2008-07-09

A True War Story: Reality and Simulation in the American Literature and Film of the Vietnam War

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A TRUE WAR STORY: REALITY AND FICTION IN THE AMERICAN

LITERATURE AND FILM OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2008

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

A TRUE WAR STORY: REALITY AND FICTION IN THE AMERICAN

LITERATURE AND FILM OF THE VIETNAM WAR

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The Vietnam War has become an important symbol and signifier in contemporary American culture and politics. The word "Vietnam" contains many meanings and narratives, including both the real events of the American War in Vietnam and the fictional representations of that war. Because we live in a reality that is composed of both lived experience and simulacra, defined by Baudrillard as a hyperreality, fiction and simulation are capable of representing particular realities. Vietnam was shaped by simulacra of Vietnam itself as well as simulacra of previous American conflicts, especially World War II; however, the hyperreality of Vietnam differed largely from that of World War II. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* are highly fictionalized texts that accurately portray particular realities of Vietnam. These texts are capable of presenting truth about Vietnam through their use of

specific metafictional techniques, which continually remind readers and viewers that the story being told is not reality but a story. By emphasizing the fictional elements of their narratives, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* point to the constructed nature of reality and empower readers to recognize the possibility of truth in different, even conflicting, narratives.

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MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

Vietnam was a war, not a movie.

—Vietnam Veteran bumper sticker

[A] Marine with minor shrapnel wounds in his legs was waiting to get

on a helicopter . . . and a couple of sniper rounds snapped across the

airstrip, forcing us to move behind some sandbagging. "I *hate* this

movie," he said.

—*Dispatches*, Michael Herr

In November of 2000, President Bill Clinton became the first American president

to visit the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since the American war there. Although the

visit represented a step towards the normalization of relations between the United States

and Vietnam, Clinton's words demonstrated the distance the U.S. still had to cover. The

theme of that visit, "Vietnam is a country, not a war'" (qtd. in Herring 368), reveals that

the definition of the word "Vietnam" in the United States is complex and constantly

under adjustment. From Clinton's words, it is clear that Vietnam means something more

than a Southeast Asian country, but does it also refer to something more than the

American war there? What does the word Vietnam signify for Americans today? Is

Vietnam a mistake, a psychedelic nightmare, a movie? In the contemporary United

States, Vietnam contains all of these meanings as well as many more. Over the thirty plus

years since the end of the Vietnam War, Americans have filled, emptied, refilled, and

stretched Vietnam to accommodate a host of various meanings, values, and connotations.

Perhaps the most common meaning for "Vietnam" in the United States today is the war waged by the United States in Southeast Asia beginning in the 1950s and ending with the fall of Saigon in 1975. The theme of President Clinton's 2000 visit indicates the prominence of this meaning in common American usage. In her book *The Vietnam War / The American War*, Renny Christopher writes, "all previous U.S. wars have names that identify them as wars, rather than countries: the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and so on. … But 'Vietnam' in common usage refers unambiguously to the war rather than the country" (7). Although the use of solely a country's name to identify a war is a semantic approach somewhat unique to the American War in Vietnam (Christopher does acknowledge that the Korean War is sometimes referred to as "Korea"), the meaning of Vietnam can hardly be considered unambiguous. Urbandictionary.com, an online slang dictionary where users can add and rate definitions, lists 21 meanings for the word "Vietnam." The very fact that Americans feel the need to make claims about what Vietnam is or is not points to the word's ambiguity.

Although Americans often use "Vietnam" to indicate the war that took place in that country, there is little agreement as to what kind of a war that was. Historians have written hundreds of books on the American experience in Vietnam and, by so doing, have added new shades of meaning to Vietnam-the-war. A short list of titles of Vietnam War histories indicates the many different wars Vietnam has become: *The "Uncensored War"* (1986) by Daniel C. Hallin, *Working-Class War* (1993) by Christian G. Appy, *The War Within* (1994) by Tom Wells, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (1999) by Michael Lind, *Choosing War* (1999) by Frederik Logevall, and *America's Longest War* (2002) by George C. Herring. Even when "Vietnam" refers to the Vietnam War, Vietnam's

meaning often remains vague because it is unclear which war is being referred to—the military war, the media war, the internal war, or the class war.

Another common meaning associated with the signifier "Vietnam" is quagmire, failure, or mistake. Often Vietnam is used as a kind of symbol of American defeat or wrongdoing, especially in the context of current events. Nearly all American military engagements since the Vietnam War have been viewed through the lens of Vietnam. Six years after President Clinton's inaugural visit, President George W. Bush returned to Vietnam in the midst of criticism of the American war in Iraq, and despite the Bush administration's efforts to discourage comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, political pundits vigorously debated whether or not Iraq was "another Vietnam." Politicians of all parties put significant energy into proving or disproving Iraq to be a "Vietnam." Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice suggested that comparisons between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War "[were] not very helpful" and said that she "[didn't] think they happen[ed] to be right" (qtd. in Sanger A12). On the other end of the political spectrum, Democrats were eager to draw similarities between the war in Iraq and the war in Vietnam. In early 2007, when Bush announced his plan to "surge" troops in Iraq, prominent members of the Democratic party were careful to refer to Bush's plan as an "escalation," a word strongly tied to President Johnson's strategy in Vietnam. Senator Edward M. Kennedy said, "An escalation, whether it is called a surge or any other name, is still an escalation, . . . The Department of Defense kept assuring us that each new escalation in Vietnam would be the last. Instead, each one led only to the next" (qtd. in Rutenberg A10). Just as Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon worried about Vietnam becoming "another China," President George W. Bush worried about Iraq being labeled

another Vietnam. In this debate, asking if Iraq was another Vietnam was commensurate with asking if Iraq was another failure or another mistake.

Stories, films, music, video games, comic books, and novels about the Vietnam War have recast "Vietnam" as a surreal, terrifying, psychedelic experience. The fourteenth definition for Vietnam listed on Urbandictionary.com is "[a] traumatic event or bad situation from which you need to escape immediately" ("Vietnam"). The perception of Vietnam as a bad trip has largely grown out of the literature and film that has been produced about the war in the past thirty years. Films, video games, and other media are often described as being "very Vietnam" or having a Vietnam-like quality when they present a traumatic or desperate situation. World War II historian Martin Morgan described *Saving Private Ryan* as "very Vietnam-ish" because of the film's "pessimism," "hopelessness," and "futility" ("Interview"). Similarly, John Cusack said of *Grace is Gone*, a film that deals with the loss of American lives through the Iraq War, "It's very Vietnam-esque. We wanted to present a film that showed the caskets coming in" (Rush and Molloy). These statements indicate a connection between the word Vietnam and a sense of trauma and horror. "Vietnam" has come to mean terror and surreal tragedy in large part because so many texts have presented the Vietnam War in that manner.

Many artistic representations of the American War in Vietnam present it as a strange, frightening, and often confusing mix of reality and imagination. Tim O'Brien's novel *Going After Cacciato* (1978), winner of the 1979 National Book Award, tells the imagined story of a group of soldiers who walk right out of the war and into Europe while searching for a soldier gone AWOL. Larry Heinneman's *Paco's Story* (1986) is

narrated by a ghost. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is known for its surreal adaptation of Conrad's trip upriver, while Michael Cimino's *The Deerhunter*'s (1978) famous Russian roulette scene plays into the idea of Vietnam as horror and insanity. This strange world of terror and imagination has played an important role in the way both the word Vietnam and the Vietnam War have come to be understood.

