

Hollywood and Vietnam

John Wayne and Jane Fonda as Discourse

CHAPTER I Hollywood's failure to participate imaginatively in America's war against Vietnam has been often noted: only one wartime film, John Wayne's *Green Berets* (1968), took as its primary subject the combat in Southeast Asia. Other films of the period use the war as background or premise for characters and situations located within some other, non-Vietnam context. We can find, as well, films that allude to the war obliquely or indirectly; indeed, some would say that a Vietnam allegory underlies virtually every significant American film released from the mid sixties to the mid seventies, from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) and *Taxi Driver* (1976). It remains true, nevertheless, that the film industry had little interest in the Vietnam War as such. At the same time, what might be termed "the matter of Vietnam," both during the war and after, intersects in a number of ways with the discourse of Hollywood. Not only are Hollywood movies—in particular, World War II combat films—themselves texts frequently alluded to in the literature and postwar films of Vietnam, but throughout the 1960s

the politics of Hollywood as a community of specific individuals and as an imagined world revolved around and expressed itself through attitudes toward the war.

Almost as if to compensate for the absence of movies about Vietnam, movies themselves quickly became a central motif in the Vietnam mythology. "We are starring in our very own war movie," writes Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War*, characterizing his first, "romantic" months in Vietnam.¹ Caputo had gone to OCS and Officer Basic School, his head filled with Hollywood fantasies. "For me, the classroom work was mind-numbing. I wanted the romance of war, bayonet charges, and desperate battles against impossible odds. I wanted the sort of thing I had seen in *Guadalcanal Diary* [1943] and *Retreat, Hell!* [1952] and a score of other movies."² Michael Herr in *Dispatches* sees "life-as-movie, war-as-(war) movie, war-as-life."³ "One day," Herr recalls, "at the battalion aid station in Hue a Marine with minor shrapnel wounds in his legs was waiting to get on a helicopter, a long wait with all of the dead and badly wounded going out first, and a couple of sniper rounds snapped across the airstrip, forcing us to move behind some sandbagging. 'I hate this movie,' he said, and I thought, 'Why not?'"⁴ "Vietnam: The Movie" emerges as a key catchphrase for the war and for its imaginative reconstructions.⁵

One soon notes a pervasive intertextuality in the Vietnam discourse, where everything seems to refer to everything else, allusions bouncing from text to text in a seemingly endless sequence. So, for example, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, published in 1955, probably the first Vietnam novel, comes up several times in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and Herr's description of a soldier with "Born to Kill" inscribed on his helmet next to a peace symbol becomes a key image in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987; Herr worked on the screenplay of Kubrick's film). Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers*, from which *Full Metal Jacket* derives, refers back to *Dispatches*, both in its epigraph and in the comment the novel's protagonist, Private Joker, makes as he reacts to boot camp: "I think I'm going to hate this movie."⁶ Even the advertising copy for *Full Metal Jacket*—"In Vietnam, the wind doesn't blow, it sucks"—echoes a

passage from Tim O'Brien's novel *Going after Cacciato*. One begins to wonder, after a while, just where the striking images and allusions originate; not simply where fact begins and fiction leaves off but, more intriguingly, which of the two—fiction or fact—derives from the other. In this sense, at least, the novels, memoirs, and films of Vietnam, in blurring the line between the fictive and the factual, replay the confusions and contradictions that were and continue to be central to America's experience of the Vietnam War.

The reciprocal relationship between real life and the movies, which is a crucial aspect of this intertextuality, is exemplified by two Hollywood stars, John Wayne and Jane Fonda, who can be seen as spokespersons for and representatives of the "right" and "left" extremes of the political response to the war. In real life—and sometimes even in film—such polarizations are simplistic; both Wayne and Fonda stand in a much more complex and ambiguous relationship to Hollywood, the war, and that phenomenon conveniently labeled "the sixties" than the terms Right and Left (or "conservative" and "liberal") can account for easily. Both stars operate in the discourse in multiple ways: iconographically, as performers in particular films; ideologically, in terms of specific statements each made and specific acts each engaged in; and, as well, as imaginary constructs that innocently or deliberately efface the distinction between person and performer, actor and role.

John Wayne and Jane Fonda, furthermore, represent a discourse operating within the film industry itself: "Old" versus "New" Hollywood. Here, too, both stars functioned in a complex manner. Although Wayne might reasonably be seen, by age, experience, associations, and so forth, as an archetypal representative of Old Hollywood, his iconic power, throughout the sixties and up to and indeed beyond his death in 1979, operated on young filmgoers with at least as much if not more effect as on their middle-aged or older counterparts. And Fonda, for her part, though clearly associated with the new, post-Production Code, post-studio-system Hollywood, provided a strong and significant link to the Old Hollywood through the star image of her father, Henry Fonda, whose presence not only made itself felt via her physical resemblance to him but

tended to emerge as well as part of a phenomenon known as “The Fondas,” with the career of Jane’s brother Peter and his even stronger association with New Hollywood (*Easy Rider* [1969], etc.) serving as catalyst for the generational conflicts on which the press regularly commented.

