Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)
ISSN: 2457-0044

Cinema as Historian: Agnotology and the Politics of Historical and Fictional Representations of the Vietnam War

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It is often the case with most concepts employed to mark, characterise and define notions of humanity to defy all efforts of arriving at conclusive understanding; the concept of memory is no exception to this. It lies at the heart of human subjectivity and is often that silent voice at the back of one's head which fuels and determines notions of identity, influences actions, perceptions and behavioural patterns. It has been codified through the methodological frameworks of various academic disciplines. For all its complexities and simplifications, for all the various shapes that it has been moulded into, for all of the light that has been shed on it and the nature of the resultant shadows examined, it nevertheless eludes a proper, conclusive explanation. It would help therefore to begin with a general/popular definition of memory before one proceeds to examine the echoes it produces in human lives.

Memory is broadly defined as the ability to recall or reproduce in the present what has been learnt or imbibed from the past, recalled from a veritable storehouse of information codified in words or images and sometimes evoking certain sensations or emotions. Time is the axis along which this concept may be plotted or comprehended, as memory is generally tied to an idea of the past. In terms of its role in enabling and determining narratives, several questions may be raised: How does memory feature in the writing of history? How does memory enable a narrative and how does a narrative determine the nature of memory? What factors determine the notions of authenticity primarily associated with academic history, and how does that distinguish it from fiction? How does memory feature in these estimations?

The notion that history is a simple and objective retelling of 'facts' is one that has been problematized in academic circles but it nevertheless continues to hold sway for the general populace. This infuses the discipline of history with a degree of authenticity and narratorial authority and makes for clear distinctions between the 'historical' and the 'literary.' The 'objectivity' of the narratorial voice, however, when brought under question, problematizes these notions and advances the idea of historiography. William Guynn, in *Writing History in Film,* talks about how Paul Veyne challenges this notion with the assertion that historical narratives are essentially stories, and goes on to explain how historical writing is not a scientific discipline, seeing as it is concerned with "…the totality of shared human experience across time, in its infinite variations", and that history is rather "…a critical apparatus that allows the historian to examine whether the meaning he attaches to an event by placing it in a chain of cause and effect is justifiable" (29).

Several theories have attempted to arrive at some possible ways by which fiction may be distinguished from non-fiction. It is not enough for the author to ascribe a fictional or

nonfictional character to his work; it must be recognised as such by the readers. At the outset is the understanding that there are no strictly formal characteristics that are unique to either a work of fiction or non-fiction by which a reader may instinctively make distinctions between either work, and that "…the internal organisation of discourse varies relatively little according to whether what is represented is real or imagined; it varies dramatically according to the "vehicle of representation" the discourse puts in service…" (Guynn 57). Therefore, it is necessary to make distinctions by examining them through other lenses, including but not limited to the underlying concerns that govern the creation of either a fictional or a non-fictional narrative, the function or objective of either narrative, the effect sought upon the audience/reader/viewer, the location and function of the narratorial voice and the extent of responsibility assumed by this voice.

A minor distinction may be made with regard to the functions ascribed to, and the constraints acting upon either genre: "Non-fictional genres are defined by their pragmatism and fiction by its creation of a space where the concerns of the world of real action are suspended in the interest of another kind of experience…fictional narratives are *shaped* (sic), whereas nonfictional narratives are bound by the truth imperative that prohibits such structuring activity" (Guynn 48). According to Kate Hamburger, fiction assumes an imagined time while non-fictional narratives fundamentally locate the speaker in the "moment of enunciation," thereby placing a greater emphasis on the 'reality' not simply of the speaker's presence but of his/her utterances (Guynn 49). The degree of referentiality is another method through which distinctions are made between the 'factual' and the 'fictional', for factual discourses are understood to be those that can be verified, that in fact demand verification, and may therefore be deemed referential, while fictional representations do not necessarily require verification and need not, therefore, be referential (Guynn 56). The question of referentiality depends on the relative appropriateness of the 'vehicle of representation' employed by the discourse, whether oral, written, or audio-visual. This brings one to the question of historical cinema and the appropriateness of employing the cinematic medium, generally located under the rubric of 'fiction' owing to its mechanisms of representation that require 'showing' rather than 'telling', to represent sociological or historical concerns.

Cinema is particularly effective as a medium of communication. It has, and continues to play a rather crucial role in shaping public consciousness and collective memory; this has understandably caused much consternation among academic historians, a discomfort grounded nevertheless in a genuine concern. Can filmmakers be trusted, in their handling of historical material, to stick to the ethics and standards of 'objective representation' with regard to their truthfulness as determined by academic historians? To what degree should the act of 'recreation', inherent in the process of crafting audio-visual representations, be allowed to interfere with the act of 'retelling'? To what degree can filmmakers be allowed to 'bend' or 'distort' historical 'truth' or creatively 'fill the vacuum' left behind by insufficient historical knowledge in their attempt to not simply narrate stories but narrate them 'effectively' and 'entertainingly'? Often enough, the "…distortion of historical chronology in the interests of dramatic structure, simplification of complex events…emphasis on the spectacular rather than the analytical, reduction of historical observation to the evocation of the picturesque…" can severely affect how certain historical events and the characters in them are publicly remembered for times to comes (Guynn 2).

