From Self To Other In Oliver Stone's Vietnam Trilogy: Platoon, Born On The Fourth Of July, and Heaven And Earth

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FROM SELF TO OTHER
IN OLIVER STONE'S VIETNAM TRILOGY:
PLATOON, BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY,
and HEAVEN AND EARTH

by
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ABSTRACT

As a Vietnam veteran film director, Oliver Stone has made several controversial films on the Vietnam War and the 1950s. Among his filmography, we can categorize *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Heaven and Earth* (1993)--Stone's so called Vietnam Trilogy--as the most direct depictions of the war and its aftermath, whereas *The Doors* (1991), *JFK* (1991), and *Nixon* (1995) examine the broader political and cultural dimension of the war and the era. Throughout his Vietnam films, Stone struggles to find the new America's identity by studying the historical meaning of its past events and characters, because he knows that the correct interpretation of the past based upon a balanced political perspective is a beginning of understanding who Americans are, and predicting what the country will be in the new millennium.

Stone shows the progression of his political awareness from American Self to Vietnamese Other in his Vietnam Trilogy. In *Platoon*, by employing the bildungsroman form and a Christian theme, Stone examines a naive young soldier's initiation into the war. However, given an absence of historical perspective based upon the political awareness on the war, the film's narrative style and thematic structure do not work satisfactorily. In fact, *Platoon* replaces historical understanding of the war with a psychological interpretation--the
struggle between good and evil.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone examines a paralyzed Vietnam veteran's political initiation to American culture and people. At first, the protagonist Ron Kovic is a victim of both his family and his country; later he rebuilds the value of American community based upon the power of political awareness and the understanding on the war and others. At the end of the film, he is projected as the savior of the nation.

In *Heaven and Earth*, though Stone for the first time tries to dramatize the story from the viewpoint of the political other—a female Vietnamese, the film's focus is still primarily on America. With the heroine Le Ly who has been victimized not only by American soldiers but also by the Vietcong, the film deeply relies on the redemptive power of the heroine. Though the heroine finds her victory in her heart, the film also cannot touch the historical wholeness of the war and does not shed tears for the Vietnamese victims. Therefore, it seems that Stone focuses on the moral redemption of American in the hand of a former enemy.

Although Oliver Stone has contributed to the understanding of the war and its effect, he still has not depicted the balanced wholeness of the war based upon historical perspective. It seems that Stone cannot transcend the Americanized context of his political vision. Therefore, it can be said that Stone's Vietnam films are still work-in-progress versions in American film and an understanding of the Vietnam War based upon a balanced historical perspective can only be achieved by the Vietnamese themselves.
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION:

OLIVER STONE'S FILMS ON THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE 1960S

Throughout his career as a film director, Oliver Stone has shown his strong interest in the Vietnam War and on the specific period of America in the 1960s and early 1970s. As a director and a Vietnam War veteran, Stone has incessantly questioned the meaning of the war and of the 60s in general in terms of their significance in U.S. history. According to William Romanowski, unlike most contemporary filmmakers, Oliver Stone employs strong social criticism in his films:

Several filmmakers during the 1980s and early 1990s, most notably Stone and Spike Lee (Malcolm X), used cinematic renderings of past events as a means of contemporary social criticism. These films received enormous critical attention and scrutiny certainly in part because interpretations of the past, and control over which are accepted in the present, become more critical during periods of cultural tumult and social change. (68)

Within Stone's filmography, we can categorize the following six films as Vietnam-related --Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), The Doors (1991),
JFK (1991), Heaven and Earth (1993), and Nixon (1995). Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July and Heaven and Earth are called Oliver Stone's 'Vietnam Trilogy'; here Stone directly deals with the Vietnam War. In the other films, The Doors, JFK and Nixon, Stone studies the political and cultural implications of the war and America of this period. The chapters that follow will analyze Stone's Vietnam trilogy in some detail. As a prelude to that analysis, I want to focus briefly on his three other sixties films--The Doors, JFK, and Nixon--in order to analyze the extended meaning of the Vietnam War in the light of the political, historical and cultural aspect of the particular era.

According to James Davison Hunter, Stone's Vietnam films are "ultimately a struggle over national identity--over the meaning of America, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium" (qtd. in Romanowski 68). Particularly in JFK and Nixon, Oliver Stone explores the political implication of the Vietnam War in order to find the answer for the question of 'why the U.S. was in Vietnam.' Stone's thesis is that if John F. Kennedy had not been killed in Dallas of 1963, the world "would be a much healthier place. The massacre in Southeast Asia would not have occurred" (qtd. in Romanowski 69).

Based upon two sources--Jim Garrison's On the Trail of the Assassins, and Jim Marrs's Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy--Stone's JFK undermines the Warren Commission's one-assassin theory and concludes that the assassination was the first coup d'etat in American history to remove the
President from his office. JFK suggests the possible conspiracy by the military-industrial complex as follows:

It was the greed of the military industrial complex that fueled the assassination of the president and that, with his death and the subsequent demise of his intention to withdraw American troops from Indochina, the industrialists had the opportunity to generate billions of dollars in revenues through the sale of arms. (Keller 76)

Indeed, the film begins with television news footage of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous warning speech against the power of the military-industrial complex in 1960.

Employing all kinds of claims about the assassination of John Kennedy—"that representatives of the Mafia, the FBI, or the CIA were involved; that anti-Castro Cubans or agents of Fidel Castro had a hand in it; or that representatives of the military-industrial complex played a role" (Toplin 59)—JFK attacks the validity of the Warren Commission's report. Stone's co-scriptor Zachary Sklar argued that "since nobody agrees on anything, nobody is distorting history. The only official history is the Warren Commission report, and that nobody believes" (qtd. in Romanowski 64), answering the criticisms that JFK distorted the real history, Stone poses himself as "cinematic historian" (qtd. in Toplin 68), bombards the viewer with the blend of fact, fiction and speculation, and thus forces "the viewer to think back over a tragic event that surely altered the course of American history during the latter half of our century" (Welsh 265).
Though one of JFK's shocking suggestions is Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's alleged complicity in the assassination, the film "postulated a link between the JFK assassination and the murders of both Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy" (Keller 74). Furthermore, Stone links the assassinations to President Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. Therefore, it seems natural for Stone to make a film on Nixon, one of most controversial figures in American history who said, "I will not go down in history as the first American President to lose a war." Jose Arroyo explains as follows:

Nixon is an ideal subject for Stone. In most of his other films the leading characters are just vehicles through which to examine an issue. In Nixon they are the issue. The film can focus on the man and still discourse on the rise of the military-industrial complex, the Vietnam war, how the combination of greed and power can lead to evil, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and how the media has corrupted American political and social life. In other words, Nixon's life gives Stone the opportunity to re-examine subjects he has already explored in Salvador, Platoon, Wall Street, JFK and Natural Born Killers. One of the many interesting things about Nixon is that these issues are looked at from the centre of power. (48)

Nixon, Stone's "most introspective and claustrophobic film" (Smith, Sight and Sound 6), begins with the Watergate burglary that forced President Nixon's downfall. Avoiding a linear chronology to depict Nixon's life, Stone presents
"three elements: the lie, the deaths of brothers and the influence of the military-industrial complex" (Arroyo 49) to explain Nixon's political ups and downs. The film depicts 'lying' as the inveterate flaw in Nixon's character from his childhood. In the end, lying over The Watergate scandal sent him out of his office in disgrace. Second, the film says that Nixon's success is based upon "the deaths of two sets of brothers: Nixon's own and the Kennedy's" (Arroyo 49). While his brothers' deaths gave him the chance of going to college, Kennedy's death eliminated the hardest obstacle he had to overcome to reach the Presidency. Lastly, the film employs the military-industrial complex as "the political explanation for the President's rise and fall" (Arroyo 49). The film shows that the military-industrial complex may have been responsible for Kennedy's assassination because he was going to withdraw troops from Vietnam.

While JFK and Nixon explore the political aspect of the Vietnam War and the 1960s, The Doors, based on "the music and self-destructive life of 1960s rock legend Jim Morrison" (Beaver 14), studies the young generation's counterculture of the 1960s. In other words, Stone's The Doors depicts another side of the youth culture. The members of the rock group wanted to "breakthrough" the tumultuous and hellish era with rock music while other young men like Chris Taylor of Platoon and Ron Kovic of Born on the Fourth of July are suffering and injured in Vietnam. In particular, according to Beaver, Morrison was seen by Stone as a "home front" echo to the idealistic Ron Kovic of Born on the Fourth of July:
Kovic represented the naive young soldier valiantly marching off to war for his country's good and for the attainment of his manhood; Morrison stood as a drug-ridden contemporary Dionysus, writing and singing lyrics whose mystical images seemed to probe better than any other the darkness of the times. Both fell victim to their enterprise: loss of potency and idealism for Kovic; drugs and death for Morrison. (Beaver 146)

In a scene during which television footage depicts the era--"youth activism, Kent State, Charles Manson, moon exploration, Martin Luther King, My Lai, Bobby Kennedy, Nixon, Vietnam" (Beaver 150)--Morrison says in close-up, "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown." Therefore, with the icon of the time, Stone tries to find what was the truth of the era from the rebellious young men's points of view, who believed that the established political and cultural systems were all corrupted and their young generation was being sacrificed in Vietnam.

In his Vietnam Trilogy—*Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven and Earth*, Oliver Stone has shown the progression of his political consciousness from American Self to Vietnamese Other on the Vietnam War. In my thesis, I will use the terms—Self and Other—in the light of a political framework. In *Platoon*, Stone tries to find and redefine Self in relationship with the war. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone extends his political consciousness into the "other" while he also strongly studies the damaged self and tries to restore it. At last, in *Heaven and Earth*, Stone analyzes the war and its aftermath from the viewpoint of the
Vietnamese Other. In chapter 2, I consider *Platoon* in terms of its narrative and thematic pattern. I argue that the film's self-initiation theme and Christian theme are without historical perspective based upon the correct political awareness on the war. Chapter 3 focuses on *Born on the Fourth of July* in terms of how the film destroys the existing socio-political self-identity, rebuilds it and extends political understanding to others. In chapter 4, I examine *Heaven and Earth* in the light of how the film employs the Other's point of view and what the political purpose and result are.
CHAPTER II. PLATOON: THE SELF WITHOUT
A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Platoon is the first Vietnam War film written and directed by Oliver Stone, a Vietnam War veteran. When Platoon was released in December of 1986, it received a hail of praise from the public as well as film critics, as the first realistic film about the Vietnam War. In this chapter, the term 'realistic' is being used as having synonymous meaning with 'verisimilitude.' In other words, when we say Platoon is 'realistic,' it refers to the film's "accurate representation of the war" (Bates 102). As a matter of fact, Platoon has some realistic elements, therefore the film enjoyed the atmosphere of authenticity about the Vietnam War. It is mainly because unlike earlier films on the Vietnam War, Platoon was made from a veteran's real experience.

We can find some autobiographical aspects of the director in the film. In fact, Chris Taylor, the white male protagonist and narrator of Platoon, is the alter ego of Oliver Stone himself. Like Chris Taylor, Oliver Stone dropped out of college and volunteered to participate in the Vietnam War. As a middle class college student, Oliver Stone's voluntary participation in the war was exceptional. Oliver Stone's desire to participate in the war was from two motives: One was
personal, the other was social and political. First, on the personal level, Stone wanted to feel and study the extreme depth of the human condition: "Now I wanted to see another level, a deeper level, a darker side. What is war? How do people kill each other? How will I handle it? What is the lowest level I can descend to find the truth, where I can come back from and say, I've seen it?"

(qtd. in Beaver 3-4).

Second, on the public level, by being a soldier Stone spontaneously took on responsibility as a young member of American society. He knew that only young men of the lower and working class had to take part in the war, whereas those of the middle and upper class and college students tried to evade the war with college deferments or other methods. His decision, therefore, came from his sense of social justice. Stone even thought that if the soldiers from the middle and upper classes had gone to Vietnam, the war would have ended sooner and the war would not have been exacerbated:

The ultimate corruption was, of course, President Johnson sending only the poor and uneducated to the war— in fact, practicing class warfare wherein the middle and upper classes could avoid the war by going to college or paying a psychiatrist. I am sure to this day that if the middle and upper classes had gone to Vietnam, their mothers and fathers—the politicians and businessmen—would have ended that war a hell of a lot sooner. (qtd. in Bates 106)
Therefore, for Oliver Stone, the Vietnam War was the chance not only to discover himself and the human condition, but also to share and understand the working and lower-class people's ideas and their experiences. In other words, the Vietnam War did not have any special meaning to him. For Stone, the Vietnam War served as a vehicle with which he could discover the hidden truth of himself and human beings. In particular, when Stone decided to go to the army and to Vietnam, it seems that he did not have any political ideas about the Vietnam War, nor shared any antiwar, revolutionary, and countercultural ideas of the contemporary young generation in 1960s. Rather, when he came to Vietnam, he believed that the war was right and the U.S. was doing the right thing in Vietnam. That is, he did not have any political creed on the war, he just shared the official ideology of the U.S government:

Stone claimed that as a result of his father's view, he developed as a young man into "essentially a torn right-winger" who ultimately would go to Vietnam and be able to react "accordingly," never doubting "that the Communists were the bad guys and we were the good guys, and that we were saving the South from the North" (qtd. in Beaver 2).

Moreover, although "the process of Platoon's evolution in Stone's mind had been remarkably lengthy: Stone experienced Vietnam at age 19, wrote the first draft of Platoon at 30, and directed the film at 40" (Beaver 96). Stone had remained all the same in his political position about the war. In fact, he did not show any progression of his political awareness on the war compared to his
political naivete when he had participated in the war. According to Tassilo Schneider, "No representation of historical events such as the Vietnam War, which still carries—in the U. S., at least—significant potential for discursive conflict, can claim to be exempted from political analysis" (49). In this sense, *Platoon* cannot transcend political analysis and a perspective on the nature and reality of the Vietnam War.