For many in the United States today, the suggestion that Vietnam is a war, a mistake, or a surreal trauma is seen as offensive and dangerous. As Clinton stated in 2000, Vietnam is, of course, a country. In the years since the fall of Saigon, the number of Vietnamese Americans living in the United States has greatly increased, and with this growth, Vietnam has been stretched to contain new meaning. While Americans have traditionally viewed Vietnam in largely negative terms, new voices are attempting to re-present Vietnam in new ways. In the poem "Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water," Le Thi Diem Thuy attempts to add meaning to Vietnam by writing:

> our survival is dependent upon
>
> never forgetting that vietnam is not
>
> a word
>
> a world
>
> a love
>
> a family
>
> a fear
>
> to bury
>
>
> let people know

VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR (254)

Vietnamese Americans often present Vietnam as something complex, something more than just a country. As Le writes, Vietnam is not simply a "world" or a "family," but it is something upon which "survival is dependent." For some Vietnamese American writers, Vietnam is an essential part of their identity and is often described as being carried on their bodies like a scar. Monique Truong calls Vietnam "that S-curved stretch of land that I carry on my body like a tattoo" (687). As Vietnamese Americans add their voices to the constellation of definitions, meanings, and connotations associated with Vietnam, the meaning of Vietnam grows increasingly multifaceted.

Vietnam is a war, a quagmire, a trauma, a country, and part of an identity, and, despite the claim of a popular veterans' bumper sticker, Vietnam is also a movie, or at least, a fiction. What "Vietnam" has come to mean in the U.S. has, in large part, been shaped by films, along with television coverage, novels, oral histories, poetry, video games, comic books, and music. In Anthony Swofford's memoir, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (2003), the author describes his platoon's preparation to leave for war. Waiting to hear when they will be shipped out, the men decide to get some extra training. For three days the marines watch war films: "We concentrate on the Vietnam films because it's the most recent war, and the successes and failures of that war helped write our training manuals" (6). In this passage, Swofford connects Vietnam films, specifically *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), with military training. The marines study the films, rewinding certain passages, such as "Robert Duvall and his helicopter gunships" and "rape scenes," to prepare themselves for the realities of war (6). For the marines in Swofford's platoon, the

fictitious and often unrealistic Vietnam portrayed in these films has become the Vietnam that prepares them for real battle. Swofford writes, "as a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War, I want ammunition and alcohol and dope, I want to screw whores and kill" (7). Swofford and his fellow marines are preparing to recreate the Vietnam they have come to understand through film in Iraq and Kuwait. In this case, Vietnam is a fiction, albeit a dangerous one.

Even for those who were personally affected by the American War in Vietnam, "Vietnam" is, in many ways, a fiction. Because of the charged nature of the word "Vietnam" in the United States, Vietnamese Americans are often particularly invested in the meaning of Vietnam. However, even for—perhaps especially for—many Vietnamese Americans, the meaning of Vietnam is influence by American media, particularly films. Thai Dao, a second generation Vietnamese American, discusses how movies have influenced his understanding of Vietnam: "The first time I ever encountered the Vietnam War was in Hollywood movies—*Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Hamburger Hill*. It was kind of a sad way for me to get a perspective of my own heritage" (541). For Thai, part of what Vietnam means for him has been derived from Hollywood films. Similarly, some Vietnam veterans have indicated that Vietnam movies have influenced their understanding of the war. Vietnam veteran William Adams suggests that the meaning of Vietnam is often extremely complex for those who experienced it firsthand:

> When *Platoon* was first released, a number of people asked me, "Was the war really like that?" I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how graphic and realistic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what "really" happened

is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about

what happened that the pure experience is no longer there . . . . The

Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and

mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our

conflicting and changing view of ourselves. (qtd. in Sturken 86)

Because Vietnam has been so often discussed and represented, it has become more than

just a war, even for those who fought in it. Vietnam is not only an important part of

American history, but an important part of American mythology as well. The complex

hybrid of meaning that Americans call "Vietnam" contains both real events and fictional

narratives, and because Vietnam is partly made up of imaginative representations,

Vietnam is, in some ways, a fiction. As Adams explains it, "Vietnam" cannot be defined

as simply a war or a movie; it is both and more.

It is in this particular form of Vietnam—Vietnam as fiction—that I am most

interested. In the United States, Vietnam is, as Adams describes it, "a collective and

mobile script," a script that has been written as much by history and politics as it has by

Hollywood and rock stars. The relationship between Americans' understandings of

"Vietnam" and fictional representations of Vietnam should not be easily discarded with

the claim that Americans have simply confused fictional representations for reality. When

it comes to Vietnam, the relationship between fiction and reality is complex. Repeatedly

it is the texts and representations of Vietnam that are the most overtly fictionalized and

unrealistic that are perceived as the most real or the truest. *Apocalypse Now* is a

particularly good example of this phenomenon. From the film's conception, director

Francis Ford Coppola described *Apocalypse Now* as an intentionally surreal portrayal of

the Vietnam War. However, despite *Apocalypse*'s self-conscious use of surrealism along with other unrealistic techniques, the film has been repeatedly credited as a realistic and authentic Vietnam film. For example, in his *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1993), John Storey writes, "Think of the way in which *Apocalypse Now* has become the mark against which to judge the realism of representations of America's war in Vietnam. Does it have the 'look' of *Apocalypse Now* is virtually the same as asking is it realistic" (162-63). For Storey, *Apocalypse Now* has become a standard of realism despite its obviously unrealistic elements. While Storey uses this claim in support of larger theoretical claims about reality and simulation, he is not alone in considering *Apocalypse* to be a realistic representation of Vietnam. In a survey published in July of 1980, 61% of respondents answered that *Apocalypse Now* presented "a fairly realistic picture of what the war in Vietnam was like" ("Would you say"). This seeming contradiction—that a text designed to represent a historical event can be at once unrealistic and realistic—is the focus of this study.

To pursue this symbiosis of reality and unreality within the American "Vietnam," I have chosen to focus my study on two texts: Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1991). Both of these texts are popular representations of the war that are commonly judged to be realistic and authentic portrayals of Vietnam despite the fact that they self-consciously employ surrealistic, unrealistic, and metafictional storytelling techniques. Although *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are illustrative of the play between fiction and reality in the meaning of Vietnam, they are not representative of all of the many meanings associated with Vietnam. Both texts offer a version of the war generally limited to the white, male,

American soldier's experience. Traditionally, the American literature and film of the Vietnam War as well as the criticism of that body of artistic works has been disproportionately preoccupied with white, male, military perspectives. More and more artists and scholars are shifting their focuses to include Vietnams created by women, blacks, Latinos, Vietnamese, and others that have been generally excluded from the traditional American narratives.[1] While there is still much to be done in the way of expanding the canon and criticism of the literature of the Vietnam War, that is not the focus of the present study. Although *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* present a very specific and somewhat myopic "brand" of Vietnam, it is the Vietnam that is most familiar and most available to Americans. In Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Mai, a one-point-five generation Vietnamese American realizes that although she knows a Vietnam very different from the one she encounters in the United States, specifically through the film *The Deer Hunter*, "[t]he Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer [hers] to explain" (128).