Such narratives may therefore tend to play to spectators' perceptions or expectations about what is, or ought to be, credible or real, which in turn determine the nature and shape of collective memory through the strategic imposition of certain images of the past upon public imagination. This tendency is succinctly expressed by William Guynn as "…the general

tendency in the era of simulation to offer the public packaged substitutes for the act of reminiscence…" through images that "once captured," are manipulated and repeated" (166). Memory isn't merely the passive presence of certain images in the mind but is also, more crucially, an intentional and active process of recollection. Historical cinema offers an image and works to enable that image to encompass a historical event, thereby determining the contours of the form and nature of remembrance. In addition to being a medium that facilitates remembrance, it also enables a certain memorialization, intended towards the preservation of accumulated communal experiences in order to help foster an easily transferrable communal identity. The objective of memorialization through cinema isn't merely to reconstruct the past for the present or future, or determine how it ought to be remembered, but enable *particular* kinds of recollection for the individual and for the community at large (Guynn 168-171).

The cinematic medium, as stated earlier, narrates by showing and not merely telling. There is thus, for the purposes of representation, a need for creating a scene and not merely capturing a scene as it is. This element of manipulation, defended on the grounds of artistic creativity, raises great concerns regarding the authenticity of a cinematic work's claims of historical truthfulness. This does not mean that a work of academic history is necessarily and always more truthful or authentic than, say, a cinematic work. It deals rather with the question of how historians and filmmakers understand their respective roles with regard to what is owed to their readers/spectators on the basis of certain estimations of their readers'/spectators' expectations of/from them. In such a scenario, any claim, no matter what, or from whom, must be met with suspicion. Eric Hobsbawm, in *On History*, briefly touches on this issue when he writes thus:

> Historians are the memory bank of experience. In theory the past – all the past, anything and everything that has happened to date – constitutes history…And insofar as they compile and constitute the collective memory of the past, people in contemporary society have to rely on them. The problem is not whether they do. It is what exactly they hope to get out of the past, and if so whether that is what historians should give them (33).

Filmmakers, not conventionally bound by the rigid boundaries that academic historians are ethically confined to, *may* be amenable to give people, in Hobsbawm's words, "exactly what they hope to get out of the past."

The desire to talk about something is the desire to talk about it in a *particular* way. The war in Vietnam has caused the American imagination a fair amount of trouble in trying to decide how to talk about and remember an unpopular war they'd rather forget. American novels, memoirs and films that deal with the Vietnam War generally limit their narratorial perspectives to the vantage points afforded by the American soldiers themselves, and therefore limit their focus to the effects of the war upon the soldiers, and by extension, the larger American psyche. These soldiers are either shown as heroic and victorious, fighting a just war as only Americans do, or in the event of a writer/ filmmaker caught in the liminal space between absolving oneself of responsibility and taking it upon oneself entirely, portrayed as victims. One of the most effective ways of constructing alternative narratives of victimhood was to suggest that the soldiers in the Vietnam war and the general public were ignorant, or were kept in ignorance, of the larger picture; ignorance of the dealings of the political administration, of the motives of those in the higher echelons of power who manipulated them by starving them of pertinent information or by feeding them misinformation. This explains the 'betrayal' that many anti-war protestors, and especially the

Vietnam war veterans, were understood to have felt and articulated, a betrayal not just of the American public by the democratic institutions they believed in and trusted but a betrayal of the larger American spirit itself. This narrative also allows for a certain degree of self-absolution, a pre-requisite for self-redemption.

"The desire of collective memory to preserve the past in the present leads to distortions and "misrepresentations" because memory is steeped in emotion and is often guided by the self-interest of the group" (Guynn 173). Ignorance is generally seen as an undesirable lack or a void that can be addressed through the acquisition of knowledge. But just as light falling upon an object always leaves certain areas of the object in the dark, knowledge of something will always leave something else unilluminated; particular kinds of knowledge, even those that claim to be objective and authentic, foster particular kinds of ignorance. Since the prioritising of certain kinds of knowledge or information over other kinds is inevitable, there is a need to examine the nature of ignorance that inevitably results from this prioritising, in addition to looking at some of the methods and means by which ignorance is constructed and/or perpetuated. Manufactured ignorance can be especially dangerous, for "once things are made (selectively) unknown – by suppression or by apathy – they can remain unknown without further effort. Once lost or destroyed, a document or a species or a culture does not spring back to life" (Proctor 8).