Therefore, when we say 'Platoon is a realistic film on the Vietnam War,' it includes the two opposite meanings. That is, on the one hand, *Platoon* is a realistic film in terms of its believable mise-en-scene. The film realistically reenacts the terror of the Vietnam jungle:

> A mosquito on a soldier's neck; clinging leeches; red ants; a poisonous snake slithering across a combat boot; an abandoned, steaming teapot; a suffocating underground NVA bunker that in a glance heightened the mystery of the unseen enemy; the wind of a helicopter lifting a tarpaulin from American corpses. (Beaver 90).

And some of the battle scenes show the realistic power of the firefight. In particular, in the scene of the last night firefight, the film succeeds in creating the madness of the war by "the fragmentary guerrilla warfare with no clear lines defining success or failure" (Porteous 155), friends or enemies.

On the other hand, the narrative structure of the film is far from realistic given the absence of the political understanding on the war. *Platoon* "relies on the traditional structure of the bildungsroman, the tale of the education of a young
man" (Kinney 161). With the maturation process of a naive youth into a man, the film takes the protagonist's first person point of view. For this purpose, the film employs voice-over narration. His recurrent voice-over takes the form of a letter to his grandmother. And from time to time the camera employs a series of subjective point-of-view shots from a hand-held camera that make the audiences identify themselves with the protagonist's point of view. Particularly in the first ambush scene, the camera takes lots of point-of-view shots by the protagonist and close-ups of his eyes. All these elements make us follow the hero's personal perspective and feel closer to the hero himself. Along with these narrative and filmic methods, the film employs a Christian theme. However, with these narrative structure and the Christian theme, Stone not only de-politicizes the war but also psychologizes the war into the struggle of good and evil rather than giving us the understanding of the historical meaning of the war based upon the political awareness of the war and paying attention to the suffering of the Vietnamese. Therefore, given the fact that the film lacks any specific political point of view about the Vietnam War, this narrative style and its theme do not work satisfactorily. Based on these topics, my assessment of *Platoon* centers on whether the authenticity of the film's narrative style and its Christian theme work in the absence of explicit political context.

First of all, the film employs the bildungsroman pattern. Within the bildungsroman, the film includes the Christian theme. Like Oliver Stone, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) comes to Vietnam with innocent ideas. In a sense, Chris
Taylor is a naïve and innocent young man. He steps down from a C-130 military transport plane when it opens its womblike hatch. A dozen new recruits step off the plane, unloading their duffel bags, looking around. Chris Taylor is just one of them. They appear "stunned and uncertain, like newborn infants" (Bates 110). According to Stone’s screenplay, Chris Taylor’s face, "unburned yet by the sun, is tense, bewildered, innocent, eyes searching for the truth" (19). Right after they land at the airport in Vietnam, they see the body bags of the dead soldiers and the departing soldiers who have finished their duty in Vietnam. Chris and his company are called “fresh meat,” or “new meat.” As Chris and other soldiers are moving, the camera takes a series of point of view shots from Chris Taylor and one of the returning soldier. By exchanging the perspectives, Chris Taylor seems to know immediately the fact that the reality of the war is quite different from his imagination of it.

Chris Taylor dropped out of school and came to Vietnam. In his voice-over narration, we can find the fact that he does not want to live in the privileged life of the middle class. In a sense, being a common soldier in the war is Taylor’s rebellion against his society and his parents: “Course Mom and Dad didn’t want me to come here. They wanted me to be just like them--respectable, hard-working, a little house, a family. They drove me crazy with their goddamn world, grandma, you know Mom” [Quotations without a parenthetical reference are taken directly from the soundtrack].
And in Vietnam he does want to know and share the common people's experience. He even wants to be "anonymous" in the army. Chris believes that the anonymous soldiers are the backbone of the country and they are fighting on behalf of the country and freedom. Moreover, Taylor also has the idea that he will discover and learn something that he has never known before the war:

I guess I've always been sheltered and special, I just want to be anonymous. Like everybody else. Do my share for my country. Live up to what Grandpa did in the First War and Dad did the Second. Well here I am—anonymous all right, with guys nobody really cares about. They're poor, they're the unwanted, yet they're fighting for our society and our freedom and what we call America. It's weird, isn't it? They're the bottom of the barrel—and they know it, maybe that's why they call themselves 'grunts' cause a 'grunt' can take it, can take anything. They're the best I've ever seen, grandma—the heart and soul. Maybe I finally found it, way down here in the mud—maybe from down here I can start up again and be something I can be proud of, without having to fake it, maybe ... I can see something I don't yet see, learn something I don't yet know. (32)

But Chris's ideas are quite different from those of common 'grunts,' the anonymous soldiers. All soldiers are just "draftees, living in fear, counting the days they are "short" (Lichy 281). Therefore, it is clear that most of the soldiers, unlike Chris, are fighting for their life and nothing else. When Chris reveals the
fact that he volunteered to come to Vietnam because he thinks that it is unfair that only poor people should come to Vietnam, King, a black soldier of the platoon, ridicules him by saying, "What we got here is a crusader....Sheeit, you gotta be rich in the first place to think like that. Everybody know the poor always being fucked by the rich. Always have, always will" (42). Therefore, as soon as Chris comes to Vietnam, he comes to know that he made a wrong decision. Particularly in the military, nobody cares for the newcomers because they could easily get killed:

It's scary 'cause nobody tells me how to do anything 'cause I'm new and nobody cares about the new guys, they don't even want to know your name. The unwritten rule is a new guy's life isn't worth as much cause he hasn't put his time in yet--and they say if you're gonna get killed in the Nam it's better to get it in the first few weeks, the logic being: you don't suffer that much ... I don't think I can keep this up for a year, grandma--I thin': I've made a big mistake coming here .... (26)

From the beginning, *Platoon* employs a Christian theme. First of all, the names of the characters are suggestion of Christian typology. The name of Chris Taylor reminds us of "Christ." And Sergeant "Elias" is "the New Testament, or Greek, form of the Old Testament’s "Elijah" (Beck 214). In the earlier part of the film, the camera shows the back and front of Elias "who walks slowly with both arms taken over an M-60 machine gun carried across both shoulders, behind his neck. This is the only time we see him with the M-60" (Bates 110). This scene
symbolizes and hints early that Elias is a figure representative of Jesus Christ who will be crucified. And when Elias protests against Barnes' order of a night ambush, O'Neill, another sergeant, says, "Guy's in here three years and he thinks he's Jesus fucking Christ or something" (28). And Staff Sergeant Barnes calls him "a waterwalker" when he is indicted by Elias for the illegal killings in a Vietnam village. In fact, in his death scene, Elias dies with both hands raised upward nearby a ruined church like Jesus Christ. In the screenplay, Stone also briefly calls the scene: "Elias Crucified" (98). In the film, Staff Sergeant Barnes is the symbol of the incarnation of the evil. As Chris calls him "Captain Ahab" in his voice-over, even Barnes's face is symbolically deformed by the scar. And when Rhah is arguing with Chris for "fragging" Barnes, Rhah depicts him as a 'larger than life' figure: "Barnes been shot 7 times and he ain't dead, that tell you something? Barnes ain't meant to die. Only 'ning can get Barnes ... is Barnes!" (99). In these context, with regard to the Christian theme of the film, we can regard him "Baal-supportive evil-incarnate, the appropriate opponent for the Christian savior-heroes, Elias and Chris" (Beck 214).

Therefore, with two opponent figures, the film enacts the dichotomy of good and evil: "Barnes is evil and Elias good; Barnes is darkness and Elias light" (Bates 109). Stone also sets up the dichotomy of good and evil within the characters of the platoon:

It was from these roots that the essential conflict between Elias and Barnes grew in my mind. Two gods. Two different views of the war.
The angry Achilles [Barnes] versus the conscience-stricken Hector [Elias] fighting for a lost cause on the dusty plains of Troy. It mirrored the very civil war that I'd witnessed in all the units I was in--on the one hand, the lifers, the juicers, and the moron white element . . against, on the other, the hippie, dope-smoking, black and progressive white element . . . Right versus left. And I would act as Ishmael, the observer caught between those two giant forces. At first a watcher, then forced to act--to take responsibility and a moral stand. And in the process grow to a manhood I'd never dreamed I'd have to grow to. To a place where in order to go on existing I'd have to shed the innocence and accept the evil the Homeric gods had thrown out into the world. To be both good and evil. To move from this East Coast social product to a more visceral manhood where I finally felt the war not in my head, but in my gut and soul. (9-10)

That is, Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) and Staff Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) represent the opposite point of view about the life as well as the war. Barnes represents “the “win-at-any-cost” mentality and believes in the war, the other [Elias] preaches restraint and disbelieves in what he is doing” (Cardullo 457). With these two sergeants, Stone establishes the Christian concept of good and evil.

From the earlier part of the film, Chris Taylor feels closer to Elias and his squad than to Barnes and his people. When Chris is exhausted in the jungle
patrol and vomits over the dead body of a VC as a new soldier, Barnes forces him to move on and his people mock him as a 'cherry,' an inexperienced soldier. Elias, on the other hand, helps Chris by emptying Chris's backpack of superfluous baggage, including several heavy, hardbound books. And in the first ambush where the platoon is attacked by NVA scouts, Junior and other soldiers who are sided with Barnes censure Chris for falling asleep during the ambush. Due to the sudden firefight, two of the platoon members are killed in the battle, and one of them is a rookie like Chris. Chris is also wounded in the firefight. Big Harold, a black soldier who is a member of Elias' squad comes to Chris and consoles him while Junior criticizes him severely. And when other soldiers rebuke Chris for his negligence during his night guard, Chris tries to explain his innocence asserting it was not his shift but Junior's. But other soldiers surround and rebuke Chris. At this moment, Elias intervenes and helps Chris to get out of the plight by saying, "Man'd be alive if he'd had a few more days to learn something". With these experiences, Chris quickly identifies himself with Elias and his people.

Oliver Stone divides the platoon into two groups--"heads" and "juicers."

Sergeant Elias and Staff Sergeant Barnes represent "heads" and "juicers" respectively:

"Heads" are the "hippie, dope-smoking" members of the platoon whose progressive values are actively antagonistic to those of their right-wing brothers, "the lifer, the juicers, and the moron white elements,"
including hard-core killers like Barnes and the psychopathic Bunny.

(Schechter 21)

And "how two factions differ from one another is dramatized in a triptych strategically inserted between Taylor's wounding and the titanic fistfight between the two sergeants" (Bates 113).

When Chris comes back to the platoon from the hospital, King, a black soldier who is a member of Elias's squad, introduces him to the "heads," the members of Elias squad. That is, King helps Chris ease his tension and stress as a grunt. According to Taylor, "King" matched with nobility and generosity, qualities he shares with his namesake, is the black male mammy figure to Chris:

King is actually more of a father figure to Chris than Elias is; but deprived of the moral authority that neither the film nor its primary audience will grant him, his characterization tips toward the familiar role of black male mammy to innocent white youth. (171)

Later, right before he is about to get out of Vietnam and when Chris is in agony for Elias' death, King advises that the only thing Chris should do is to get out of Vietnam:

Does a chicken have lips? Whoever said we did, babe. Make it outta here, it's all gravy, every day of the rest of your life man--gravy...You okay Taylor? Just 'member take it easy now, don't think too much, don't be a fool, no such thing as a coward cause it don't mean nuthin. Jes keep on keepin' on. Okay my man .... (106-7)
In a sense, King is the real mentor to Chris. In fact, we can doubt that there is any lesson to learn from the Vietnam War experience, except that the U.S. should not have participated in the war.

In the world of the 'heads,' "the values of communal, antipatriarchal sharing are celebrated, where head-tightened men dance together to 'The Tracks of My Tears'" (Taylor 171). To Chris, being among the heads is in fact the beginning of "a new world" (44). So when Rhah asks Taylor why he has come to the "underworld," or their hutch, King replies for Chris, "This ain't Taylor. Taylor been shot. This man Chris been resurrected" (45) And Rhah invites Chris to smoke the dope pipe. In the hutch, every soldier enjoys smoking marihuana or other substances. Then Chris suddenly notices Elias on the hammock in the far corner of the hutch surrounded by burning candles. And above him, a portrait of Ho Chi Minh is hanging on the wall. This picture of Ho Chi Minh and the marihuana smoking atmosphere of the barracks quickly establish the characteristics of the "heads." That is, they seem to share the counter-culture of 1960s and progressive political point of view. In this context, the headband, which Chris wore in the last part of the film also, also reminds us of the atmosphere of the contemporary activists of 1960s. Frank Beaver says, "Drugs, music, skepticism, suspicion of authority, and young heroes with emerging leftist political points of view and concluding pacifist stances were fast becoming the stuff of Oliver Stone's backward glances at historical realities" (12). However, they just share the atmosphere, not the essence of the counter-culture:
Stone's soldiers share the drugs of the counter culture, its obscurity, its messianic fervor, but not its questions, not its moral confusions. These soldiers allude to racism, the black man's draft, but never to whether they should be fighting or not. (Beaver 92)

Seeing Chris, Elias smiles and waves his hand tenderly like "a sensual little Egyptian whore." (46) And he comes to Chris with his shotgun and asks if this is the first time: "First time? Then the worm has definitely turned for you man." The camera employs Chris's point of view shots. Elias aims the shotgun to the camera, and has Chris put his mouth on the end of the barrel of the shotgun. Chris does so slowly, a little worried. Elias first smokes himself and then blows the smoke through the barrel of the shotgun. In the screenplay, this scene is depicted as "shotgunning" (46) it into Chris' lungs. Chris staggers back, coughing. Everybody laughs. Elias smiles his big white-tooth smile. This scene symbolizes the relationship between Chris and Elias in light of the Christian theme. In fact, Chris is baptized by Elias and he will be a disciple of Elias. Therefore, "When Elias dies, Chris will inherit his principal role much as the disciple Elisha was given his prophetic status by Elijah" (Beck 217).