With any representation of an experience as emotionally, psychologically, and historically significant as Vietnam, comes a responsibility to represent that experience

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[1] Anthologies of texts that present underrepresented perspectives include *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (1987) edited by Kathryn Marshall; *Women in Vietnam* (2000) edited by Ron Steinman; *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1992) edited by Terry Wallace; *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (1999) edited by George Mariscal; *Vietnam Veteranos: Chicanos Recall the War* (2004) edited by Lea Ybarra; *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (1998) edited by Barbara Tran, Monique T.D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi; and *From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (1998) edited by Phillip Mahony. Works of criticism that focus on texts written by traditionally marginalized groups include *American Women Writers on Vietnam: Unheard Voices* (1990) by Deborah A. Butler, *The Viet Nam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (1995) by Renny Christopher, and *Narratives of the Vietnam War by Korean and American Writers* (2007) by Jinim Park.

ethically and accurately. However, there is not one true Vietnam, and, therefore, many

representations of Vietnam can be accurate in some ways even if they are inaccurate

according to another standard of measurement. Flawed as it may be, the Vietnam that has

been expressed repeatedly through texts that focus on a white, American, male

perspectives and particularly through texts that present a surreal, psychedelic Vietnam,

has become a powerful part of the meaning of Vietnam in the contemporary U.S. I have

chosen to focus on *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* specifically *because*

they fit into this narrow and disproportionately analyzed brand of Vietnam. *Apocalypse*

Now and *The Things They Carried* are popular texts that are part of mainstream American

culture, and, thus, they effectively represent the way that Vietnam has been imagined in

collective cultural scripts. Because they are mainstream, popular texts that self-

consciously use blatantly fictional techniques to present their narratives of Vietnam, they

provide a particularly advantageous field in which to examine how fiction and reality

merge to create meaning for Vietnam.

Those Vietnam books and films that are generally considered to be realistic or at

least authentic often consciously employ unrealistic techniques, such as surrealism,

metafictional elements, overt fictionalization through intertextuality, and challenges to

designations of reality or truth. However, it seems that these texts are often considered to

be "realistic" or "true" not *despite* their unrealistic techniques but *because* of them. In

The Things They Carried, O'Brien makes this claim by describing two kinds of truth:

"story-truth" and "happening-truth." Happening-truth is a truth based in fact or

occurrence, while story-truth is a kind of emotional, psychological, or experiential truth.

In "Good Form," O'Brien claims that "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening

truth" (179). A story that is true in the story-truth sense might be completely fictional—

"[a]bsolute occurrence is irrelevant" (83)—but O'Brien reiterates the importance of

story-truth over happening-truth throughout *The Things They Carried*. Thus, for O'Brien

fiction is privileged over reality, and in fact, fiction is the means of conveying truth about

Vietnam. When a story is not working, O'Brien suggests "making up a few things to get

at the real truth" (85). How is it that fictional techniques can make a representation more

realistic or closer to some truth?

Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations" (1981) provides insight into how

fictions can allow access to certain realities. Baudrillard's theories on simulation and

reality suggest that the reality texts such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They*

Carried attempt to represent is no simple reality. Baudrillard theorizes that in a time of

endless simulation, the real is replaced by the hyperreal, a state in which "the real is no

longer real" (175), and because in the hyperreal reality is inherently unreal, texts that use

unreality, fictionalization, and simulation to represent reality might be the most

successful. Baudrillard contends that the real no longer exists because all reality is

composed of and mediated through simulation. This state is what Baudrillard calls the

hyperreal. The hyperreal has developed through the proliferation and duplication of

simulacra. A simulacrum begins as a simulation of the real, an attempt to "[represent] a

basic reality," but as simulation continues, eventually simulacra "[bear] no relation to any

reality whatever: [they are their] own pure [simulacra]" (173). This final type of

simulacra is Baudrillard's fourth order simulacrum, which corresponds with the

narratives created by American artists of the Vietnam War who simulate other simulacra

and representations in their texts. *Apocalypse Now* is a story that takes its basic structure

and plotline from works of fiction rather than real-life war experiences. Likewise, many texts about the Vietnam War are based on or respond to other texts about the war. For example, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," one of the stories included in *The Things They Carried*, responds to and revises *Apocalypse Now*. These texts approach Baudrillard's fourth-order of simulacra as they are based on other texts and, thus, imitate simulacra rather than reality.

As simulacra simulate simulacra, it becomes more difficult to trace down any original reality. In the hyperreal, reality and simulacra intertwine and overlap, making them difficult to distinguish. For example, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., one of the names most often rubbed and photographed is Arthur John Rambo, the name of a real soldier who shares his name with the fictional John James Rambo (Sturken 86). The character Rambo from the Rambo films has become a part of the cultural memory of the war even at a space dedicated to the memory of real soldiers lost in battle. Stallone's Rambo, although a fiction, is still part of the reality experienced at the Vietnam Memorial. As reality is mediated through and shaped by simulacra, a new reality is formed—a hyperreal—in which there is no distinguishable difference between the two.

Because in the hyperreal the distinction between reality and simulation is lost, Baudrillard argues that "the real is no longer real" (175). However, this does not mean there is no reality. Rather, the real is made of simulation; reality becomes an experience with simulacra. The hyperreal is the real. Baudrillard writes that abstraction and simulation are "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (169). Here, the hyperreal is still *a* real. It is still experienced as the real despite its

unreality. Even if lived experience is essentially an experience with simulacra, that experience will still *seem* real to the person who experiences it. In fact, according to a study conducted by Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsch, simulacra have become such a part of reality that simulacra actually often replace reality in memory. Neisser and Harsch compared two written descriptions of how Emory students learned of the Challenger explosion: one written 24 hours after the explosion and another written two and a half years later. The data revealed a trend the authors described as "TV priority." While originally only nine of forty-two students recorded that they had learned of the accident through television, after two and a half years, the number of students who remembered learning of the incident while watching television had increased to 45% (25). The television coverage of the explosion was such a central part of the students' experience that the repeated images of the space shuttle exploding replaced the way many students really first learned of the disaster. For these students, their memory of the event remained their reality even though it had been changed and modified through exposure to simulacra.

The reality of Vietnam has clearly entered the realm of the hyperreal. Simulacra and reality have mixed to create a hyperreal in which real events, stories, and films have mixed to create a complex hybrid of reality and fiction. As the words of Swofford, Adams, Thai, Storey, and others indicate, when it comes to Vietnam, what is real and what is fiction cannot be easily distinguished. Even those texts that present themselves as nonfictional representations of Vietnam often cannot avoid merging with simulacra. One example is the *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* (2005). The film uses archival footage and letters written by soldiers in Vietnam to tell the story of the war. It

begins with a few lines of text that declare its factual truth: "This film is about young men in war. It is their own story, in their own words. . . . Every scene, every shot in the film is real—nothing has been re-enacted." Immediately following this claim of reality and historical exactness comes a list of the actors who read the letters for the film. Among the actors listed are Willem Dafoe (*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*), Robert DeNiro (*The Deer Hunter*), Kevin Dillon (*Platoon*), Michael J. Fox (*Casualties of War*), John Savage (*The Deer Hunter*), Martin Sheen (*Apocalypse Now*), and Robin Williams (*Good Morning, Vietnam*). Even a carefully nonfictional Vietnam incorporates elements of fiction and simulacra into its representation. Because Vietnam has become a hyperreal—a reality made up of fictions and simulations—fiction and unrealistic techniques are particularly effective means of tapping into some reality of Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* present a Vietnam that has been deemed to be realistic and "true" *because* they employ metafictional techniques, use surreal juxtaposition, re-present other fictional stories, and challenge perceptions of reality.