Agnotology, the study of culturally and socially induced ignorance, broadly distinguishes ignorance in three ways: "ignorance as *native state* (or resource), ignorance as *lost realm* (or selective choice), and ignorance as a deliberately engineered and *strategic ploy* (or active construct)" (Proctor 3). Ignorance, in the first category, is generally seen as a form of innocence, a pre-existing void that must be or can be overcome by the simple infusion of knowledge and awareness, while the second category looks at ignorance that result from a conscious prioritising of knowledge to serve one's particular interests. The third category, one where attempts are deliberately made through suppression, misinformation and manipulation to try and create a climate of ignorance, is more pertinent to the debates around the problematic nature of American representations of the Vietnam war.

It is ignorant to see ignorance itself as an overwhelmingly negative thing, a vice that must necessarily be overcome through reason and logic, just as it is foolish to indiscriminately champion knowledge and its possession. Ignorance is crucial in certain ways, such as in the instance of the notion of privacy; this notion is built on the idea, mutually agreed upon in theory between 'one' (an individual or even an institution) and the 'other' (another individual or another institution), that 'one' has a right to keep the 'other' ignorant of certain aspects of one's life or affairs, aspects that the other has no right to try, by any means, to gain awareness of. A perfunctory examination of the cinematic responses offered by Hollywood opens up to scrutiny two ways by which ignorance can be seen to manifest itself within the American domain: firstly, when state institutions deliberately try to engineer ignorance through manipulation, misinformation and suppression of relevant information, and secondly, when a conflicted public, incapable of digesting a reality that conflicts with their beliefs, chooses to reconcile with certain narratives they believe truthful inasmuch as it aligns with what they want to believe as true.

The logic that guides an official classifier of information for the United States government is fairly straightforward, in that the determination is based upon how a certain classification of information may be seen to add to the "net national advantage" of the country in terms of how it contributes to, or could potentially contribute to, the accumulation of value for the state, its institutions and the general well-being of the country and its public

(Galison 41). The essential idea is to keep any piece of information that could potentially harm the national interests, or could be used counter to it, from falling in the hands of 'the wrong people', while leaving such terms as 'national interest' or 'wrong people' intentionally vague; the ambiguity in such formulations make them extremely effective in suppressing any form of dissent under the guise of protecting larger interests.

The nature of information determines the nature of history. It determines remembrance, that is, it decides forms of memorialization. It evokes intellectual and emotional responses; it inspires or deters action, it convicts and it pardons, it condemns and it redeems. It decides knowledge and it pronounces ignorance. Ignorance is never the absence of knowledge; those deemed ignorant are deemed so by those who possess not necessarily more knowledge or information but rather different knowledge or information. A degree of self-awareness therefore enables one to recognise the insidious and pervasive influence of ignorance manufactured through the simultaneous processes of removal of certain knowledge and infusion of certain other knowledge. Information is therefore powerful in that it not only creates an awareness of knowledge but also a simultaneous awareness of its lack, and how one works with, and through, the other. This is a crucial element of all self-reflective texts.

Films such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978) have been among those films that have received much critical acclaim for its attempt to portray the harsh and unforgiving realities of the soldiers 'in country' and their plight 'back home'. They were praised for cutting through false rhetoric and for being 'realistic' depictions of the sufferings endured by an average soldier in Vietnam. These films dealt with the sense of utter disillusionment and betrayal that pervaded the period and the reality of the organisational disorder and drug abuse that plagued the military; they were, in effect, held as authentic representations of the 'experience' of the Vietnam war. These films were understood to serve as historical or micro-historical texts in the sense of documenting the experience of soldiers in war and thereby contributing to the archives of, and invariably shaping, the collective memory of the war. But few films about the Vietnam war have self-reflectively examined the mechanisms of suppression and misrepresentation that worked ceaselessly to actively manufacture ignorance about the war, both in America and 'in country', save two cinematic representations; these films, namely *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) exhibit a certain self-reflectivity that transcends the mere 'authentic' portrayal of individual experience and briefly examines the politics of representation itself.

Characteristic of the quintessential Kubrickian humour that enjoys playing linguistic games in well-crafted satiric exposes of the excesses of political or military administrations, the ethos of the journalism team of the *Stars and Stripes* magazine that the protagonist Pvt. Joker is assigned to is displayed in a banner thus: "First to go, last to know: We will defend to the death our right to be misinformed," the replacement of certain phrases such as "search and destroy" by more sanitised expressions such as "sweep and clear," and the deliberate emphasis on stories that either deal with 'winning of hearts and minds' or 'winning the war' are emblematic of the extent of misrepresentation, either through deletion (as in *Good Morning, Vietnam*) or through sanitisation (as in *Full Metal Jacket*) that was employed to make an unpleasant and unpopular war palatable to the larger public consciousness.