Right after the scenes of the "heads" camp, the scene is changed into the "juicers" barracks with the tunes of "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee..." in Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" (Bates 113). Unlike the "heads" hutch, the juicers' camp is stuffed with white militant atmosphere: "Sensuality and communal feeling give way to masculine aggression and contentiousness"
On a corner of the wall, there is a Confederate flag. And this flag summarizes the culture of the barracks: white, male chauvinist, militant.

Junior, a black soldier, and Bunny, a psychopathic killer and hard-core follower of Barnes are talking to each other. They are so unpolished that the topic of their conversation is only about killing “gooks” and having sex. In fact, they are the representatives of Barnes’ barracks. “Junior” signifies a stage of moral minority and immaturity. It also signifies his derivativeness” (Taylor 171).

Actually, throughout the film, Junior remains in the state of the underdeveloped and he does not experience the process of mental maturation. For example, Junior sleeps on his shift of guard in the jungle. Because of his negligence, the platoon members are killed and wounded, but he blames Chris for the casualties. And right before the last firefight, Junior malingers to get out of the battle but Barnes does not accept his request, by saying, "Get up, or I'll court-martial your nigger ass!" And Bunny, a simple-minded psychopathic killer who comes from the working class, is the white counterpart of Junior. He says that he likes to stay in Vietnam because he can do anything in the war as he teases Junior: "I like being here. You get to do what you want. Nobody fucks with you. The only worry you got is dying. If that happens you won’t know about it anyway. So what the fuck, man." In fact, Bunny enjoys killing. In the beginning of the village scenes, Bunny shoots a pig just for fun. In a village hutch, he kills two of the Vietnam villagers by the butt of his rifle in revenging three dead American soldiers without any proof, mocking Chris for his hesitation in killing. Right after the killing, he
shouts the idea of the massacre: "Let's do the whole fucking village." And he sets fire to the hutch of the dead people with his lighter and then casually lights his cigarette. When Chris tries to prevent the rape of the young village girls, he protests to Chris by saying "Are you homosexual?" And he takes pictures of the burning village for his souvenir. In the last firefight scene, Bunny, experiencing the emotional frenzy as Chris, yells out at the enemies, "Come on MOTHERFUCKERS, you can do better than that!"

Like Junior, Bunny does not experience the maturation of his morality. In this sense, it is symbolic that they are in a same foxhole in the final apocalyptic battle scene. Because they remain in the primitive state of their consciousness, they cannot get out of Vietnam. Junior is bayoneted in the abdomen several times when he tries to run out of the foxhole. And Bunny is also killed miserably when his foxhole is overrun by the NVA. With the death of two bad soldiers, the film shows the idea that the wicked would be punished.

Lieutenant Wolfe, the platoon leader, comes to the juicers' barracks wearing a tee shirt marked "Ohio State Wrestling." Throughout the film, Wolfe is the representative of the wrong and weak authority of the U.S military leadership. Like Chris, he is also a "naive, all-American WASP" (Cadullo 453) college graduate. In the early part of the film, he is ignored by Barnes and other sergeants. Barnes gives orders to the squad leaders disregarding Wolfe. Even the camera disregards him. Thus, we quickly recognize the fact that Barnes is really in charge of the platoon. However, Wolfe has a desire to fill the vacuum in
his leadership with a false masculinity: thus he comes to the juicers' barracks to mingle with the common soldiers. Here, in the barracks of the juicers, he is also humiliated by the working class soldiers. When Wolfe rejects Barnes’s offer for him to participate in the card game by saying, "Nah, I wouldn't want to get raped by you guys" (53), Sergeant O'Neill mocks him as being "Jewish," and even predicts that Wolfe would not outlive the war: "Some dudes you jes' look in their faces and you KNOW they just ain't gonna make it" (53). Wolfe is not only a weak character but he does not have any moral position. When Barnes commits an illegal killing in the Vietnam village, he is so indecisive and evasive that he is not able to control the situation. Moreover, he tries to cover up his responsibility by taking side with Barnes when Elias reports the incident to Captain Harris.

Lieutenant Wolfe is the incompetent figure of the U.S. military authority. In the second firefight scene, Wolfe gives wrong coordinates to the artillery mission and causes his own platoon members to get killed by their own forces. And in the last firefight scene, when his platoon is about to be overrun by an NVA regiment, he asks the permission to pull back his platoon rather than fighting against the enemies like the common soldiers do. In the end, Wolfe gets killed by the shots from a NVA soldier and dies in a shameful way.

In Platoon, Captain Harris is the opposite figure to Lieutenant Wolfe. He represents the authentic figure of the U.S. leadership. When Elias reports Barnes’s killing and wrongdoing in the village, Harris sternly promises to recover justice, saying, "I promise you if I find out there was an illegal killing there will be
a court-martial. And in the last scene of the firefight, when his army's perimeters are about to be overrun by the NVA soldiers, Harris calls in the air bombing expecting the extinction of his forces. And when the battle is over, he looks at the dead and injured soldiers with sympathy as if they were his sons. He is depicted as a representative of a good officer.

After the scenes of the juicers' barracks, the scene is changed into the heads' hutch again. Mingled together, Chris and other soldiers are dancing with their arms on each other's shoulders. It looks like a Saturday night dance party. According to the screenplay, the atmosphere of the barracks is filled with "a yearning for tenderness, for feminity, for a moment of peace in this nightmare life. Their eyes closed, thinking of dance partners that can't be here tonight. Singing their souls out" (54). Now, Chris feels "as if he's being accepted into a new family" (54).

However, for all their differences, "the two sergeants have much in common as seasoned combat veterans and leaders" (Bates 116). That is, although Barnes is a "representative prowar figure, Elias is not a symbol of antiwar resistance" (Klein 27). In fact, Elias is as effective a killer as Barnes. In the following scene after the heads' barracks, Elias goes into an underground bunker to search for the enemy with a pistol. Elias effectively endures the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bunker and kills an enemy who tries to run away without any weapon. And in the second firefight scene, although Elias indicts Barnes for the illegal killing in the village, he proves himself as an expert warrior. He goes into
the jungle with three members of his squad. Elias comes to a stop, looks. Behind them we hear the sounds of battle, showing their distance from the main body. He listens, senses something out there getting closer. Looking at the jungle, he reads the jungle saying, "They're coming." And when Chris volunteers to go with him, he smiles saying "I move faster alone." He moves alone into the jungle. Yelling, he runs through the jungle and "zaps" numerous NVA soldiers. "The shoot-out is rendered with great intensity in a series of tracking shots" (Klein 28), thus glorifying Elias's ability as an expert killer. Even in his death scene, although he is mortally wounded by the three shots of Barnes, Elias runs a hundred yards absorbing dozens of incoming bullets of NVA soldiers before he crumbles to the ground. Photographed in slow motion, this scene looks so unrealistic that it disturbs the reality of the film. He is, in fact, not an "antiwar pacifist." Therefore, in the village scene, when Elias fights with Barnes for baiming Barnes's atrocity, we can doubt what Elias's ideology is. Although Elias expresses to Chris his thought after the village scene, "What happened today's just the beginning. We're gonna lose this war ... We been kicking other people's asses so long I guess it's time we got our own kicked" (79), Elias is "a nonideologue and a person who adheres to the rules and laws of war as they have been established by the Geneva Convention" (Klein 25).

Therefore, we can doubt what the lesson is that Chris could learn from Elias. In this sense, the village scene of the film is the turning point for Chris. In the village scene, Chris displays his morality and courage again through the
power of Elias's authority. At first, as Rhah points out, Chris admires Barnes: "I remember first time you came in here Taylor, you telling me how much you admired that bastard" (99). And in the voice-over before the village scene, Chris still believes in Barnes's authority: "Barnes was at the eye of our rage--and through him, our Captain Ahab--we would set things right again. That day we loved him" (61). Right before the village scene, three of the platoon members are killed: two soldiers are killed by a booby trap, one by the barbaric torture from the unseen enemy. Given the construction of the filmic narrative, the American soldiers are killed by terrorist and barbaric acts. For this purpose, when the platoon members find a dead soldier who is pinned down on a tree with his neck cut with a warning sign against the U.S. soldiers, the camera shows each soldier's face and stops at Barnes. Barnes sums up the anger of the soldiers by spitting "The Motherfuckers." in the village, even Chris cannot control himself. He frantically shoots his M-16 in front of a young man's foot exploding his anger and stress. But Chris does not intend to kill the man. Although Chris says, "It's all a blur. I don't know what's right and what's wrong anymore," in his voice-over after the village scene, he knows right from wrong. However, in reality, Chris can not act himself. When Bunny smashes a young man and an old woman to death in a village hutch, he is not able to stop Bunny. Chris just watches horrified. And when Barnes shoots an old woman who protests against the U.S. soldiers' atrocity, and aims his pistol at the head of the village Chief's young daughter, Chris shakes his head in agony but does not stop him, overwhelmed by Barnes's
power. In fact, all the soldiers are shocked in some way, but do nothing against
the power of Barnes. But after Elias's violent intervention and fight against
Barnes, the camera takes Chris who is watching Elias with awe. After this scene,
with the authority of Elias, Chris regains a sense of morality and acts himself.
When he finds soldiers raping two young girls, Chris courageously intervenes in
the rape scene and saves the girls by shouting to the soldiers, "They are fucking
human beings." In a distant spot, Elias watches Chris saving the young girls from
the soldiers.

Now Chris is a real disciple of Elias. And in the scene right after the village,
the relationship between Elias and Chris develops into the spiritual level. Elias
says that he does not believe in the victory of the U.S. in the Vietnam War. With
the background of the vast sky at night, the camera captures both men in a frame
to reinforce their communion: "Maybe a piece of me's in you now, who knows."
And Elias anticipates his death and says about the reincarnation: "I like to think
I'm gonna come back as ... as wind or fire--or a deer... yeah, a deer" (81). A
shooting star falls through the cosmos as if confirming Elias's comments. And at
the scene when Elias is crucified, the chopper that takes Chris flies over the dead
site of Elias as if Chris takes over Elias's spiritual resurrection.

However, even after the village scene, Chris's concern is only about the
American soldiers' conflict in the platoon: "A civil war in the platoon: half the men
with Elias, half with Barnes. There's a lot of suspicion and hate. I can't believe
we're fighting each other when we should be fighting them." In a sense, the
internal conflicts and divisions among American soldiers reflect "the depths of societal division and the lack of a clear sense of purpose about the war" (Dittmar 5). In fact, Chris does not try to understand the Vietnamese and their misery. Moreover, Chris does not show any acknowledgement about the nature and politics of the Vietnam War. For Chris, the enemy is just the enemy. Rather than bring up any awareness on his innocent consciousness, Chris is just interested in private justice by "fragging" Barnes for Elias's death. In this sense, "Barnes's real crime in bringing about Elias's death is transgression of the law, in this case not "though shalt not kill civilians" but "thou shalt not kill members of thine own army" (Klein 28). In addition, the screenplay depicts Barnes's behavior as "A crime against nature" (95).

In fact, Chris does not indict Barnes and Bunny for killing of the Vietnamese civilians. The only concern Chris has is about the death of Elias by Barnes. And he laments the system of injustice: "It's the way the whole thing works. People like Elias get wasted and people like Barnes just go on making up rules any way they want and what do we do, we just sit around in the middle and suck on it! We just don't add up to dry shit." Accordingly, killing Barnes, Chris tries to rebuild the new authority by destroying the authority represented by Barnes. In this context, the heads' barracks scene after Elias's death scene is symbolic. When heads are discussing the fragging of Barnes, Barnes comes into the heads' barracks with a whiskey bottle. As he smokes a pipe of dope from a member of the barracks, he attacks heads' value saying, "You smoke this shit, so's to
escape from reality?" As he overwhelms the barracks, Barnes matches himself as "reality" by exorcising the value represented by Elias:

I AM reality. There's the way it oughta be and there's the way it is.
Elias was full of shit, Elias was a crusader—I got no fight with a man does what he's told but when he don't, the machine breaks down, and when the machine breaks down, WE break down ... and I ain't gonna allow that. From none of you. Not one. (99-100)

Barnes just thinks of every solder as a cog for the system of the war. Barnes's point is that "all must become like him if they are to survive" (Palmer 270).

Then, in the last firefight scene, Chris becomes an expert killer like Elias and Barnes. Chris rejects Francis (his foxhole mate)'s suggestion of running away from the foxhole. And when NVA soldiers appear, Chris can explode his claymore right away as he could not in the opening ambush scene. Like Elias, Chris can read the bush and he gets out of his foxhole when NVA soldiers are going to blow it. After that, yelling, "DIE YOU MOTHERFUCKERS," Chris runs through the bush and kills a lot of enemies. And like Bunny, Chris smashes a wounded NVA soldier with the butt of his M-16 down into the foxhole. Even Francis, infected by Chris's insane fervor, joins Chris in the frenzy. They shoot randomly at the nearby enemies shouting, "Isn't it fucking beautiful?" While killing the enemies, Chris runs to Barnes, who is fighting as if "the entire world is his enemy" (123). His eyes glared in red, he looks like "The essence of evil" (123). In
fact, in the last climatic firefight scene, Chris is “acting in the spirit of Barnes himself” (Schechter 22).

Therefore, Chris’s killing Barnes is “a ritualistic attempt to exorcise the dark side of human nature” (Klein 27). In this context, this last scene is closely related to the Christian theme. When the last firefight scene begins, Chris says in his voice-over, "I felt like we were returning to the scene of a crime," where Elias was killed by Barnes. And when Chris wakes up the next morning after the climatic firefight, Chris finds that he is being watched by a deer. The deer is “a sign of grace—the grace of Elias” (124).