To support this seemingly contradictory claim it is necessary to first trace the development of Vietnam-as-hyperreal and define various metafictional techniques. The formation of the hyperreality of Vietnam commenced from the very beginning of the war. Vietnam was shaped by simulacra of Vietnam itself as well as simulacra of previous American conflicts, especially World War II; however, the hyperreality of Vietnam differed largely from that of World War II. Because Vietnam is a hyperreality, and specifically a hyperreality that broke from a significant, previous hyperreality, certain fictional storytelling methods are capable of presenting particular truths about Vietnam. Metafictional techniques continually remind readers and viewers that the story being told

is not reality but a story, and this emphasis on fiction points to the constructed nature of reality. Coppola and O'Brien use metafictional techniques, specifically surrealism, re-narration, intertextuality, and emphasis of the medium of representation, to present specific realities of Vietnam. In *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola uses these metafictional tools to represent surreal, simulated, and constructed aspects of the reality of Vietnam. Similarly, O'Brien uses metafiction to convey a reality of Vietnam that is largely composed of war stories. Both Coppola and O'Brien are able to present truths about Vietnam through of their use of highly fictionalized storytelling methods.

A MEDIA WAR: THE HYPERREALITIES OF WORLD WAR II AND VIETNAM

> Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to
> win all the time. I wouldn't give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and
> laughed. That's why Americans have never lost, and will never lose a war:
> because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.
>
> —General Patton in *Patton*

Although Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations" was published in 1981, symptoms of the hyperreal, or a reality composed of simulacra, were apparent long before the eighties. Representations of reality and history have always influenced reality and become a part of that reality, although perhaps not to the extent that they do in the age of mass media and mass communications that Baudrillard discusses. Reality is and always has been shaped largely by representations, simulations, and fictions, things that generally are not considered to be real. Evidence of this merging of reality and simulacra is evident in the years following World War II and leading up to the Vietnam War. The reality of the post-war United States was shaped by and mixed with the simulacra produced by the growing information and entertainment industries. The newsreels, stories, photographs, films, television shows, and history books that told the story of World War II merged to create a hyperreality of World War II that would be carried into the battles of Vietnam. The hyperreality of Vietnam was shaped in many ways by the hyperreality of World War II, and the contrast between the two hyperrealities gave Vietnam an air of unreality.

The way that we view Vietnam today has been shaped in many ways by the way we understand and perceive previous American wars. Vietnam is regularly viewed as

different from previous American wars and as breaking from American history in general. In histories of the Vietnam War, both popular and academic, Vietnam has often been cast as a catalyst for change. Of course, such a role is not necessarily the true role that Vietnam played on the American stage of the 1960s and 1970s. The events of any historical period or episode can be fit into many different narratives or storylines. As historian Hayden White argues, all histories are basically fictions. Although the events on which histories are based truly occurred, historiography, or the placement of those events into a narrative, is a necessarily fictional endeavor. Any written history of an event necessarily undergoes a process of what White calls "emplotment," the selection of particular details and the placement of those details into a narrative structure. It is through *writing* the history—through emplotting it—that history takes on a fictional quality. As White explains, "The events may be given, but their functions as elements of a story are imposed upon them—by discursive techniques more tropological than logical in nature" ("Literary Theory" 9). While the Vietnam War certainly has been emplotted into many different narratives and roles, many of these differing narratives agree on the point that Vietnam was a source of change in the United States. Why has Vietnam been cast as provoking change and revolution and what does that mean for the way Vietnam has been and continues to be experienced and remembered by Americans?

Terry H. Anderson's book *The Sixties* (2007) casts Vietnam as the central figure of a narrative of change and revolution. *The Sixties* emplots the events of that decade into a plot structure of rising action, climax, and denouement. The first chapters trace the development of what Anderson calls "sixties culture" starting with the "happy days" of the 1950s described in chapter one, "Cold War America: Seedbed of the 1960s."

Anderson chooses events from the time period to create a narrative of growing activism until chapter seven, "The Climax and Demise of the Sixties." The book's remaining chapters narrate the fall of sixties culture and finally its legacies. If *The Sixties* has a protagonist, it would have to be Vietnam. Anderson views Vietnam as the event that sparked change and marked the end of the decade's upheaval. Anderson uses the December 1969 issue of *Life* magazine, "a special issue on the sixties" as a guideline for his study (v). *Life* dubbed the sixties "'The Decade of Tumult and Change" and divided the decade into "two stages: the 'brisk feeling of hope, a generally optimistic and energetic shift from the calm of the late 1950s,' followed by 'a growing swell of demands for extreme and immediate change' when the decade 'exploded—over race, youth, violence, lifestyles, and, above all, the Vietnam War'" (v). Following *Life*'s lead, Anderson casts the Vietnam War as the central issue that prompted protests and rebellion. This focus is certainly motivated by Anderson's own experience as a Vietnam veteran; he cites his war experience as a motivating factor in becoming a historian. Anderson's focus on Vietnam is especially prominent when he argues that the sixties actually ended in the seventies—1973, the year of the "American withdrawal from Vietnam" (vi). He writes, "The end of the sixties was logical. The cause for most of the protest—the war—was over" (200).

In order to present the 1960s as a "Decade of Tumult and Change," Anderson and *Life* cast the 1950s as a period of "hope" and "calm," a kind of peaceful foil to the rebellious sixties. The 1950s have often been portrayed as a time of serene contentment for the United States, and although some Americans may have experienced the decade as such, the seeds of discontent and revolution that would shoot up in the sixties were

already germinating in the fifties. The 1950s were marked by the beginning of the Cold War, a growing fear of nuclear war, McCarthyism, and discrimination. The years leading up to the years of "tumult" and "change" that Anderson and *Life* describe were certainly more complex than they are often credited for. However, although the fifties were a time of developing concern and change, it was during the sixties that mainstream American culture became aware that things were drastically changing, and Vietnam influenced that change. Why were the 1950s viewed as a time of peace and calm despite growing discontent? Why did the events of the 1960s, particularly the Vietnam War, challenge the mythos of an idyllic America? The way that these decades were and have been perceived has been greatly influenced by the hyperrealities of the two wars that largely defined them. The 1950s grew out of the American victory in World War II, and the 1960s were shaped by the country's longest war yet, Vietnam. The hyperreality of World War II was presented as the culmination of a righteous American military history and was shaped both by stories of previous American wars and by new films, books, songs, and games about World War II itself. In turn, the hyperreality of World War II influenced the way that the Vietnam War was viewed, although the combination of World War II simulacra and Vietnam simulacra would result in a much different hyperreality. The hyperreality of Vietnam challenged widely held beliefs about the United States as a nation and, particularly, about America at war. In order to better understand the hyperreality of Vietnam, it is necessary to first examine the hyperreality of World War II, the reality that Vietnam grew out of and challenged.