A “generation gap” of sorts can in part account for the ideological differences separating John Wayne and Jane Fonda, but politics also distinguished Wayne from Henry Fonda, well known in Hollywood as a liberal. Wayne and the elder Fonda were about the same age (as are Jane Fonda and Wayne’s second son, Patrick). Both Henry Fonda and John Wayne remain associated in film history as crucial members of director John Ford’s professional “family,” each virtually alternating as protagonist in Ford’s films in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s: Wayne in *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Long Voyage Home* (1940), *They Were Expendable* (1945), *Three Godfathers* (1948), and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949); Fonda in *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Drums along the Mohawk* (both 1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and *The Fugitive* (1947). They starred together only once, however, in Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948), where they played characters in constant conflict. Ironically, it is Fonda, the liberal, who portrays the harsh, unbending, racist Custer-surrogate Owen Thursday, while Wayne plays the softer, more human and humane, near-liberal Kirby York. In the course of the narrative, the Wayne character moves from a relatively untroubled, blunt honesty to a position of affirming the useful lie over the unpleasant reality. Kirby York is thus fundamentally compromised, ending up a far more ambivalent character than the film-text had constructed him at the outset. In this context, it seems particularly notable that *Fort Apache* evokes thematic issues that would become central to the Vietnam discourse—America’s historic role, imperialism, militarism, genocide, truth to image versus truth to fact—and thus becomes, as Michael Herr noticed, “more a war movie than a Western, [a] Nam paradigm.”⁷

The complex, equivocal character John Wayne played in *Fort Apache* bears very little resemblance to his popular image, particularly as that image was appropriated by various voices in the

Vietnam discourse. Most of the allusions to Wayne in the war novels, memoirs, and films of the era construct a simple, one-dimensional heroism: Wayne as Captain America, a hero undivided in his loyalties and emotions and indestructible in his encounters with the enemy.⁸ If Vietnam was a war movie, John Wayne was its star. In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo reflects on the illusion that he, a young marine second lieutenant hoping for glory and fame, carried into battle: "Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest."⁹ Ron Kovic, too, in his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*, remembers the impact the film made on him as a boy: "Like Mickey Mantle and the fabulous New York Yankees, John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes."¹⁰ Michael Herr writes of the grunts whose motives or justifications for being in Vietnam range "from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy."¹¹ Gustav Hasford's *Short-Timers* is imbued with Wayne allusions, from "John Wayne cookies" to Private Joker's vocal impressions. A soldier who goes berserk and performs a suicidally "heroic" act is characterized as having done "a John Wayne." Adapted into *Full Metal Jacket*, the Wayne presence seems even stronger, a constant subtext in Matthew Modine's enactment of Private Joker.

By the 1960s, when Wayne's image had hardened into a cliché-laden icon of the uncomplicated warrior hero, his film persona began to be confused with and seemingly contaminated by his public statements. Reciprocally, his roles began to take on the coloration of his offscreen activities. Wayne's various "patriotic" remarks in speeches and interviews, and in particular his support of Richard Nixon, turned him into, depending on one's point of view, either a noble superpatriot or a neolithic ultraconservative. Wayne's middle-American, lower-middle-class roots could be posited as in some ways explaining his response to the turmoil of the sixties. Wayne exemplified the archetypal self-made man Americans are supposed to value. Unlike Jane Fonda, who was born a kind of acting princess, and a wealthy one at that (her mother was an

heiress), Wayne's parents were poor midwesterners: his father, according to most sources, was a charming ne'er-do-well who moved his family from Iowa to the golden land of California, where he signally failed to improve his lot; Wayne's mother eventually divorced him. John Wayne's rise to stardom was lengthy and frequently painful. In a number of ways, his career paralleled that of his political hero, Richard Nixon. Both men knew defeat and failure and both carried with them, even in success, a streak of anger and meanness that often expressed itself in a seemingly contrary mode: the mouthing of sentimental platitudes and pieties.

Jane Fonda, in her thirty-year film career, has not constructed anything like John Wayne's iconic film persona. As a representative of the New Hollywood, she did not enjoy the advantages or suffer the disadvantages of the studio system, a system that encouraged the casting of performers according to type and within a fairly narrow range of generic conventions. Her roles have been far fewer than Wayne's for an equivalent period (from 1930 to 1960, Wayne appeared in well over a hundred films), and she has evidently made an effort to choose a variety of roles, creating a persona that identifies her as an actress as much as a star. From Neil Simon to Ibsen, from *Barbarella* to Lillian Hellman, from *Kitty Twist* to *Cat Ballou*, her roles trumpet her versatility; only in recent years has it been possible to speak of a "Jane Fonda character." Her political beliefs and associations have undoubtedly determined her choice of films in the 1970s and 1980s, and filmgoers are free to read ideological significance in virtually any character she plays; nevertheless, she has tried to establish herself as a serious actress, choosing roles that both broaden her range and associate her name with projects that could be regarded as much as significant cultural or political events as movies.

The Jane Fonda acting persona took some time to develop, however. From her movie debut as a high-school cheerleader in *Tall Story* (1960) at the very beginning of the sixties, through her Roger Vadim phase up to *Klute* in 1971, one can trace a growing maturity, a coming of age both in Jane Fonda the actress and in Jane Fonda the public figure. Her initial progress was gradual and erratic, almost as