However, killing Barnes is the “private solution of the moral crises of the Vietnam era” (Klein 28). More particularly, when Chris says in his last voice-over, "Looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves and the enemy was in us," the war is "essentially reduced to psychological terms" (Porteous 157). There is no recognition and development in the protagonist's consciousness that "the war was hardly an accident but rather a historical development from long-standing and ultimately counterproductive French and American colonialist and imperialist policies" (Klein 24). And when Chris summarizes the lesson of the Vietnam War, "Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again—to teach to others what we know. And to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life," we are not sure that there is any lesson that we can learn from the war, except that the Vietnam War was wrong and the U.S. soldiers should not have gone and fought
there. Therefore, without the realization of the historical perspective on the Vietnam War, *Platoon*'s narrative structure and its Christian theme may ultimately escape touch our logic though the film moves our heart with its realistic representation of the war.
CHAPTER III. BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY:
FROM VICTIM TO SAVIOR

Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* is based upon the autobiography of Vietnam Veteran Ron Kovic. Published in 1976, the autobiography is a bitter and ironic bicentennial birthday gift to his country: "For my country and its people, happy birthday" (9). The gift is presented from the grave of a living dead man: "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 grave" (11). In his autobiography, Kovic shows the process of "self-discovery and self-definition through a reconnaissance patrol of the self" (McInerney 197) through the era of the Vietnam War.

Oliver Stone in *Born on the Fourth of July* thus found an ideal sequel to *Platoon*. In particular, *Platoon* ends with the open question about the role of the disillusioned and awakened veteran in American society. At the end of *Platoon*, Chris Taylor, the protagonist, plans to reintegrate into American society with the obligation to build again and to teach people the lesson that he has learned in the Vietnam War. Therefore, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, extending his examination
into the aftermath of the war to a returned veteran and his country, Stone tries to see the Vietnam story worked through fully:

Stone's compulsion to make this big film version of Kovic's life story grew from the fact it took the *Platoon* idea of a patriotic young American man going through war's rites of passage in Vietnam and extended those rites to include the young man's experiences in returning and confronting—which *Platoon* had not done—what this country was going through, politically, back home. (Beaver 11)

While *Platoon* is apolitical about the war and its impact, Oliver Stone's adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July* examines the political meaning of the war itself and the socio-political implication of the war on American society. Stone's political growth in *Born on the Fourth of July* was in part contributed by Kovic, the co-scriptor of the film. In fact, Kovic had been widely known as a war-veteran-turned-antiwar-activist in the Vietnam era. Moreover, even after the United States withdrew from Vietnam in early 1970s, Kovic maintained and developed his political activism into the protest against nuclear development, American interference in Central America, and the inferior medical care accorded war veterans (Olendorf 257). Kovic had enjoyed his prominence in the 1980s for his activism and writing enough to say, “My wound has become a blessing in disguise. It's enabled me to reach millions of people with a message of peace and a message of hope” (qtd. in Olendorf 257). In Particular, Kovic wanted to make a film version of his autobiography because he knew that a movie would be
able to reach people who would not pick up his book (Olendorf 257). Kovic said that the making of the film as "a fully cathartic experience" (Beaver 129). In many ways, Stone had experienced many of same feelings and experiences with Kovic: "Both had resorted to self-degradation through drugs and alcohol abuse, and both had moved forward to see the war as personally and politically tragic" (Beaver 129-30). In this sense, we can say that "Kovic's autobiography was partly Stone's and the film offered the opportunity of catharsis for Stone as well" (Beaver 130). Furthermore, Stone extends the political and cultural catharsis into the national level in the film. In this sense, with Born on the Fourth of July, Stone emerges "as a director capable of powerful reinterpretations of recent American history--its politics and its social upheavals, especially the disillusionment of the young that led to the counterculture ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s" (Beaver 12).

Even though the autobiography is Ron Kovic's personal record of the war, the author "conceives of himself as the All-American Boy--literally born on the Fourth of July--a "Yankee Doodle Dandy" who wholeheartedly embraced small-town and working-class value like hard work, competition, sacrifice, duty" (Kunz 1). In fact, the fact that Kovic was born on the fourth of July "initiates the text's continuous identification of its hero with his country" (McInerney 197). By revising and adding new characters and several scenes to the film, which I discuss below, Stone makes the film the representative memory of the Vietnam era. In addition, Stone employs Tom Cruise's 'all-American-boy image': "We wanted to show
America, and Tom, and through Tom, Ron, being put in a wheelchair, losing their potency. We wanted to show America being forced to redefine its concept of heroism" (qtd. in Kunz 3).

Paralyzed from the chest down because of the wound in Vietnam, Kovic describes his autobiography as "an extended attack upon the American society and American myths which, compelled him to go to Vietnam and to be permanently disabled" (McInerney 198). More than Kovic's autobiography, however, Stone's film attacks "the entire fabric of American culture" (Doherty 264). In the film, Kovic is depicted as the victim of "all the institutions that had previously defined him: family, community, the armed forces, history itself" (Burgoyne 63). In the traditional context of American life, the values that each of the institutions represents are love, togetherness, competence, masculinity, and justice respectively. However, in Born on the Fourth of July, those values are revealed as hate, disintegration, incompetence, brutality, and injustice. To sum up, Stone says that all those values are 'lies.'

Born on the Fourth of July has a three-part dramatic structure. In part one, Stone shows us how American ideology has brainwashed and forced a young man to the war and sacrificed him. Part two depicts the paralyzed protagonist's disillusionment about the American institutions and their values. It also contains the healing process of the hero's psychic trauma. In part three, Stone depicts the protagonist as the national savior with his renewed political consciousness, activism and moral awareness. Following the three-part dramatic structure of the
film, I analyze how Oliver Stone depicts the protagonist Ron Kovic from a victim of the nation to a savior of the nation.

Part one of Born on the Fourth of July begins with a metaphor about the fate of Ron Kovic. The film begins with Kovic's voice-over about his childhood war game experience: "It was a long time ago. We turned the woods into a battlefield. And dreamed someday we would become men." [All quotations are taken directly from the soundtrack]. Wearing a World War II American Army helmet, Ron is playing war games with his friends at the wood of Massapequa, Long Island, of 1956. The camera shows the puzzled face of Kovic with a bird's-eye view shot. Soon, Kovic and his friend Timmy are suddenly attacked with stones by the ambushed enemies. A boy kneels over Kovic and fires his toy pistol shouting, "You're dead, you know it." With the high-angle close-up, the camera shows Kovic who is helplessly denying, "No, I'm not." But the boy proclaims "Ronnie is dead." This opening scene metaphorically summarizes the fate of Ron Kovic: 'He is ambushed by the war rather than proving himself a man in the war.'

The scene shifts to a Fourth of July parade. The camera cuts to the firecracker exploding to celebrate the parade and uses slow motion to evoke the nostalgic atmosphere of the past. The camera shows a group of veterans following the parade while Kovic, holding a small American flag, is watching them on his father's shoulders. Some veterans are in wheelchairs and one of them (played by Kovic himself) flinches at the sound of firecrackers. In slow motion, an older veteran with no arms and empty sleeves glances toward a young Kovic.
The camera intercuts the expressionless face of the old veteran and Kovic's close-up face. Thus, the parade scene quickly employs the idea that "sacrifice may be inglorious and that celebrating sacrifice may wound rather than heal lurks within the parade like a nightmare within the communal dream" (Kunz 9).

As Robert Burgoyne points out, "the hometown universe of the protagonist is shown to be thoroughly permeated by the mythology of the period: pop songs, the Kennedys, Marilyn, the Yankees, television, family, the memory of World War II" (63-4). Ron Kovic is so fascinated by the war hero images represented by John Wayne and Audie Murphy that he can not understand the reality and horror of the war:

I'll never forget Audie Murphy in To Hell and Back. At the end he jumps on top of a flaming tank that's just about to explode and grabs the machine gun blasting it into the German lines. He was so brave I had chills running up and down my back, wishing it were me up there. There were gasoline flames roaring around his legs, but he just kept firing the machine gun. It was the greatest movie I ever saw in my life. (54)

As if to underscore the fact, the young Ron Kovic enthusiastically unwraps his birthday present from his childhood sweetheart Donna—a Yankees' baseball cap. When one of his friends snatches away the cap from him, the young Kovic chases the boy to catch the cap, "pursuing the symbol of heroic stature which he intends to earn" (Kunz 9).
Part one of *Born on the Fourth of July* shows the male hero's confusion between male sexual identity and the myth of heroic manhood. When he is kissed by Donna at the night of the Fourth of July fireworks, the young Kovic looks embarrassed. When asked by the girl if he likes it, he says, "I don't know" and abruptly does push-ups as if to escape the embarrassing situation and impress her with his physical strength. However, this confusion is not only learned by himself but also forced by the American culture. In the ensuing scene of a little league baseball game, Kovic looks disappointed when he finds that Donna is with another boy. But when he hits a homer, Donna runs to the ground with elation and shouts "Go, Ronnie go, you made it." This scene quickly employs the idea that if he becomes a male hero, he can obtain the woman's love and her attention.

The heroic warrior manhood ethos is supported by the family and society. Calling the team members 'Ladies,' Kovic's wrestling coach teaches them "to fear compassion and failure as feminizing" (Kunz 7) and the coach drives his player with military indoctrination and imbues "the idea of a 'have-to-win' philosophy" (Beaver 134):

> To be a winner, others must be losers. To live fully, others must die. To be a man, others must be women. Come on, Ladies. I want you to kill. If you want to win, you got to suffer! You want to be the best, you got to pay price for victory. And the price is sacrifice.
At home, Kovic hears the same kind of philosophy based upon the ideal patriotism of the self-sacrifice by President John F. Kennedy: "We bear any burden, pay any price. Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." As she watches Kennedy’s inauguration address on TV, Kovic's mother makes Kovic identify himself with Kennedy's national hero image: "I had a dream, Ronnie, the other night you’re speaking to a large crowd, just like him, just like him. You're saying great things."

In Born on the Fourth of July, as Robert Burgoyne notes, "to critique the role of the family for its complicity in the war" (61), the mother sets out as "the metaphor of the nation America" (77), which embodies "the contradictory interests of both positive and negative concepts of national identity" (66). There are two contrasting images of nation as mother in the film: One is the "blood-seeker" represented by Kovic's mother, the other is the "milk-giver" (Burgoyne 77) represented by Corporal Wilson's mother whose only son was killed accidentally by Kovic in combat.

In Born on the Fourth of July, "obsessed with fighting communism, convinced that the greatest threat to her son is his sexuality, and equating his athletic success with moral character," Kovic's mother is a "conduit for the ideology of the dominant culture, showing the ways that the middle class family reproduced domestically the values and attitudes of the public sphere" (Burgoyne 79). In fact, showing an unsympathetic and selfish quality Kovic's mother dominates the family over Kovic's father, who displays "marked tenderness and
heartfelt emotion at the fate of his son" (Burgoyne 76). In the film, the father figure is only confined to "the biological father" of the male hero: "In the cultural mythos, Micky Mantle, John Wayne, and later John Kennedy are young Kovic's true father, more real than his own who is merely a supermarket clerk" (Kunz 6).

When Kovic comes back home from the wrestling practice, his mother reinforces the image of the heroic male warrior by being 'the best' like his coach at the family dinner table: "There's the next conference Champion. He wants to be the best in school, in sports, in life. As long as you do the best, that's what matters to God. Win or lose, we're still here. We still love him." And when she finds a *Playboy* magazine in Kovic's room, she lashes out at him, shouting, "You have filthy, impure though's. God's going to punish you!" and orders him to go to confession as if to exorcise the impurity from the male warrior's code. Later, in the family living room, when Kovic's father mentions his concerns about his son's decision to be a marine and go to Vietnam, Kovic becomes confused although he reiterates Kennedy's doctrine: "Don't you remember what President Kennedy said. There won't be any America unless people are willing to sacrifice. I love my country." At this moment, as she comes in to the living room, Kovic's mother confirms her son's comments as if to exorcise any doubt and fear of the patriotic image of a male hero: "You're right, Ronnie. You're doing right thing. Communism has to be stopped. It's God's will you go. We're very proud of you."

Responding to his mother's indoctrination, Kovic says that he loves his country
and is willing to make the sacrifice. In part one of the film, it can be considered that Kovic's mother is "part of the system that deluded him" (Beaver 136).

Therefore, the film depicts Kovic's mother's remark of "saying great things" as having two opposite metaphorical meanings. That is, in part one of the film, the remark represents male heroism, selfish nationalism, and anti-Communism. However, in part three of the film, with the power of political and moral awareness, Kovic proves that those 'great things' are all 'lies.' And he understands that 'real great things' could be achieved through 'the awareness of other nation's plight, the integration of community, and rebuilding family love.'

Although Kovic's mother says that 'win or lose' does not matter if one tries his best, the wrestling match scene employs the idea that to be a heroic warrior one must be a winner. As he wants to reaffirm that he is a hero, Kovic repeatedly sees his sweetheart Donna and mother during the match, who are ferociously cheering his victory with the rest of the hometown crowd. But Kovic becomes a loser, greatly disappointing them. As he lies on his back, with a high-angle close-up, the camera shows Kovic crying on the mat. The scene reminds us of the opening scene of the film and is a "metaphorical preview of America's Vietnam experience" (Kunz 8): 'That is, though you are a strong hero, if you meet a superior enemy, you will be a loser.'