World War II is often presented in public memory and popular culture as a "good war." From the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans have emplotted the events of World

War II into a particular kind of American war story that has been used to narrate the majority of American military history. Tom Engelhardt examines this particular war story in his book *The End of Victory Culture* (1995). Engelhardt suggests that the American war story is grounded in the conflicts between European settlers and Native Americans and the narratives of those encounters, such as Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. He writes, "From its origins, this war story was essentially defensive in nature . . . . [I]t was the Indians who, by the ambush, the atrocity, and the capture of the white woman . . . became the aggressors and so sealed their own fate (5). The defensive nature of this narrative is essential because it provides righteous justification for any amount of bloody retribution. Through this narrative structure, the white settlers and later Americans could view themselves to be both innocent victims and powerful victors. Of course, the encounters between European settlers and Native Americans could certainly be emplotted into a different story. Since the cultural, social, and intellectual revolutions of the 1960s, more and more texts have worked to challenge the traditional versions of early American conflicts. The December 2006 issue of *American Quarterly* reversed that narrative by showcasing a t-shirt on the cover that featured a famous picture of Geronimo and his warriors and read "Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492." In this version of the conflict, roles were reversed and the white settlers were cast as the aggressive outsiders. Although many are now revising and re-emplotting the story of the American settlement, for hundreds of years, American novels, textbooks, and films have told the story with the white settlers cast as the victims of attacks and, thus, justified in their acts of war. The essentials of this defensive narrative have been used many times throughout United States history to recount American wars.

The defensive American war story was successfully and memorably applied to the events of World War II, and because of the way World War II was emplotted many view it as the quintessential American war. From the very beginning of the United States' involvement in World War II, those who narrated the war placed emphasis on the attacks that lead the U.S. into war. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's December 8, 1941 speech set the tone for future narrations by famously characterizing the attack on Pearl Harbor as "deliberate," "premeditated," "unprovoked," and "dastardly" (Franklin). President Roosevelt presented the conflict in terms that immediately portrayed the Americans as innocent victims of Japan's deception and allowed for any future American reprisal to be seen as righteous and ethical. Roosevelt's words framed the war as a "good war." He said, "[A]lways will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory" (Franklin). The United States' involvement in World War II was framed as righteous and necessary from the start and continued to be presented that way throughout the war. When the war was over, the histories, stories, and films of World War II continued to tell a story of righteous and powerful retribution. Of course, the conception of World War II as the epitome of American wars is only one way the events of that war could be emplotted. However, because World War II war stories continually emphasized certain aspects of the war and regularly ignored others, the narrative of the virtuous American hero was ubiquitous. While there are certainly skeletons in the closet of World War II—Japanese internment camps, the American rejection of Jewish refugees, and racial segregation and discrimination in the armed forces, for example—so many texts told and retold the story

of World War II as the exemplary American war that it was difficult to perceive the war in any other way. As literary critic Lorrie Smith writes, "If enough individual stories repeat the same motifs, they may come to form larger patterns which the culture comes to perceive as 'natural' or 'archetypal' or 'universal'" (90). The version of World War II that presented the United States as righteous and powerful was ubiquitous in the years following the war and, thus, had a powerful effect on Americans during the wars that would follow the Second World War regardless of its accuracy. The films, games, stories, songs, and histories that perpetuated that particular account of World War II had irrevocably entered the hyperreal.

One of the most powerful simulacra of World War II was the popular Hollywood films that portrayed the war during the fifties and sixties. While Americans in the 1950s certainly learned the righteous, defensive narrative of World War II from history books, songs, and war games, they also learned it at the movies. Michael J. Arlen's *Living-Room War* (1969), a collection of articles about television that were published in *The New Yorker* during the sixties, reveals the influence of these World War II films. Although the majority of Arlen's writing focuses on television, the article "Perspectives" examines the role of films in war representation when Arlen's narrator explains what happened in World War II to his father. Arlen writes:

> Old Dad, I reckon it was beautiful Greg Peck who won the Big Two for
> us—beautiful Greg Peck . . . and Errol Flynn, whose impulsive, sexy
> counteroffensive swept all before it . . . and, in fact, all those wonderful,
> well-groomed, good-looking southern-California boys and girls who

enlisted as one man to do battle against that creepy, creepy bunch of guys

like Sessue Hayakawa and Otto Preminger. (35)

Arlen's ironic description of World War II confuses the on-screen war with the real

battles that were waged in Europe and the Pacific. In the hyperreality of World War II,

movie stars were war heroes and the Americans won because they were "beautiful,"

"sexy," and "well-groomed," while the enemy lost because of "creepiness." The

American warriors were "southern-California boys and girls"—certainly white, middle-

class warriors—who were happily united and "enlisted as one man." This version of

World War II greatly influenced the way that Americans viewed World War II and

American military history in general. There was no ambiguity as to who was right and

who was wrong; the handsome Americans were clearly the good guys.

The hyperreality of World War II taught many Americans that the United States

was righteous and powerful, but the lessons of history books and the silver screen were

not just history lessons. The portrayal of World War II told Americans as much about

their present and future as it did about the past. If Americans were so good and successful

in World War II, then certainly they would continue to be the heroes of the world in later

wars and military engagements. Hollywood's version of World War II greatly influenced

the way Americans viewed later wars. In fact, Julian Smith, author of *Looking Away:*

Hollywood and Vietnam, suggests that the Vietnam War was "America's first film-

generated war . . . the first (and hopefully last) war to grow out of attitudes supported,

perhaps even created, by a generation of [World War II] movies depicting America's

military omnipotence" (4). The way that World War II and the entirety of American

military history was presented through stories, films, and books influenced the way that

many Americans felt about the war in Vietnam. Vietnam veteran Todd Dasher grew up

with these representations of American righteousness and felt that going to war must be

the right thing to do without considering "the rightness or wrongness of U.S. foreign

policy" (qtd. in Appy 58). He notes, "It never occurred to me that America would go to

war without a good reason" (qtd. in Appy 58). The World War II films that both the

Vietnam generation and their parents watched in the 1950s and 1960s created a

hyperreality in which American wars were heroic and successful and, thus, really did not

need to be questioned.

However, what Americans found in Vietnam and in the simulacra that came out

of Vietnam did not correspond with the hyperreality of World War II. Rather than

providing confirmation of the America-at-war portrayed on movie screens, the

hyperreality of Vietnam presented Americans both at war and at home with a confusing

break from a previous hyperreality—that of World War II. Films largely shaped the

hyperreality of World War II, and the influence of Hollywood on the American soldiers

who fought in Vietnam is demonstrated through the proliferation of literature that

compares World War II films with combat experience. References to John Wayne and

other aspects of popular war films are common in the literature of Vietnam. However,

many Vietnam veterans note discrepancies between the wars they saw depicted on screen

and their own experiences. Richard Deegan said, "I watched John Wayne movies—*The*

Sands of Iwo Jima and *Flying Leatherneck. . . . .* But when I got over there, let's face

facts—war ain't like you see in John Wayne. You'll be there and *you're* dead and *I'm*

still talking to you" (qtd. in Appy 75). World War II films portrayed war as glamorous

and exciting, and that portrayal affected the way many soldiers fought in Vietnam. The

simulacra of World War II influenced the way soldiers fought in Vietnam. Soldiers who attempted to act out the heroics they saw on-screen were said to "[do] John Waynes" or to have "John Wayned it" (Herzog 19). Frank Matthews is one soldier who unsuccessfully attempted to perform one of Wayne's exploits. Matthews said, "I wrote a letter to John Wayne telling him there was no damn way that stunt could work cause I broke my wrist trying it. I never did get an answer, but I sure wrote him" (qtd. in Appy 281). In this case, a simulacrum directly affected Matthews' reality, and the collision of the two resulted in a fracture both in Matthews' arm and his perception of reality. The Vietnam War presented a sharp break from the reality Americans had experienced at home and in the movie theaters. In the reality and simulacra of Vietnam, heroics and bravery did not necessarily save anyone, and the good guys—even the main characters—sometimes died.

