who has read in this area will quibble with choices. In the bibliography, I miss Hoberman’s aforementioned article. (I have also written an article, “Good Soldiers,” on Vietnam films in Mark Crispin Miller’s Seeing Through Movies [Pantheon, 1990], but it may have come out too late for inclusion.) In the filmography at least seven apparently relevant films, including Dear America, Heartbreak Ridge, and Bat 21 are not listed.

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Method Actors
Three Generations of an American Acting Style


Method acting is usually thought of as an actor’s reaching into him- or herself for the emotions to play a scene, and what leaps to mind when one thinks of it are the performances of two or three actors (Brando, Clift, Dean) in a dozen or so films of the 1950s. Steve Vineberg’s book reminds us that there was and is much more to “the Method” than that. He credits its influence with an ongoing move toward realism in our acting, and he makes a good case for this.

It’s a mark of the Method’s impact to recall that after all these years it is still controversial. It was a target for parody almost as soon as, direct from New York, it hit Hollywood’s shores; from Sid Caesar’s “Montgomery Bugle” clear through to Barton Fink, it’s still an easy target. Critical schools of the past 30 years have had little use for it—auteurist critics prefer screen icons like John Wayne to “theatrical” performers like Marlon Brando, and a modern scholar of gender like Richard Dyer finds a sexual bias in its claim to authenticity. But it has always had its fans. The best performances in the Method tradition, male and female alike, are as fresh and affecting as when they were given. Steve Vineberg’s exhaustive viewing of films famous and obscure, and of kinescopes which go back to the dawn of television, calls our attention to many of them.

Vineberg provides a readable gloss of the history of an important branch (some would say the important branch) of American acting history, from the 1930s through the 1980s. He traces the Method’s roots to Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, usefully defines such controversial terms as “affective memory,” and locates its first flowering in America, the Group Theatre, amid the militant idealism of the 1930s. Unfortunately, his condescending attitude toward that idealism lets him miff the Group’s political background; he calls his chapter on Clifford Odets et al. “Passionate Moderates”—a misreading, I think, of their values. The ascendency some decades years later of Method players in Hollywood at the same time that its originators were either being blacklisted or cooperating, like Kazan, with anti-Communist authority has been read by some commentators (Peter Biskind comes to mind) as part of a cultural move from ideology to psychology demanded by the Cold War. There’s none of that here. Vineberg seems completely unaware of post-1960 critical approaches to mass entertainment, choosing instead to quote such period stalwarts as Robert Warshow and Mary McCarthy.

At the heart of the book lie Vineberg’s prose recreations of Method performances, hundreds of pages of detailed commentary on Method, Method-inflected, or at least arguably Method-like performances. He manages to work in a section on some 1930s actors—Robinson, Stanwyck—he likes, plus a whole chapter on Jason Robards toward the end, which is reaching for it, since Robards is not Method-trained. Vineberg also all but ignores and dismisses the work of John Cassavetes, which owes at least as much to Method notions of acting as Robards’. Virtually everyone associated with the Method is included, although Eli Wallach, Shelley Winters, and Robert De Niro are missing in action. A throughline is traced from early landmarks of Method acting like Lee J. Cobb’s performance in Death of a Salesman to Dustin Hoffman’s Willy Loman of 1984. The sections on Clift, Brando, Newman (“the great proletarian Method actor”), and Hoffman are particularly strong.

Vineberg opens his book with a brilliant comparison of Rod Steiger’s kinescope “Marty” of 1953 and Ernest Borgnine’s non-Method, more obvious screen “Marty” of two years later. On the level of detailed observation—of little hand movements, eye twitches, how an actor uses his or her body—Vineberg is consistently perceptive, frequently insightful, and not a little