However, still mystified and strongly believing in the male warrior's myth, Kovic tries to rebuild himself in the real field of male warrior: the military. In the next scene, when the Marine Corps recruiting team comes to Kovic's high
school, Sergeant Hayes sums up the code of being a real man that Kovic has longed for:

First off, young men, let's get one thing straight. Not everybody becomes a United States Marine. We want the best. We'll accept nothing but the best because there's nothing prouder, nothing finer, nothing standing as straight as a United States marine. If you want to achieve the impossible, you'll find out if you really are men. Just 13 weeks of hell at Parris Island, South Carolina. Then the Marine may be what you're looking for. First to fight, we have never lost a war. We have always come when our country's called us.

The camera gradually closes up on Kovic's face as he listens with awe, fascinated by the Sergeant's words and what their uniforms stand for. And for him, being a Marine would be the way of rebuilding his heroic image destroyed by his defeat in the wrestling match. During the Sergeant's speech, Kovic averts his eyes to see Donna who is passing by the building with her other friends. And when he meets Donna and a group of girls in a supermarket, Kovic boasts his being a soldier: "Probably on the front line, I'll see a lot of action."

However hard he believes in the myth of the heroic warrior, and however hard he is brainwashed by the myth, Kovic nevertheless feels confusion about his decision. In the night of the high school prom, while he stays home to prepare for training camp, Kovic oscillates "between the myth of the heroic warrior and his attraction to Donna" (Kunz 9), who represents 'love and peace,' because in part
two of the film, Donna appears as an anti-war activist. Sitting beneath the crucifix, he confesses his confusion between two values to God: "Sometimes God, I'm so confused. Sometimes I think I'd just like to stay here in Massapequa, and never leave. But I got to go. Help me to make the right decision." Then abruptly standing up, he runs through the heavy rain to the prom. Rushing through the people, he comes to Donna and asks her to dance with him. And both kiss each other as Moon River plays on the soundtrack. Although the scene fades to black with the lyrics of the music: "we're after the same," they will never be the same.

Part two of *Born on the Fourth of July* begins in Vietnam. From a fade to black to a slow fade-in on American soldiers patrolling toward the camera silhouetted against a Jungle Vietnam horizon, part two of the film shows Kovic's confused and traumatic experience as a squad leader in the real war. The subtitle reads "Near the Cua Viet River, Vietnam, October 1967." As Kovic's patrol moves forward, he reassures a frightened soldier from Georgia--Corporal Willie Wilson--with the remark that he hasn't "seen a Georgia boy hurt yet." Asked to do so by his platoon leader, Kovic gazes at the Vietnam village to find the enemies with the rifles. A point of view shot indicates that he is not sure that he sees any rifles. But asked once again, Kovic says he saw the rifles. When Kovic is about to leave for the patrol with his squad, firing begins before the order is given. Frantically, Kovic shouts "Motherfuckers, cease-fire." The term, "Motherfuckers" is used in the war meaninglessly. When they find that the victims
are all civilian women and children, one of the squad members laments
"Motherfucker, we wasted them." However, the term has the "significant
connotations of being the reduction and denial of the female authority figure from
the previous culture" (Fenn 160) with regard to the fact that Kovic's family and
particularly his mother are pious Catholics.

To catch the frantic situation of the war and to show the confused soldier's
mental status, the scene is fragmented, taken by a hand-held camera and
consists of a series of cuts. When he finds out that they killed and mutilated
women and children in a hutch that they professed to save, Kovic's close-up face
is terror-stricken. All the soldiers look dumb-faced, lamenting "We didn't do this,
did we?" Shouting "Somebody, help me" he frantically tries to do something for a
fatally wounded young baby. Soon, while the confused troops are ordered to
"Move out! Move out" because of the incoming NVA soldiers, Kovic does not
follow the retreat order and keeps doing something for the baby. But finally when
he comes out of the hutch pulled by the platoon leader, the camera still takes in
the wounded baby. And as he runs to the sand dunes frantically, the sound of a
baby crying is still heard like the voice of his inner conscience. The soldiers
become more confused and fire at any moving targets. At this moment, Kovic
fires three shots into the silhouette of a soldier coming over the dune blinded by
the sun. All the images he fires at are so indistinct that Kovic at first can not be
sure he killed the soldier-- Corporal Wilson whose safety Kovic assured before
the battle. The accidental killing of Wilson reinforces the failure of Kovic's heroic
image. When Kovic shoots his rifle, the camera takes Wilson's figure with Kovic's point of view shot: first in slow then fast motion. Kovic climbs the dune and says in the confusion: "What happened?" The scene ends with a close-up of confused and exhausted Kovic kneeling on the sand dune. This scene reminds us of the previous scenes of Kovic's defeat—in the wood, and in the wrestling match. Therefore, in the real war in Vietnam, rather than proving his heroic warrior myth, Kovic experiences confusion and commits illegal murders even though he does not intend to.

In part two of the film, Oliver Stone indict the military as the symbol of corruption and brutality and debunks the myth of the heroic warrior. First, Kovic's platoon leader frantically tries to find the rifles in the Vietnamese hutch as if he wants to justify his decision and exempt his responsibility. And rather than helping the wounded victims, he orders the soldiers to retreat. Second, back at the base, Kovic wants to see one of the commanding officers to confess his concern about the mutilated Vietnam civilians and to confess that he is the one who killed Corporal Wilson. However, the officer refuses to admit Kovic's confession. When Kovic is about to mention the killed civilians, the officer quickly denies the truth saying, "It was very unfortunate. The enemy used the villagers as cover." And when Kovic says that he might have killed Wilson, the officer does not accept his confession, quickly responding "I don't think so. It's hard, it's very hard to tell what's happening." Despite Kovic's repeated confession, the officer strongly refuses to accept the truth and brainwashes Kovic, saying, "I don't think
so, Kovic. Don't talk like that. Don't tell me this shit. I'll take your head off? Is that clear?"

Still mystified by the lies of the military leaders and by his own guilt-stricken conscience, Kovic once again wants to prove himself as the heroic warrior. That is, rather than learning a lesson from his experiences, he tries to rebuild his warrior's code. In January, 1968, Kovic's platoon is actually ambushed by the enemy during their search-and-destroy patrol. Kovic is shot in his foot by the enemy in a camouflaged bunker. Despite his wound, spitting "Son of a bitch," Kovic rises again and continues to fire back at the enemy whose position is not distinct until his rifle jams and another bullet tears through his chest. With a bird-eye-view shot of slow motion, the scene reminds us of the childhood battle scene in the wood where Kovic is also ambushed and denies his defeat. Later, when he meets his friend Timmy, Kovic compares his behavior to playing the war movie hero: “Shot in the foot. I got up like I was back in the woods again. Like I was John fucking Wayne.” “The child’s dream of becoming a man which his culture has provided has unmanned him” (Kunz 13). The black soldier who rushes to evacuate the wounded Kovic ends the scene with the meaningless refrain: “Motherfuckers, motherfuckers”

Kovic is sent from the field medical unit to the Bronx Veterans Hospital. Paralyzed from the chest down, Kovic's experiences in the V.A. hospital depict the process of recovery and rehabilitation. Despite his physical damage, Kovic naively still believes in the authority of war. While he watches a televised student
demonstration in which the protesters are burning the American flag, Kovic shouts in rage, "Love it or leave it, you fucking bastard?" However, his political ignorance on the war and on the situation of the country is being mocked by even the hospital staff. One of Kovic's physical therapists tries to disillusion him: "You gung-ho you don't know shit about what's going on in this country. It's a revolution going on. If you aren't part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Then, with "rats, physical abuse, a negligent medical staff, the omnipresence of death and putrefaction" (Burgoyne 65), the scenes of Bronx V.A. Hospital are "so uncompromisingly intense that it served both to debunk the fable of war's glories and to act as a tract for the causes of social justice" (Beaver 137). Although Kovic still believes in the warrior's dauntless spirit, Kovic is gradually aware of the reality of the corrupt national institution represented by the V.A. Hospital. Despite the fact that he will never walk again or be able to have children, as he is told by the hospital physicians, he undertakes dangerous and futile exercises to make his legs work until one of his legs is fractured. Lying on the bed, when he shouts in anger that he wants to be treated like a human being because he fought for his country in the Vietnam War, one of the staff retorts, "Vietnam mean nothing to me, man. You can take Vietnam and shove it up your ass." Although he still remains in political ignorance, a dream sequence in which Kovic rises from his chair and runs through the fellow patients, who begins to watch Kovic as he passes, "foreshadows his later political role" (Burgoyne 66).
Back home, Kovic experiences the difficulties of his reintegration into society and family. Although he says "I'm only paralyzed" when he arrives home, his mother looks puzzled and tries to avoid him as if she cannot take the fact that her son is paralyzed. And one of his childhood friends who was mocked by Kovic and other friends, tries to use Kovic's war hero image for a commercial purpose. Mocking the money that Kovic earns from the government as "charity money," he calls the Vietnam War "bullshit lies" while he cheats customers by selling burgers with concealed holes in the center to save money. He also mocks Kovic's sacrifice: "People here don't give a shit about the war. It's just a million miles away. It's bullshit anyway. The whole town was devastated. For what? For lies, for bullshit lies?" At home, there is also a feud between family members about the idea of the war. When his younger brother expresses his opinion that he doesn't believe in the war and they have been doing the wrong thing in Vietnam, Kovic shouts in anger "Love it or leave it," which is the same phrase that he used in VA Hospital.

Although he is getting suspicious about his conviction that his sacrifice is worthwhile and America is doing the right thing in Vietnam, Kovic assumes his position as a war hero in his hometown Fourth of July parade. Riding in the Continental convertible, Kovic flinches at the exploding firecrackers like the World War II veteran in the earlier scene of the parade. Parading through the people, Kovic "witnesses that the war itself has come home" (Kunz 15): Some people look at him with sympathy and understanding while others are showing their
contempt. And finally, the parade becomes a battlefield between marchers and spectators. However, in the celebration, the World War II veteran who in fact represents the ideology of the nation tries to justify the cause of the war:

I believe in America and I believe in Americanism. I believe in victory for America. There are kids that care about our country. Kids who have respect for their flag, their parents and their government and their religion. Six boys from Massapequa, they all knew what honor, duty and sacrifice meant. They paid the highest price. They died for it.

When asked to address to the crowd, Kovic at first repeats the same cliché of patriotism and heroism that his mother said to him as “the great things”:

We're doing our best. It's not an easy situation. But the boys' morale there is real high. And you can feel confident we are going to win the war. I served for my country. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I volunteered. Do not shed a tear. I have my hands, my eyes, and my ears and heart....

But when his words come to the term ‘heart,’ Kovic can not continue his speech. Because he knows that all the things that he is telling are lies and that he is no hero. And the sound of a baby crying is heard from his heart as if to confirm his two sins in Vietnam: the slaughter of Vietnamese women and children, and the killing of one of his squad members. Here, the film quickly establishes the idea that “to be born on the Fourth of July has become synonymous with murder and death” (Burgoyne 72).
That night, for the first time, in his backyard with his childhood friend Timmy who is also a wounded Vietnam veteran, Kovic extends his understanding to the fact that he may be the victim of the immoral system and casts doubt on the value of heroic manhood that forced him to be seriously wounded:

I made some terrible mistakes. Sometimes I'd wish first time I got hit in the foot, I could have laid down. I give a fuck now if I was a hero or not? I was paralyzed, castrated that day? Why? 'Cause I was so stupid. I think I'd give everything I believe in. Everything I got--all my values.

In the ensuing scene, Kovic visits Donna at Syracuse University. Invented by Stone, this scene at Syracuse is intended to explain the transformation of Kovic's political consciousness into that of an antiwar activist. Kovic finds Donna has become an antiwar student leader. In fact, Donna (also an invented character) represents the values that Kovic has lost--'love and peace' which are directly opposed to the values that have victimized him--'male heroism and war.' Donna tries to infuse the progressive ideas into the confused Kovic's mind. When Donna says "the war is so wrong" and talks about the massacre of My Lai, Kovic realizes that "the country to which he has returned has changed as much as the girl he planned to come back to and love forever" (Kurz 15). At the antiwar demonstration, Kovic feels the antiwar atmosphere of the demonstrators. Particularly, when a black veteran throws away the medals contemptuously
shouting, "this is war," Kovic sees the campus turn into a war field as the police break through the assembly.

Knowing that he has been victimized by the authority systems--family, religion and nation--Kovic's first response appears to desecrate and destroy all the false system. In particular, in the film, as I mentioned above, as the mother is metaphorically identified with the negative side of the nation, Kovic, who comes to understand that he is his mother's victim, fights against the mother by blaspheming the mother's authority. Coming home late one night drunk, taking off the crucifix from the living room wall, Kovic proclaims that he does not believe in God any more. And in his room where the American flag is on the wall, he shouts, "I'm a fucking dummy...It's all a lie." When his mother says, "I didn't force you to go," Kovic retorts "You did. With all your goddamn beliefs and your bullshit dreams about me." Further, he confesses the fact that he killed women and children against the lesson of the Bible: "Thou shall not kill women and children." And he reveals his political awareness: "King, Kennedy, Kent State. We all lost the fucking war." When she does not admit her responsibility saying, "It's not my fault," Kovic at last desecrates directly God and the nation: "God is as dead as my leg, as dead as my dead penis! There's no god, There's no country." He even tries to reveal his castrated sex organ. In the film, Kovic's injury is imbued with a symbolic significance. That is, it implies not only the emasculation of Kovic himself, but also the enervation of his country. At last, she orders him to leave
the house as if she wants to exorcise his ideas that are not part of mainstream beliefs.