Vietnam's break from the hyperreality of the World War II war story was clearly demonstrated through *The Green Berets*, an attempt to fit the events of Vietnam into the patriotic, John Wayne brand of the American war story. During World War II, Americans rallied around the war effort on the home front by planting freedom gardens, going to work in the military-industrial complex, and buying war bonds. With the Vietnam War, the "home front" took on a new meaning as politicians began worrying about losing the war at home. As anti-war sentiment flourished with continuing escalation in Vietnam, John Wayne led the development of *The Green Berets* in hopes of stimulating the kind of support Americans demonstrated during World War II. John Wayne had come to symbolize patriotism and courage by the 1960s, and he felt that he could and should do something to raise morale and public support for the war. He wrote a letter to President

Johnson requesting government support in the production of the film. In the letter Wayne

emphasized the potential of the film to improve public perception of the war; he wrote

that it was

> extremely important that not only the people of the United States but those
>
> all over the world should know why it is necessary for us to be there. . . .
>
> The most effective way to do this is through the motion picture medium. .
>
> . . We want to do it in a manner that will inspire a patriotic attitude on the
>
> part of fellow Americans—a feeling which we have always had in this
>
> country in the past during times of stress and trouble. (qtd. in Suid 248)

Wayne's letter reveals some of the ideology perpetuated by the World War II war story.

He connects the Vietnam War to past American wars and sees Vietnam as a "necessary"

war, like all previous American wars as imagined through the defensive American war

story. In a letter to Bill Moyers, the president's press secretary, Wayne reveals a

particular ideological motivation when he describes elements he would like to include in

the film. He suggests including scenes that glorify the American soldier and the

American people, such as a scene depicting "the little village that has erected its own

statue of liberty to the American people" (qtd. in Suid 248). Wayne's letter also suggests

that he equates patriotism with support for the American military and American wars, an

idea that fits well with the American war story, but one that would be seriously

challenged with the anti-war protests of the 1960s and 1970s.

While John Wayne's previous war films, such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *The

Longest Day*, had been popular, the formula did not quite work when moved to Vietnam.

By the time *The Green Berets* came out in 1968, the war had grown unpopular, and it is

easy to see how the traditional heroic war story might fall short in a war that much of the public felt Americans should not be fighting. A *New York Times* review of the film called it "rotten and false in every detail" (qtd in Devine 44). With this kind of reaction, it is not really surprising that *The Green Berets* was the only combat film made during the war. In fact, when Francis Coppola began work on the next planned film about Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now*, he and his associates actually considered *The Green Berets* to be a World War II film (Eder C6). The World War II war story did not correspond with the soldiers experience in Vietnam. In his book *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, Jeremy M. Devine suggests that soldiers in Vietnam "began to enjoy the movie as unintentional high camp" because they could not relate to the grand heroics and easily distinguished good and evil of John Wayne's brand of war (45).

During the Vietnam War, the conventions of the World War II war story were threatened and reversed. The good guys did things only bad guys would do. The lines between good and evil were blurred. As the conflict wore on, American troops grew uncertain about what they were fighting for. The defensive aspect of the American war story that had been so important in previous war narratives for establishing the righteousness of the American cause was missing. In World War II, from the very beginning, there was no question as to whether or not the United States would go to war after Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt spoke of America's righteous victory the following day. With Vietnam, a conflict that the United States had been involved in since the forties, American involvement slowly entered the American consciousness without any event that clearly demonstrated the need for the United States to go to war until the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1965. The need to explain *why* the war was being fought is

demonstrated by a 1965 film released by the Defense Department entitled *Why Vietnam?*
It seems such a film was necessary as most Americans were unclear on why the United
States was fighting in Vietnam other than because it vaguely related to communism.
Anti-war slogans, such as "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger," that circulated during
the war years showed that Americans did not see a moral or ethical reason for being in
Vietnam and that perhaps the war that needed to be fought was at home.

In addition to not seeing a reason for being in Vietnam, the soldiers' experiences
in Vietnam often differed drastically from histories, films, and stories about World War
II. Their allies, the South Vietnamese, were often hostile, and many Americans back
home viewed the soldiers as villains rather than heroes. Through images broadcast on
television, Americans at home watched their war heroes burning down villages and other
acts that did not seem to fit into the code of bravery and fairness of the American war
story. The soldiers could not distinguish the Viet Cong—the enemy they were to search
out and destroy—from the villagers they were to protect. In the end, American troops
were forced to withdraw without establishing a democratic government or containing
communism in Vietnam. In other words, the American hero was no longer triumphant.
The story of the victorious and righteous warrior defending liberty and justice did not
apply to the American experience in Vietnam.

The American war in Vietnam was not necessarily a unique war, but it was
viewed and presented differently than other wars. In fact, through the lens of the Vietnam
War, previous wars were seen differently. Some of the most challenging, nontraditional
narratives about World War II were written and published during the Vietnam War. As
the Vietnam War challenged the ideals of the American war story, even the war that had

been seen as the "good war" was rewritten as a meaningless horror story in books like

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The shift from the glory of World War II

to the fear and confusion of the Vietnam War happened quickly, and it was disconcerting.

As Engelhardt writes, "It was a bare two decades from the beaches of Normandy to the

beachfronts of Danang, from Overlord to Operation Hades, from GIs as liberators to

grunts as perpetrators, from home front mobilization to antiwar demonstrations organized

by the 'Mobe.' The shortness of the span seemed surrealistic" (10). Because many

Americans had grown up learning of American military righteousness, the reversal in

Vietnam to an American military that burned down villages for unclear reasons and could

not win the war was unreal.

The conflict between the traditional American war story as epitomized by World

War II and the Vietnam War story was clearly demonstrated through the performance of

both of these stories in living rooms around the United States. The Vietnam War has

often been called the "first television war" or "living room war" because it was the first

war that Americans learned of primarily through the television. Americans became aware

of the Vietnam War just as television news was coming of age: in 1963, the CBS and

NBC evening news broadcasts expanded from 15 minutes to 30 (Hallin 105). Although

the Vietnam War was described as the "first television war," the news coverage of the

war could not and did not provide direct access to the "real" Vietnam—it was a fiction

like any other show on television. The American war in Vietnam was not experienced

"live" as later wars would be; footage of the war in Vietnam was delivered to the

American public at least 24 hours after it was filmed (Struken 125). Additionally,

although the war was consistently covered on the news, it was usually presented in one to

four minute segments that gave brief glimpses of the war often disconnected from the

larger context of the war. The television reporters in Vietnam had little control over what

was shown back home and were limited in what they were able to film. As opposed to

print media reporters who produced stories through " 'fact-finding' and interviewing,"

television reporters were to "obtain and produce film vignettes usable in one-to-two

minute snippets; [their] own hasty commentary served only as support and explanation"

(Braestrup 39). In television, the image was paramount, and often the image was

presented without significant context. This kind of reporting of the war led to a limited

understanding of "what was happening" in Vietnam. However, although these brief

glimpses into Vietnam were themselves simulacra, the war that they presented deviated

drastically from the wars of World War II fiction that was aired concurrently. The

television set became a site of conflict that exhibited the surreal juxtaposition of the

"real" war and the World War II war story.