The censorship of news is more explicitly shown in Barry Levinson's film, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, where reports of bomb explosions, civilian and military casualties, cases of court-martial, or basically anything not given 'official clearance', were kept under wraps while the troops on the ground, the American public back home, and the world at large, were

fed stories that optimistically maintained the success of the American effort in Vietnam. The futility of resistance is shown in the backlash that Robin William's character, Adrian Cronauer, faces in the film when he disobeys direct orders and tries to get the news of a bomb explosion out into the airwaves. In Sam Mendes's film about the Gulf war, *Jarhead* (2005), a film very similar in its cinematic structure, characterisation and imagery to *Full Metal Jacket*, the marines, before being interviewed by journalists, are coached in the political position that they ought to adopt, required to not contradict the establishment's views, expected to admire the might of the military and display pride in being a part of it and are encouraged to show that they believe in the necessity of the war effort. The standard responses provided by the marines in this film are an echo of the responses offered by the marines being interviewed in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and they show that little has changed between the two wars.

James Meek, in his review of Sam Mendes's film *Jarhead*, tries to understand what it means for a war film to be 'realistic': "Perhaps it is asking too much of war films to be realistic when war itself is so unlike the reality western audiences know. It's not that actors are incapable of capturing the intensity of men at war. They are. What they cannot do is capture the vacancy of men at war" (par 10). This may be seen to apply to all narratives, including 'authentic' historical narratives, for any text would inevitably fall short of conveying the reality of an experience in its entirety and in all its complexity. The terms 'realistic' and 'authentic' have been used quite liberally in talking about certain narratives of the war, whether literary, historical or cinematic, but one would be hard pressed to determine the exact basis for these types of judgements.

The estimations of certain narratives and representations as 'true', 'real' or 'authentic', and on the basis of which distinctions are made between these narratives and those that are therefore deemed 'less' true, real, or authentic, are simply judgements that are made on the basis of how certain narratives are determined to align more 'truthfully' with a collective assumption about the 'truth' of a narrative or an experience, in as much as it corresponds to certain 'established' or universally agreed upon notions or 'facts' that act as the foundational background against which these representations are contrasted and their 'value' and 'validity' determined. It is a truth that is judged as 'relevant' in accordance with a certain socio-political and cultural ethic and the term 'reality', or 'realistic', terms that find its validation on account of its association with a particular notion of 'truth', is therefore a matter of convention. These determinations, subject to the vagaries of 'facts' and 'truth', are nevertheless essential in that the 'reality' they present, as truthfully and authentically as they are able, brings it, or is understood to bring it, closest to 'how it actually is/may be'. These notions are problematic and ever elude absolute clarity with regards its determinations, but it is in this manner that one may look at and validate certain representations of the war as 'true' or 'real', or more 'true' or 'real', and therefore more valid or relevant, than others.

In the case of fictional narratives or cinematic representations the extent to which what is presented is, individually or collectively, understood to correspond to a general sensibility regarding the 'genuine' experience may be a determining feature for the award of the label of 'realistic'. In the instance of academic historical narratives the fact of it being an account that bases itself strictly in archival material, the truthfulness of which have already been, more or less, established, would account for the narrative being deemed 'authentic'; one wonders if the term 'realistic' may be appropriately used for judging 'authentic' historical narratives. The former is a concept that is more malleable than the latter. Truth is an element that naturally factors in estimations of both the 'authentic' and the 'realistic' and at a glance they appear to be terms that could be used interchangeably, for in terms of how these

expressions are generally used, they may be understood to refer to the same idea, quality, or attribute of an object or a text.

There is the truth of war as history, deemed 'authentic', and the truth of war stitched together in individual experiential moments, deemed 'realistic'; the 'authentic' (in the form of a historical text and in its estimation) may differ from the 'realistic' (in the form of a cinematic work and in its estimation) in the manner that a photograph may differ from a painting. These 'realistic' cinematic representations of the war, entities that do not fit neatly either within the rarefied category of institutionally determined fact nor within the category of fiction, may then be understood to fall into a liminal space generally occupied by works of popular history, to name one instance. These are works that are truthful in their reference to actual places, people, events or phenomena of historical significance but do not command the narratorial authority of an 'authentic' historical text in its role in the determination of collective historical memory; this is owing to their not being necessarily bound by the strict rules that govern the writing of academic history nor sharing its objectives of the historian's accountability to his/her readers with regards his/her strict adherence to 'verified or verifiable historical truth'. Historical cinema works to produce a certain kind of remembrance through specific acts of memorialisation; the images they create, or recreate, constitute a visual archive that potentially influences public consciousness and determines the nature of collective memory. It influences the manner in which the past is recollected, interpreted, and memorialised as history, primarily by, and to, the self, and then to the other. It is a flawed historian, but is a historian of a kind, nonetheless.

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