In a Mexican resort, Kovic befriends Charlie (Willem Dafoe), another paralyzed veteran, and associates with other disabled veterans. All of them hate their country and people because nobody understands them in the States. The scene in Mexico is set forth to show the healing process of Kovic's psychological trauma with the ritualistic sex and talking cure. First, as he said to his father and his friend Timmy, Kovic longs to be "a man" again in terms of sexual meaning. He is castrated in the war without any previous sex experience. Therefore, in the film, with the ritualistic sex with the sympathetic Mexican prostitute, Kovic becomes "whole" as a man spiritually. The camera shows Kovic, who is weeping during the sex scene, to reinforce the idea of being a whole man. But the film shows that the wholeness Kovic longs for does not lie in sexual addiction with assumed sexual prowess but in facing the political truth of the war and the political understanding of the self. Right after he is tormented by the nightmarish images of his sin in Vietnam, Kovic tries to write a letter to Corporal Wilson's parent. But he quickly hides the letter when one of his friends comes to him, suggesting that he still wants to avoid and hide the truth.

The fight scene between Charlie and Kovic, added by Stone, illustrates the process of a talking cure by forcing the character to face his inner self. In a rural Mexican road, circling each other in their wheelchairs, they vent their same inner guilt on one another. They are in fact each other's "mirror image" (Burgoyne 74).
Shouting, "They made me kill the babies, man. Little gook babies. You ever have
to kill a baby?" Charlie forces Kovic to face himself:

You never killed a baby. You never had to kill a baby. You never put
your soul into that war. You never put your soul on that line, man. What
are you hiding? You weren't even there, man. You never killed
anybody and anything, Kovic? You ever look at yourself in the fucking
mirror?

Getting closer until "they stare into each other's face as if into a mirror"
(Kunz 19), they spit into the other's face and fight each other in their wheelchairs
and tumble down into a ditch alongside the road. Both crying lying in the dust, as
Chris laments "What are we going to do? What am I going to do, man?" Charlie
is what Kovic will become unless he can face his trauma and truth. Therefore,
"the wholeness Kovic longs for is symbolically realized when he discovers and is
allowed to use his activist voice to tell the world of his loss" (Beaver 137).

In part three of Born on the Fourth of July, Stone depicts Kovic's
transformation to a kind of national savior: first by confessing his guilt, second by
extending political understanding to others. The invention of the ideal family in
the film extends Kovic's redemption into the community for the cathartic purpose.
Part three of Born on the Fourth of July begins with a scene added to the film, in
which Kovic returns to the country and stops at Corporal Wilson's grave in
Venus, Georgia. In the scene, as he approaches the gravestone, the camera
takes Kovic's point-of-view, as if he is "visiting his own tomb" (Kunz 19). While he
is in front of the grave, the voice-over flashback of Kovic's conversation with Wilson and the cover-up of the truth by the commanding officer are heard. In fact, this scene symbolizes Kovic's awareness that Wilson is also the victim of the lies by the system.

The scene with Corporal Wilson's family functions as the turning point in the film. In this scene, Wilson's family is set as the representative of the all-American family. The Wilson's living room is filled with helmets and medals like a small war museum. The father mentions their proud tradition that this family has fought "in every war that this country's ever had." However, although he says that his son had a nice funeral, the father expresses his wonders: "I still can't quite figure out that war. Why we had to go all that long way to fight it. And why we had to lose so many young men. Can't figure it out." But when he says, "I reckon we're ready to do it again. If'n we have to," the camera moves from the dead Wilson's wedding picture to his young son who aims and shoots a toy rifle at Kovic as if he would follow his grandfather's remark. Given the construction of the film, the family was lied to by the military authority, but still believes in the war myth. They believe that their son died in the fighting like a heroic warrior. Now, although Kovic says "it is very difficult for me to say," if Kovic does not strip away the lies, it would be evident that the lies would be inherited to the next generation and he can never resurrect himself. Finally, Kovic confesses the truth--that they killed Vietnamese women and children while fighting against the enemy, and it was he who killed Wilson by mistake, confused and scared during the fighting.
As Kovic cries after his confession and waits for their judgment, Wilson's wife says she can never forgive him but maybe God can. Although her only son was killed by him, Wilson's mother forgives him as if he is their "surrogate son" (Burgoyne 83), showing enormous sympathy and setting aside her pain: "We understand, Ron. We understand the pain you've been going through." In fact, at this moment, Wilson's mother is symbolically projected as "the positive concept of national identity" (Burgoyne 66) and "functions as an icon of forgiveness and understanding, an emblem of promised community" (Burgoyne 77) compared with Kovic's selfish and heartless mother. This scene presents "the rememoration of the protagonists as a source not just of individual expiration, but of a wider social purification" (Burgoyne 83-4) which will be completed in the following scenes.

After his confession to the family, the film depicts him as the disillusioned and reborn national savior. As he comes out of the Wilson's house, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" is played on the soundtrack and the scene resolved into a large American flag. In the next scene, the camera zooms in to Kovic in his wheelchair as a flag bearer while he and the Vietnam Veterans are marching toward the 1972 Republican National Convention. Kovic and his fellow veterans sum up their antiwar slogan in a phrase: "One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war." This scene suggests the protagonist's political transformation from a fervent patriot to an anti-war veteran who can lead the nation with his renewed political consciousness.
In reality, when he and two fellow veterans break onto the Convention floor, and interrupt President Nixon's speech, the film depicts Kovic as the true political authority of the nation. When Kovic's image and ideas replace those of President Nixon on the TV monitor, the paralyzed Kovic himself is the symbol of antiwar sentiment and new authority of the nation. Surrounded by Nixon's supporters chanting "Four more years" and calling the veterans 'traitor or communist,' Kovic's speech shows who the traitor is. Proving the completion of his political and identical awareness, Kovic's speech consists of pointing out four wrong things that could summarize his political orientation. First, he says about the war: "I'm telling you this war is a crime! I'm here to say this war is wrong. That this society lied to me and my brothers. It deceived the people in this country." This statement acts as "the film's ideological climax" (Beaver 135). Second, Kovic extends his political awareness to others, the Vietnamese, as if to compensate for the burden of his tragic experiences in Vietnam: "A poor peasant people who have a proud history of resistance, who have been struggling for their own independence for 1,000 years, the Vietnamese people." Third, he casts doubt on the authority of the government: "I can't find the words to express how the leadership of this country sickens me. The government is a bunch of corrupt thieves. They are rapists and robbers. We are here to say we don't have to take it anymore." Finally, he says about the meaning of the Vietnam veterans' homecoming: "We are never going to let people forget that war. This wheelchair, our wheelchairs on wheels is your Memorial Day on wheels. We are your Yankee
Doodle Dandy come home.” After his speech, although President Nixon says, “Let’s reject any philosophy that would make us the divided people of America. Let’s give those who have served in Vietnam the honor and respect that they deserve and that they have earned,” the scene outside the hall tells us the lies are still going on, as Kovic and his fellow veterans are attacked brutally with tear gas and police clubs.

Born on the Fourth of July ends by reestablishing the community into which Kovic and the Vietnam veterans should reintegrate. However, the values of “restored community” (Burgoyne 84) are based upon progressive values—political understanding of history and others, not the values of the existing authority represented by President Nixon. In 1976 at the Democratic National Convention, where Kovic waits to address the delegates and the entire nation, a congressman illustrates the new values of the community: “This is a government of the people, by the people, and for all the people. Black, brown, red, yellow, white, woman, young, old, workers and students. This is our land in this country.” Saying, “I’m going to say truth” to a reporter, Kovic expresses his feeling of coming home: “It’s been a long way for us. The vets. Just lately, I felt like I’m home. Maybe we’re home.” As he wheels through the aisle to the podium, a series of flashbacks of his past experiences appear as if he overcomes “the past that had been synonymous with an order of destructive social uniformity” (Burgoyne 84). In the last scene, in the glowing lights and celebrated by the
crowd and media, Kovic is projected as a new national savior who can lead the people to "the great things."
CHAPTER IV. HEAVEN AND EARTH:
FINDING REDEMPTION BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* is based upon two memoirs by Le Ly Hayslip: The first half of the film is based on *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and the second half is based on *Child of War, Woman of Peace*. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* is a Vietnamese woman's initiation on the war. Focusing on a family's ups and downs during the war, the purpose of the memoir is twofold: first, to give an understanding on the Vietnamese and the war for Americans. Second, to suggest the forgiveness and reconciliation between two parties. As she says, her politics are "the politics of reconciliation and healing after decades of division" (qtd. in Mydans 16), David Shipler notes that Le Ly Hayslip "never slides into bitterness, although she has good cause. She never chooses sides or places blame. She preaches a little for Vietnamese-American amity. She manages so gracefully to transcend politics, keeping her humaneness as the focus" (37).

Although her memoir is written from the perspective of the Vietnamese, it is hard to say that the story is the representative voice of the Vietnam War by the Vietnamese. In fact, Le Ly was not a hard-core-member of the Vietcong and thus
had no specific political idea on the war enough to say, "We knew little of democracy and even less about communism. For most of us it was a fight for independence--like the American Revolution" (Hayslip xv). Therefore, although "her story provides a window into the war on the level of the ordinary Vietnamese, it is not a historical work in the usual sense" (Crowell 355). Rather, as Lynne Bundesen comments, her story is “the private side of the Vietnamese War. The private side of any war is rarely told, and it is, supremely, the woman’s side” (qtd. in Edgar 188). Moreover, because the memoir focuses on the self-awareness and self-redemption throughout the war, it lacks the voices of America’s real victims--the Vietnamese. Therefore, the memoir is reduced to a personal record on the war and to a personal suggestion of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Following the memoirs faithfully, the film has a classic narrative pattern. With Heaven and Earth, Oliver Stone for the first time in his Vietnam films seems to be “coming to terms with two Others--the feminine perspective and the Vietnamese experience of the war” (Gavin Smith, Film Comment 26). First, Oliver Stone has been criticized for the absence of feminine figures not only in his Vietnam films but also in his other films. Stephen Talbot summarizes the thematics of Oliver Stone’s film as follows:

Stone identifies closely with his protagonists, as they struggle with their personal demons torn between self-destruction and salvation. He doesn't have much to say about women. His films explore masculinity:
the relationships between men in prison and in war, the conflicts
between father and son. If there is a kind of typical Oliver Stone film, it
involves a young man—naïve, idealistic, patriotic—who undergoes a trial
by fire, a rite of passage, that nearly kills him. (qtd. in Beaver 10)

Most notably, using the war as "the finest proving-ground of manhood" (Porteous 158), *Platoon* does not employ any female character. Women characters are depicted no better in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Second, Stone also has been criticized for his ignoring the Vietnamese voices in his Vietnam films. Although Stone shows the important political awareness on the Vietnam War in *Born on the Fourth of July, Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* pay almost no attention to the Vietnamese. In *Heaven and Earth*, with the extension of his political awareness to others—the Vietnamese, Oliver Stone at least makes us understand the fact that "the ordeal for the Vietnamese was much worse than the American ordeal and was exacerbated by U.S. intervention and withdrawal" (Crowell 341-42).

While Stone sets the protagonist as a Vietnamese woman and half of the film's background is set in Vietnam, in *Heaven and Earth*, the focus of the film is still on America. As I mentioned above, the female protagonist of the film has limited as a representative Vietnamese experience of the war. We can say that if Stone had wanted to represent the balanced political perspective of the war by the Vietnamese others, he would have chosen the protagonist as a patriotic Vietcong character. However, in the film, Stone even depicts the Vietcong as
another intruder to the Vietnamese peasants' people though the Vietcong was the real defender of Vietnam at that time. And even though Stone selected the protagonist as a patriotic Vietcong character, we can assume that it would be hard for Stone to transcend the Americanized context of his political vision. But this is not the limit that only Stone has shown. For example, *White Badge* (1994) by a Korean director Ji-young Chung, based upon Jung-hyo Ahn's novel of the same title, studies the impact and aftermath of the Vietnam War mostly on the Korean soldiers and its society rather than paying attention to the political aspect of the war and the Vietnamese. Therefore, we can say that Stone's Vietnam films give us only a part of the understanding on the war. And as Tassilo Schneider points out, "restoration of the fullness of history" based upon the correct political perspective "will have to be provided by the Vietnamese" (52).

In *Heaven and Earth*, by selecting the protagonist who has been victimized by two worlds—particularly by two countries, America and Vietnam, that represent capitalism and communism respectively—Stone tries not only to find "the USA's moral redemption in the hands of the former enemy" (Doyle 94), but also to set aside the burden of the Vietnam War. For these purposes, Stone strongly depends upon the Le Ly character's redemptive power who reverberates Kovic's words: "Those bad people put me on the path so I could progress. I can only be grateful to them. Without him raping me, I would never have left my village; I would still be a little stupid farm girl" (qtd. in Robert Stone 24).
As the title 'Heaven and Earth' suggests, Le Ly, the female protagonist, at the end of the film finds herself standing between two values or between two forces: "I would be always in between. South and North, East and West, Peace and War, Vietnam and America. It is my fate to be in between--Heaven and Earth" [All quotations are taken directly from the soundtrack]. In the film, the broader category of the world of 'Heaven' represents something futile that could change and transform easily and quickly--South Vietnam, the West, the War as represented by America in terms of the film's narrative construction. The world of 'Earth' stands for the things that are permanent--North Vietnam, the East, Peace as represented by Vietnam. In the film although people of each world assume that they are saviors to the protagonist, they in fact prove themselves as victimizers to the protagonist.

However, in the deeper level of the film, the world of 'Earth' represents the philosophical world of the protagonist's father, the leader of the Phung family, which includes the worship of God and the love of ancestors, forgiveness to the aggressors and peace in the heart. The world of 'Heaven' represents the world of all other male aggressors, which means betrayal and hate, murder and war. Thus, in Heaven and Earth, whenever the female protagonist leaves from the world of her father, she suffers. And when she returns to the father's world, she can find redemption not only for herself but also for the victimizers. I therefore analyze how Oliver Stone in Heaven and Earth describes two worlds and what
the truth of her father's world is with which Le Ly finds the redemption not only for herself but also for the victimizers.