The hyperreality of World War II was perpetuated during the Vietnam War

through popular television shows, such as *Combat!*, *Rat Patrol*, *McHale's Navy*, and

Hogan's Heroes. These shows continued the myths of the brave American men who

fought the good fight, and in order to keep a consistent cast, the only people who ever

seemed to get killed were the replacements and the newbies. In contrast to these World

War II fictions, Americans watching television during the sixties also saw representations

of Vietnam, mainly through news coverage. Through the televised Vietnam narratives,

Americans often saw the war through snippets of fighting outside of any righteous

narrative. These two representations types of representation were simultaneously broadcast, presenting very different versions of warfare.

Michael Arlen's book of articles about television during the sixties presents an example of the conflict between these differing war narratives. Arlen writes that the World War II shows taught that the United States won the Second World War because "in virtually every key position in the German and Japanese Armies was a *comical* German or Japanese soldier" (37); however, he learns something very different from news coverage of Vietnam. What Arlen saw on the TV news was "real men get shot at, real men (our surrogates, in fact) get killed and wounded" (82). This footage of soldiers fighting in a distant land for unclear reasons was mixed with shows like *Hogan's Heroes*, which Arlen describes as "a funny show about prison camps" (38). Arlen suggests the unreal combination of war and television in an article titled "An Illustrated History of the War." In the article, Arlen carefully blurs the reality of the war "out there" with the reality of the box. The characters, shows, and personalities of the television become part of the same reality of the war. Arlen's wife, Miranda, and his friend Grigsby argue as to whether the enemy snuck in during the NBC Golf Classic or *Flipper* (169). Miranda feels betrayed that none of the familiar faces of television did anything about the war; she says:

> All those dark valleys. Those dark pajamas. All those unfriendlies. Did
> *none* of you notice anything at all . . . *unusual* . . . in the hills and valleys .
> . . during the *Late Show*? Did Captain Kangaroo not spot the bicycles?
> Where was Joe Pyne? Did Roger Mudd not hear words spoken secretly
> behind bushes? (170)

When the tragedy of war and images of "real" death were combined with the funny wars of sitcoms and the news anchors who said in a "Texas-fatherly sort of way, it is all going to work out in the end" (22), it created a feeling of unreality. The "real" world did not seem to fit with the reality of the television.

Little Vietnam fiction was written, filmed, or televised by Americans during the Vietnam War. With the exception of *The Green Berets*, films during the war only featured Vietnam indirectly. Some films and shows could be viewed as being about Vietnam even though they were set in other wars, such as the *MASH* film and *M*A*S*H* television series. Similarly, the bulk of the fiction about Vietnam was published post-1975. During the years of the war, the most common way that Americans heard and viewed the stories of Vietnam was through the news; however, once the war ended, Americans began telling themselves Vietnam stories over and over again. The events, scenes, phrases, and icons of Vietnam were emplotted into narratives that were often very different from the narratives of World War II. These films and books often portrayed the war in Vietnam as surreal and strange, and for those who experienced Vietnam as a break from the hyperreality of World War II, it was, in many ways, surreal and strange. Representations of Vietnam repeatedly used blatantly fictional and unrealistic techniques to portray the war. These techniques, including surrealism, metafiction, and intertextuality, will be discussed in the following section.

THIS IS NOT VIETNAM: TOOLS OF METAFICTION

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more

—Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*

Rene Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (*La Trahison des Images* 1928-1929) famously depicts a realistically rendered pipe paired with the sentence: "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" (This is not a pipe). Magritte's play with images and words throughout his work and particularly in this famous painting could be described as meta-painting. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the definition for "meta-" when it is "[p]refixed to the name of a subject or discipline" as a discipline that "raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions" ("Meta-"). Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* raises questions about the nature of painting and representation by allowing text and images to comment on one another. Metafiction works in similar ways by raising questions about the nature of writing and by allowing the text to comment on itself. Both metafiction and meta-painting draw attention to the artifact as a representation. For example, the traditional reading of *The Treachery of Images* is that the sentence works as a caption and indicates that "this" refers to the image of the pipe, which is merely that, an image, not a pipe. Although the painting can be interpreted in many different ways, it always raises crucial questions about representation and reality. The meanings of simple words and images are complicated, and Magritte reminds his viewers that they are looking at a painting, a representation, not a reality.

Metafiction works in ways similar to Magritte's meta-painting. In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh defines

metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). A metafictional text employs various methods to remind readers that they are reading language that was carefully constructed, not found. Metafictional techniques have been used for centuries although they are largely associated with the postmodern literary movement of the late twentieth century. Works such as *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; *Northanger Abbey*; and *Jane Eyre* use frames and frame-breaking, play with the conventions of genre and printing, and draw attention to the narration of their stories. While these novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are certainly works of metafiction, metafictional works written during the postmodern literary movement beginning in the 1960s and 70s often confer a certain ethical responsibility upon readers. Metafictional works allow readers to participate in the construction of the text and when that text represents a significant historical event such as Vietnam, readers are presented with the responsibilities associated with constructing a reality. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are both highly metafictional works. Coppola and O'Brien repeatedly use techniques that affix their works with the caption: "This is not Vietnam." By inviting readers and viewers to take part in the creation of their respective Vietnams, *Apocalypse* and *Things* are able to challenge the reality of Vietnam and suggest that the narratives that make up politics, history, and reality are also constructions.

Metafictional techniques are effective means of commenting on reality because of the hyperreality of existence. Reality is made up both of real, direct experience and fictional representations. Waugh argues that by turning away from reality and focusing of

fiction, metafiction provides a unique means of examining not only fiction but reality; "[m]etafictional deconstruction has . . . offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems" (9). Because we live in time of hyperrealities, by "showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is constructed, similarly 'written'" (Waugh 18). In 1937, Magritte exhibited a work that complimented his *Treachery of Images* series. The work was titled *This is a Piece of Cheese* and consisted of a small, framed painting of a piece of cheese placed on a cheese platter and covered by a glass dome (Dillon). In this piece, the frame clearly designates the painting as an image, but the larger frame—the platter and dome—place the piece of cheese into reality. In contrast to *The Treachery of Images*, this work suggests that in some contexts, perhaps the image *is* the reality, and in a hyperreality, it often is. Thus, metafiction is particularly suited to present truths about a hyperreal reality and to prepare readers to read that reality.

Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are both successful in presenting realities of the Vietnam War specifically because they use metafictional storytelling techniques that emphasize their texts' unreality. While there are many metafictional techniques storytellers can use to highlight the fictional nature of their stories, I will focus on a few that are prominent in Coppola's and O'Brien's works. *Apocalypse* and *Things* constantly present themselves as fictions by refusing to provide just one true story, through the use of surreal juxtaposition, by drawing attention to the medium of representation, and through allusion and intertextuality. Waugh notes that metafictional works "often end with a choice of endings. Or they may end with a sign of the

impossibility of endings" (29). *Apocalypse* and *Things* present their audiences with not

only a variety of endings but also a variety of stories. Coppola and O'Brien continually

retell their stories with a difference and, thus, refuse the possibility of one true version.