Set in the peaceful periods between the foreign invasions, the opening scene of *Heaven and Earth* establishes the whole idea of the film. The film begins with the picturesque scenery of the rural landscape of Vietnam. As the protagonist's first voice-over "I lived in the most beautiful village on Earth" indicates, the opening scenes consist of the beautiful landscape of Vietnam: rice paddies, Buddhist temple, a boat on the river, a raft on the raining river and mountains. As the heroine's voice-over summarizes, the scene of the French invasion shows how the foreign colonialists break these beautiful and peaceful rural fields of Vietnam and the lives of the peasant Vietnamese people, and how the common people have overcome the disaster: "They destroyed our village and the following year we went hungry. I will never forget my father's eyes as he watched our house burn to the ground. But as it had happened to our village for so many centuries we rebuilt our lives." After the disaster of the French invasion, the film shows again the pastoral scenery of rural Vietnam with now the teenage heroine who is balancing on a water buffalo in the green paddies and running through the golden ripe rice paddies.

Stone shows similar kinds of beautiful and pastoral scenery after the retreat of the French imperialist and before the infiltration of the Vietcong. And at the end of the film, Stone repeats some of the opening shots "to suggest a cycle: life is a turning wheel" (Smith, *Film Comment* 29). Therefore, these opening scenes
quickly establish the idea that nature is permanent and that it is the foreign aggressors who break the essence of nature and the lives of the people "striving to bring forth the harvest and follow Lord Buddha's teachings" between Heaven and Earth.

However, this peaceful peasant countryside is changed once again as the country comes into the "American War--the dirty war" (Hayslip 143). Then, Oliver Stone places the scene of the father's speech to the protagonist between two invaders--the Vietcong and the American--to emphasize the authority of the father's words and to depreciate both invaders in the construction of the film's narrative structure. First, the Vietcong comes into Ky La in Central Vietnam, the hometown of the protagonist. When they come in the village, the Vietcong soldiers are depicted as if they come from the earth like 'the savior of the land': the camera shows the Vietcong walking along the rice paddies with their bare feet. In fact, the Vietcong represents to some extent the people's need. And in the village meeting, the Vietcong leader compares Vietnam to a family divided by outsiders. His speech is filled with appeals that refer to the situation of Vietnam in terms of family problems:

My parent taught me Vietnam is a free nation. That is what this war is about. The Chinese, the Japanese and the French. They have each tried to rule us. And we have won. The North and South are inseparable like sisters. But in 1954, the French and American allies gave themselves the right to separate us and kidnap the South. Can
we stand by and watch the kidnappers taking turns and raping and corrupting our sisters? That is what this war is about. Why should outsiders come in, divide the land and tell some people go North and go South, why? If Vietnam were truly for the Vietnamese people, shouldn't we be able to choose our government that we want. A nation can not have two nations. Any more than a family can have two fathers.

During the Vietcong leader's speech, the camera cuts to Le Ly who is fascinated by the speech, saying, "He's right." And when the Vietcong leader mentions the typical ideology of Communism, "We have no ranks. We have no promotion. We take no money. We are your servants. We respect your house and shrine," Le Ly seems to be fully attracted by their cause whereas her father looks at her with concern. After the village meeting, there is a dance party between the Vietcong and the villagers. The party shows the fact that the Vietcong won over the peasants' support because they lived their life with the peasants. In the party, she dances passionately with her brother and other village people. Sau, the older brother whom Le Ly loves most, prevents a VC cadreman from approaching Le Ly to offer the dance. For Le Ly, Sau seems like a protector from outsiders: "He was always there to protect me and make me laugh." To support the Vietcong's cause in the war, her eldest brother Bon and Sau go North to Hanoi following the Vietcong. Le Ly feels as if it is the last time she would see her brothers.
In the ensuing scene, as she says, "From my father, I learned to love God and the people I could not see--My ancestors," Le Ly listens to her father Phung's lesson in the family pagoda located alongside the rice paddies, in which the Vietnamese people enshrine their ancestors' spirits. Based upon his lived experiences, the father's lesson is deeper than the Vietcong's. It is the lesson of a father representing the voices of the common people who have longed for the freedom of themselves and their country from the invasions of the foreign forces. And his lesson is the essence that was learned through several centuries. Therefore, it transcends any specific ideology:

You understand that a country is more than a lot of dirt and rivers and forest. You know your brother Sau may not come back. I told many times. The Chinese ruled our land. Many died. Your grandfather fought and died against the Japanese just before you were born. You suffered much. When the Japanese came, your mom and I were taken to Danang to build a runaway for the airplane. We worked like slaves. Our reward was a bowl of rice and another day of life. Freedom is never a gift, Bay Li. It must be won and won again. This land Vietnam is going to be yours, now. If the enemy comes back, you must be both a daughter and son now.

She seems to understand some of her father's lesson. However, as she says, "I would learn in time my father's word would be twisted by events;" the film shows that she learns the lesson by herself the hard way.
In *Heaven and Earth*, the Americans seem to come from heaven. While a helicopter is whirring heavily above the rice paddies, the U.S. and the government army arrive at the village when Le Ly is working in the green rice paddies. She is being washed by the strong wind generated by the helicopter while her hat is blown away. This scene symbolizes the nature of the U.S as a foreign invader like the French that breaks the peaceful life of the peasant people. However, in the later part of the film, when Le Ly is running with her children to escape the raid of the Vietcong on the U.S. base, the U.S. helicopter with her husband is coming down from heaven as if they are saviors to the protagonist.

In the film, as the voice-over indicates “The government soldiers came to our village with the support of American advisors,” the U.S is portrayed as the mastermind for the puppet government of South Vietnam. When a government military officer delivers their ideology to the villagers, “Your village will be safe. To resist the communist rebels. You will be rewarded with food and money. Your village will be happy and peaceful,” a few American officers are watching him as if they are superintendents. And when she is tortured by a government officer for acting as the Vietcong’s spy in the government military building, an American officer is also silently watching the man torturing her. In addition, in the yard of the same building, when Le Ly and two other Vietnamese girls are tortured with ants and snakes, several American officers enjoy the atrocity, laughing and talking with each other. All these scenes give us the impression that the U.S. is
masterminding the puppet government of South Vietnam. And her voice-over quickly denies the authority of the U. S. army as the forces of the savior to Vietnamese and gives the credit to North Vietnam represented by Ho Chi Minh:

The soldiers ate our food, slept with our women and they searched our home just as the soldier of the warlord had centuries before. But government leader whose name is Ngo Dinh Diem, America's ally, was a catholic like French. And that alone made suspicious to the Buddhists in our area. The North leader Ho Chi Minh had been a great patriot against the Japanese and French and we always heard his stories of his compassion and his love for Vietnam.

After the American and the government army came to the village, the confrontation between the Vietcong and the government army continue in a confused way: "During the day, we were Government village but each night when the soldiers returned to their base camp, the night belongs to the Vietcong." And as Le Ly points out, "Every day I was scared, but there's no real choice. They'd fight for our freedom against the Southern Government;" everyone in the village has been pressed to select his or her position from both parties. Although Le Ly does not have any specific and solid political point of view on the war and ideology, she joins the Vietcong. Her decision to be a Vietcong warrior is directly from the death of her beloved brother Sau, not from her belief in the Vietcong. When the Vietcong come to the village and kil her student teacher immediately without any trial for teaching students to betray the country, her father warns her
not to take side with any party: "No matter who asks you the questions, either side, play stupid, stupid child!" Even in her house, there is a controversy between father and mother about participating in the war. When her mother urges Le Ly to "fight for the right thing" because the war is coming and inevitable, her father prevents her, shouting, "Do you want to send all my children to Hanoi or Saigon? If I can't have my family around me, what's the point of living longer?"

However, when she foresees the death of her brother Sau in her dream, she becomes a warrior as if she could revenge her brother's death. In her dream, after the flashback on the scene of Sau's participation in Vietcong, Le Ly and Sau are tortured in a U.S helicopter. Although Sau is threatened to be dropped out of the helicopter, he refuses to help them decisively, and at last is dropped into the air. Next day, when a local wizard confirms her omen that Sau might be dead, Le Ly imagines her brother Sau laughing and looking at Le Ly.

While she becomes a Vietcong warrior to fight against the U.S. and the South Vietnamese government, Le Ly is betrayed and treated badly not only from her enemy but also from her comrade. As a Vietcong cadre girl, Le Ly gives to the Vietcong the warning of the enemy coming into the village by changing the color of her clothes. Because of her warning signal, the Vietcong destroys the enemy's tank and attacks the government soldiers effectively. But Le Ly is caught by the government soldiers. In a government building, calling Le Ly, "Miss Vietcong hero," a government officer tortures her cruelly by beating, by electricity, and by the knife. But Le Ly denies her connection with the Vietcong. When Le Ly
and two other girls are tortured by snakes, Le Ly endures the torture by imaging her brother Sau who denies helping and is finally killed by the U.S. soldiers in her dream. Just as she becomes a Vietcong, so she overcomes her terror by imaging her dead brother.

Le Ly is released because her mother bribed a military official with her dowry. But, because of her untimely release from the enemy, everyone in the village becomes suspicious about her family's ties to the government. Finally, the Vietcong puts Le Ly into “people's court,” in which everything is predetermined by the Vietcong. In the film, when Le Ly is summoned into the meeting, a Vietcong cadre woman condemns Le Ly's crime sternly and coldly without regard to the truth. This scene reinforces the cruel and pitiless image of the Vietcong:

Our men were betrayed. There's an informer here. How else could the enemy know so much. This village is filled with traitors, government sympathizers. They will sell us out for a relative, for money, for privilege. So I ask you what should we do with these people? We must give these people the lesson they will never forget.

As the woman says, Le Ly really receives the ‘unforgettable lesson’ from her former comrades. After the sentence, Le Ly is moved in front of a pit by two Vietcong soldiers. One of them, who offered to dance with Le Ly, calls the pit her grave and aims his rifle at the back of her head. However, rather than killing her, two of them rape her in front of her grave. As she says in the voice-over, this scene symbolizes the end of her relationship with the Vietcong, particularly
represented by her two brothers. And as she thinks, it may be a warning to her father who is reluctant to take sides with the Vietcong.

After she leaves Ky La, Le Ly goes to Saigon with her mother. During her stay in Saigon, Le Ly also violates her father's philosophy and humiliates her family: first by giving birth to a child, though she is unwed, and second by selling herself to make money. Le Ly and her mother find jobs at a wealthy family as house servants. In spite of her mother's repeated warnings, Le Ly has an affair with the family host Anh, who shows kind sympathy to Le Ly. In fact, Anh is the first lover to Le Ly even though he has a wife and two sons. Le Ly enjoys their relationship until her mother finds out that she is pregnant. Le Ly is innocent enough to say, "Anh cares for me and he loves me," when her mother rebukes her saying, "You stupid girl. You think a stupid girl like you means anything to him?" However, having a bastard is never accepted, not only by their family but also by Vietnamese society. Thus, her mother orders her to get rid of the baby. While they are trying to abort the baby, Lien, Anh's wife, notices the fact and orders them to get out of the house. Le Ly's mother begs by humiliating her daughter: "Bay Ly is not a threat to you, Madam Lien, to kick around to warm your husband bed when you have better things to do. Why waste your health on man's rutting when you can leave it to a stupid girl? You are always number one wife. The law is on your side." And as the mother expected, Anh does not do anything to protect Le Ly. Although Anh promises, "I won't throw you into the street. With enough money until the baby's born. I will send you money every
month. You'll have enough to live on," he does not keep the promise. Once again, Le Ly is betrayed by men and deviates from her father's world: "My father, ashamed that I was unmarried and pregnant, refused to see me."

However, contrary to her expectation, Le Ly's father comes to see and forgive her in Danang, where Le Ly is making money by selling various goods to the American soldiers. Pregnant, Le Ly lives with one of her older sisters, Kim, who is actually a prostitute for the American soldiers. Here in Danang, her father is humiliated again by her daughters. Kim makes love with her lover, who is an American soldier and treats her father badly in front of her father. And Le Ly dares not meet her father. Hiding in a corner and rubbing her swollen abdomen that is the symbol of the family shame, Le Ly is watching her father. However, her father forgives her and tries to help her daughter come back to his world:

She has brought shame on us, an unwed mother. But she's not the only one who has brought shame on us. When you see Bay Ly, tell her I came here to see her. I miss her very much. And she should not worry about being punished for her mistake. Life finds the way to balance itself.

After her father is gone, Le Ly recognizes what they have done to their father, saying, "This is not the way that papa taught us to be." Although she made a mistake of having a bastard, Le Ly fights with her sister, shouting, "How disrespectful you are. An invader, foreigner, you slept with enemy. You betrayed your family." Calling her sister "You spoiled, camp garbage," Kim also retorts, "I'll
marry one. I'll get out of this goddamn country." Condemning each other, they slap each other's faces as if they are each other's shame.

Although she blames her sister, Le Ly also betrays her family and country by selling herself to American soldiers for big money. Le Ly decides to take care of her baby though a midwife recommends that she give away her newborn baby or kill him to wash her shame away. To make money, while she is working as a black-market vendor in front of the U.S. army base, the MP Big Mike suggests that she prostitute herself for the two returning U.S. soldiers. Le Ly rejects the offer immediately, saying, "Le Ly good girl, fuck off. Le Ly not that kind of girl." But as Big Mike raises the money from 20 to 400 dollars, saying "400 green dollars. Support your family for a year easy? What's so hard about it? 15 minutes. It ain't even work just lie there and let them do the work. Take the fucking money, give them a story to bring home," she shows the restlessness of her mind. At this moment, the camera shows her baby who is naked and playing on the ground. And the camera shows the money in Big Mikes hand, moves on he: eyes, again on the money, and close-up of her crying baby and her eyes again. Finally, she makes up her mind and goes to the soldiers. These scenes employ the idea that the U.S. forces her to prostitute herself and she finally comes to her °piritual death. That is, she washes her body after the prostitution as if she wants to wash off her sin. And the flashback scene symbolizes her spiritual death: a spade of soil is spread on her face while she is lying on the spot where she was raped by the Vietcong.
When she is exhausted spiritually as well as physically, her family is also devastated by both Americans and the Vietcong. But Le Ly resurrects herself once again with the power of her father's love. When she comes back home, she finds out that her father is near death. He was badly beaten by a group of American soldiers who were enraged because two of them were killed accidentally in her father's bunker. Stone made this scene with black-and-white fragmented slow motion because the reenactment is based on the mother's indirect testimony (Smith, *Film Comment* 38). And her mother was almost executed by the angry Vietcong. With the low angle close-up, the scene of the immediate execution reinforces the brutality of the Vietcong.

Now the family is totally detached from both parties. Having lost everything to both parties, Le Ly comes to know that both are victimizers, not saviors: "I never should have left Ky La. I should have stayed to fight them all—the Vietcong, the Government." However, when she laments her poor situation to her father, saying, "What am I doing now?" her father once again guides her to come into the world of love and forgiveness that is the base of his philosophy:

You're born to be a wonderful wife and a mother. Not a killer. Don't ask what is right or wrong. These questions are very dangerous. Right is the only the goodness you carry in your heart. Love for your ancestors. Love for your family. Love is all that counts between you and that love. Go back to your son. Make him the best son you can. That is the war that you must fight. That is the victory that you must win.
Her father says these words like his will. After he gives the lesson, he looks at her with concern: “My little peach blossom. What will you do without me?”

For a year after her father’s death, Le Ly enjoys a peaceful life with her boy until the U.S. Marine Sergeant Steve Butler comes into her life. When Steve proposes marriage after their first night, Le Ly rejects the offer immediately because she has been hurt by men and now she knows that if she leaves her father’s world, she will suffer again: “I don’t want boyfriend. We have bad karma.” Steve quickly notices her past miseries and consoles her by promising ‘peace and happiness’: “I just want a little peace and happiness. I just want to be with you. I just want to help you and your little boy and your mother.” Denying the ‘bad karma,’ Steve promises her salvation in America:

    My karma has taken me all over the world. That’s why I’m here. Living out of a duffel bag. It’s time for me to settle down. Quit pretending I’m going to live forever. I’m going home to San Diego. You’ll be safe. You’ll be free. Your little boy will have his freedom and an education. I’m serious. I need a good oriental woman like you; you’ll have me, to be my wife.

Finally, Le Ly agrees to go to the U.S. and believes that America will save her and her children: “America, Mama, in America, I can save the children. The South is dying. Steve says it will fall faster than anyone thinks. He loves me. I love him. He’s good, Mama. He loves the children.” However, disagreeing with Le Ly’s idea that she would find peace and happiness in America, her mother
doubts the American people and predicts her future misery in the U.S. almost as if she is acting the father's role:

The Americans have no beginning and no end. They don't care about the ancestors, so they think they are free to do any bad thing they want in this world. You will not be happy with this man. And your father's spirit will not rest till his most loved child sleeps in his house.

However, once again, Le Ly leaves her father's world to find material and spiritual happiness in America. In fact, she is in part fascinated by the material affluence in America. Everything looks like magic to her: carpeted house, a big refrigerator filled with a lot of food, gas ovens and microwave ovens, etc. In a supermarket, she is overwhelmed by the tons of foodstuffs. Moreover, Steve mystifies the American capitalist system saying, "See, you don't need money in America. You just give this piece of paper to the bank, then the bank pays" when he pays by check at the supermarket. But Steve lied to Le Ly in Vietnam about the promised life of America. In reality, he doesn't have a house and he is not rich at all. Moreover, he wants to go back to Vietnam to sell arms to the South Vietnamese government. Although Le Ly protests, "How can you sell to the government that blows up women and children," Steve repeats the cliché of the American authority: "If we didn't sell the weapon to these people, the fucking Communist would be better off." As the controversy grows, Le Ly says to Steve that they don't know anything about each other.
From the beginning, Steve "brings Le Ly to the USA not so much for her salvation from Vietnam but for his, from the overturned heaven of his mind" (Doyle 94). In Vietnam, Steve was a member of US Special Forces: "black Op[eration]s people sent out to kill targeted cadres and VIPs to forward a terror campaign against the VC" (Doyle 93). Therefore, Steve wants Le Ly to ease his psychic trauma resulting from his experiences in Vietnam. Therefore, in America, Steve wants Le Ly just to be a housewife and he wants to control her. As Le Ly starts her own business, their inner conflict begins to grow severely.

Then, unlike the lesson that she has learned from her father, Le Ly neither understands nor forgives him. Rather, she acts like an American: "I was starting to behave like I'm an American. Yelling back at my husband, frowns, scowls." As the domestic violence is getting severe, Steve shows the dark side of himself, speaking "angry words, now all blood and thunder words." At last, when she proclaims the divorce, "Steve, one time I think I love you. But I now see we too different inside to be soul mate. No more mistake now," Steve aims his shotgun at the back of her head, shouting, "This is the way that life works." As she says, "I felt my soul would go away in a moment," Stone symbolizes the action of killing her spirit. This scene intercuts with a series of flashbacks of the rape by Vietcong and torture by Government officer. But he can't do it. Rather, he confesses to Le Ly of his past many murders in Vietnam that even threaten his own sanity:

The Marine Corps. You don't know half of it. I'm a killer. I killed so many over there. We blame it on the VC. I was in hell--pure hell. The
more I killed, the more they gave me to kill. One day I found you. It all changed i thought, but it doesn't really change. Fuck me? I'm scared to death.

 According to Jeff Doyle, his confession may appear "to focus on the war crimes perpetrated by the USA on Vietnam, but emotionally the film focuses on the way in which Steve seeks Le Ly's help in easing his distress" (93). Particularly, showing again her infinite love to Steve, she attributes her misery to the Buddhist concept of 'Karma,' rather than indicting her victimizers:  

 I too was a soldier in past lives. I hurt many people. I lied, steal, hate. Now I pay. It's my fate. And our soul debt will come due if not in this life, then in another. But we can't give up, we must try. Different skin, same suffering.

 But one hug of love and forgiveness cannot cure the entire trauma. As she says in voice-over, "In my heart I thought I did not belong in this country. And I thought going home again," only when she comes back into her father's world, can she find peace and love. In the film, a Buddhist monk is her spiritual father who teaches her with the same words as her dead father. When Steve takes his two sons away claiming the annulment of Le Ly's divorce proceedings, she comes to a Buddhist temple to get advice. She speaks in anger her man-hate to an old Buddhist master: "My boys. I birth them with pain. I chew their food for them. I am shocked. I am insulted at the insolence of men. They don't respect women. I cannot believe such men have known a mother's love." The master
teaches her with the same philosophy as her father's while he employs the Buddhist concepts:

He has created much soul debt for himself. But if you fail to give him he will lose the opportunity to redeem himself. It will only increase your own soul debt. The man-hate that blinds you will blind any man you find in your future life. If you turn Steve away, you will be rejecting your own redemption. Child. You have forgiven the men who raped you, destroyed your country, harmed your family. And it is how it should be. Your karma is mixed with Steve, to Tommy and Allen. The future, the past are all the same if you divorce. You will only have to come back again and work it out again. The path to Nirvana has never been safe but tricky and steep. And if you only work on sunny days, you never reach your destination.

With a close-up, the master reminds us of Le Ly's father. Particularly, at the end of his teaching, he concludes her father's words: "Choose well, my peach blossom." At this moment, the camera close-ups Le Ly's face that shows the realization with an amazed expression. And when the master says, "A child without a father is like a house without a roof," the film returns to the opening scene where she and her father pray in front of a statue of Buddha in a countryside temple.

After the realization, Le Ly not only forgives her husband but also tries to rebuild their relationship by sacrificing herself and returning to the beginning: "I
don't hate you. I feel your pain. I'll go to your church. I'll put the shrine away. I
love you. I love the man I saw in Vietnam. I'll find you again. I still love you.”
However, Steve kills himself because his psychic trauma already brings him
beyond the limit of his sanity. To guide his spirit into the rest in Buddhism, Le Ly
employs a Buddhist wizard who can read the spirit's will. He tells Le Ly that
Steve's spirit is in much pain, but he forgives her. And if his soul finds peace in a
Buddhist temple, her family and children will find peace. Ironically enough,
though he was such a strong Christian, he wants to find peace in Buddhism as if
he could find his spiritual redemption only by the forgiveness of his former
enemy. That is, “it seems that the East—the Buddhist mystical element of Le Ly’s
life will offer atonement for Steve’s wrongs and his sufferings” (Doyle 94).

In the last part of the film, Le Ly returns to Vietnam to the spirit of her father
thirteen years after the war. It is not only her personal journey, but also the
journey to complete her realization in her father's philosophy. However, Le Ly is
not fully welcomed in Vietnam even by her own family when she returns to her
hometown dressed in high American style with her three American children.
There's a division caused by the war. Her mother at first does not welcome her,
saying, “I don't see you. You're a ghost. I don't know where you are.” And
rejecting Le Ly's presents, her eldest brother Bon, who was a Vietcong warrior,
treats her as a foreigner. In the film, Bon represents the vce of the Vietnamese
authority:
You don’t understand how much suffering Americans have caused here. Things were very hard. All we have to hold onto is the future. Because we knew that future would not have arrived unless we won. So, we kept dying no matter what just like the ants beneath the elephant’s feet. It wasn’t because we were brave but because we had no choice. Our freedom was all that mattered. And the future finally came there was more war. The Cambodian. The Chinese. They were starving. Their clothes are rags. Now you came here--A rich, strange foreigner. You will turn the village once more against us.

But, forgiving both parties her mother quickly reinforces the film’s power of forgiveness and reconciliation: “if war produces one thing, it’s many cemeteries. And in cemeteries there are no enemies.” And her mother is proud of her because Le Ly could see the truth hidden between two worlds:

I’m so proud of you. You’ve grown up to see the side of things that’s hidden from most people. You have completed your circle of growth. Low tide to high tide, poor to rich, sad to happy, beggar to a fine lady. Your past is completed.

As if to underscore the mother’s comment that Le Ly completed her circle of growth in her father’s world, her father appears in her dream while she is sleeping on her father’s bed. And afterwards, she says, “he found no need to visit me in my dream.”
In the last scene of the film, Le Ly renews and extends her father's philosophy into her own world of realization between two worlds—'her final victory in her heart.' In the morning, Le Ly exchanges her clothes into the white traditional Vietnamese suit—Ao Dai—and watches herself in the mirror as if she wants to confirm her identity. And she walks through the rice paddies. With the background of the beautiful mountains and village temple, while taking her with lengthy take, she proclaims her realization in her final voice-over:

When we resist our suffer, we suffer. When we accept it we are happy. We have time in abundance—an eternity to repeat our mistakes. But we need only once correct our lives mistakes. And at last I hear the song of enlightenment with which we can break the chain of vengeance forever. In your heart you can hear it now. It's the song of your spirit. It has been singing since the moment of your birth. If the monks were right and nothing happens without cause, then the gift of suffering is to bring us closer to God. To teach us to be strong when we are weak. To be brave when we are afraid. To be wise in the midst of confusion. And to let go of that which we can no longer hold. Last victories are won in the heart, not on this land or that.

In a sense, "for Le Ly the War served a good purpose--she discovered that her in-between status was her true identity" (Doyle 95). However, given the fact that the film pays little attention to the Vietnamese victims 'who didn't wish to learn this lesson and whose lives paid for Le Ly's insights, the focus of the film is
still 'All the way with the USA’” (Doyle 95). That is, in *Heaven and Earth*, Oliver Stone mostly focuses on the redemption of the U.S. morality and tries to set aside the burden of the Vietnam War with the power of a Vietnamese-American’s forgiveness and reconciliation.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have concentrated on Oliver Stone's Vietnam Trilogy--*Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven and Earth*. As I have examined the films based on the political perspective of "From Self to Other," I have suggested that Stone, in fact, has shown his political awareness and progression from American Self to Vietnamese Other as he has made his Vietnam films.

However, it seems to me that Stone cannot transcend his limit as an American filmmaker. In *Platoon*, although Stone cherishes the lesson of good and evil and the meaning of the life that the protagonist Chris Taylor learns in Vietnam, the film totally ignores the agony and suffering of the Vietnamese. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, lamenting the inability of America people to learn the vivid lesson that Vietnam veterans learned in Vietnam and America, Stone depicts a disillusioned and awakened veteran as a new political authority of the nation. But the film is also entirely about America and its people, not about the Vietnamese. In *Heaven and Earth*, employing a female Vietnamese character, Stone tries to examine the political others' points of view on the war. But it is difficult to say that the female character in *Heaven and Earth* is in any sense
representative of the typical Vietnamese other; instead the film is almost entirely about the moral redemption of America through the forgiveness and reconciliation of a former-enemy-turned-an-American.

Although 59,000 American soldiers died in the war, millions of Vietnamese people were killed, injured, and made homeless. However, among Stone's Vietnam films, none sheds tears on the real victims of the Vietnam War--the Vietnamese. In a sense, Stone uses the Vietnamese primarily as backdrop for his films. Furthermore, I have felt that the real purpose of films like these is to cure the inner psychic trauma of the American people inflicted by the war, rather than to make an apology or to pay condolence to the Vietnamese--the real victims. Therefore, it can be said though Stone's Vietnam films give us the chance of understanding the Vietnam War and its people, his films are just complementary in the understanding of the war and thus still work-in-progress versions in American film. Any comprehensive understanding of the Vietnam War based upon balanced historical and political perspective can perhaps only be achieved by the Vietnamese themselves.
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