Apocalypse Now was released several times with differences in ending, editing, and

storyline. A documentary about the making of the film was released in 1991 that

continued to add to the many storylines of the *Apocalypse* constellation. Similarly, most

of the short stories published in *The Things They Carried* were previously published with

variations from the versions published in *Things*. By continuing to re-write and re-present

their stories, Coppola and O'Brien draw attention to the fact that these stories are *written*

representations, not reality. The events of the stories and the way those events are

presented are always up for revision and modification. Both texts demonstrate a process

of writing and filming rather than a product. The writing and filming becomes an

essential part of the story itself, which allows for the metafictional probing of the

relationship between Vietnam and the representation of Vietnam.

Another technique that Coppola and O'Brien use to draw attention to the

fictionality of their works is surreal juxtaposition. A quick internet search for *Apocalypse*

Now or many other Vietnam films, books, or video games is sure to produce several

message boards and blogs peppered with the word "surreal." The word is commonly used

to describe representations of Vietnam. Although "surreal" is often used to imply that a

book or film is simply weird, surrealism is more than mere strangeness. The surrealist

movement of the 1920s-1930s was influenced by the work of Freud, and surrealist artists

sought to represent the unconscious reality of dreams through their paintings and

sculptures. To capture the world of dreams, surrealist artists did not completely break

from reality; rather, most surrealist art depicts everyday, common objects in a realistic style. What makes these works surreal is the context within which the everyday is placed. Salvador Dali's sculpture *Lobster Telephone* (1936) is not surreal because it includes a red lobster or a common black telephone but because the two are placed together outside of their usual contexts. Likewise, perhaps the most famous surreal image, Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, includes common objects, such as watches and ants, but the image is surreal because the watches are melting in a strange, desert landscape—they are depicted outside of their usual function and context. Rene Magritte's paintings create a surreal experience for the viewer through similar methods. Although his paintings illustrate familiar objects—apples, men in bowler hats, locomotives, etc.—they are situated in ways that make them unfamiliar: the apple where a man's head should be, the men falling calmly from the sky, the locomotive coming out of a fireplace. This displacement of the everyday is what creates the surrealist effect. Coppola and O'Brien similarly use the surreal juxtaposition of the everyday in unexpected contexts. *Apocalypse Now* is particularly rife with surreal combinations presented in a photorealistic style. *The Things They Carried* is not the most surreal of O'Brien's works—*Going After Cacciato* has repeatedly been cited as a work of surrealism or, similarly, magic realism—but elements of surrealism run throughout the text.

A third metafictional technique used by both Coppola and O'Brien is to draw attention to the medium with which they are working. By reminding audiences that they are viewing a film or reading a book, rather than experiencing Vietnam, *Apocalypse* and *Things* highlight their fictionality. Coppola emphasizes that he is creating a film by using various visual effects, including unrealistic editing techniques, heightened contrast, and

brilliant colors. O'Brien's medium is language, or perhaps more accurately, stories, and he draws attention to that medium by alternately building up stories and breaking them down. Waugh describes metafiction as a "tendency" to exaggerate "the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion" (14). This is one of O'Brien's favorite techniques and the means by which he emphasizes his medium of stories. Both O'Brien and Coppola also draw attention to their media by creating Chinese box structures by depicting themselves at work on their respective texts within the texts themselves. Finally, the frames of both works further draw attention to the medium of representation, just as the frame around the image in *This is a Piece of Cheese* reinforced that the piece of cheese was actually a painting.

The final technique I will be examining in this study is intertextuality. Julia Kristeva first coined the term intertextuality to refer to a relationship between texts. The term initially was associated more closely with readers and their connection of various texts through the process of reading; however, the term has evolved to include more writer-based connections between texts as well. *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* lists "anagram, allusion, adaptation, translation, parody, pastiche, imitation, and other kinds of transformation" as types of "intertextual relationships" (Baldick). Although intertextuality does not need to be intended by an author to have an effect on the way a reader understands or enjoys a text, several of the terms *The Oxford Dictionary* lists indicate a level of author intention or at least a more writer-centered focus. While some critics have denounced the use of "intertextuality" to refer to intentional literary techniques such as allusion, parody, pastiche, and imitation (see Irwin

"Against Intertextuality"), the term is commonly used to refer to these and many other types of connections between texts. Highly intertextual texts can have a metafictional effect because they re-present works of fiction rather than reality. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are both full of allusion, parody, imitation, and quotation. These techniques connect the film and book to each other and to other literary and filmic texts. By connecting their texts to fictional works, Coppola and O'Brien again refer their audiences not to Vietnam but to fiction. The intertextual relationships within the texts demonstrate to readers that the sources of *Apocalypse* and *Things* are as much Joseph Conrad and Wilfred Owen as they are veterans' lived experience. The layers of intertextuality that Coppola and O'Brien build up in their works emphasize that those works are ultimately works of fiction.

All of these metafictional techniques—continual retelling, surrealism, emphasis on medium, and intertextuality—are present in Coppola's and O'Brien's representations of Vietnam. Although both artists favor some techniques over others, the effect of the combination of techniques is similar. Through these methods, Coppola and O'Brien are able to underline the fictionality of their texts and empower readers to construct their own Vietnams and to deconstruct other historical, political, or national narratives they encounter. In *Apocalypse Now* the surreal combination of Hueys and Wagner reminds viewers that "this is not Vietnam." In *The Things They Carried*, the continual construction and deconstruction of narratives also reminds readers that "this is not Vietnam." Through metafictional techniques, Coppola and O'Brien allow readers to view the creation of their fictitious Vietnams and thereby instruct readers in how to read and create other significant narratives. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried*

demonstrate the construction of war narratives and reveal the fictional nature of the narratives that make up reality. As readers and viewers recognize the constructed nature of the war narratives that shape American culture, history, and politics, they are able to question and challenge narratives that are presented as absolute realities and imagine different realities.

BEACH PARTY VIETNAM: SURREAL REALISM IN *APOCALYPSE NOW*

My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam.

—Francis Ford Coppola

At the Cannes Film Festival in 1979, Francis Ford Coppola famously claimed that his film "is Vietnam" (*Hearts*). Years after the release of *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola's claim takes on an aura of prophecy. *Apocalypse Now*, the film Roger Ebert dubbed the "best Vietnam film" (Great Movies), has become an important thread in the hyperrealistic fabric of Vietnam. The film is a sort of Arnold-esque touchstone against which representations of the war as well as lived experiences of the war are often compared and judged. Swofford, Storey, and Thai have demonstrated the significant position *Apocalypse Now* holds in the meaning of Vietnam as well as why veterans might feel the need to argue the Vietnam is not a movie. In 1979, John Kerry wrote a review of the film for *The Boston Herald* that would come back to haunt him during his 2004 bid for the presidency. In the article, Kerry drew analogies between his lived experience and that of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen). He wrote, "On more than one occasion, I, like Martin Sheen in 'Apocalypse Now,' took my patrol boat into Cambodia" (qtd. in Reynolds). The comments that followed would lead to the Swift Boat campaign against Kerry although the context in which they were written would be largely forgotten. When Kerry made heroic claims about his experience in Vietnam that were later proved false, or at least confused, he did so in an effort to draw connections between himself and a character from the surreal world of Coppola's Vietnam. To prove himself a real Vietnam Vet, Kerry compared himself to the fictional Willard. Despite its extreme fictionalization, *Apocalypse Now* has somehow become touchstone for Vietnam in the United States. How

has such a film come to be viewed as an authentic and realistic representation of Vietnam? Coppola's multiple versions of the film, surrealistic juxtaposition, heightened intertextuality, and filmic aesthetic allowed the film to draw attention to itself as a representation and, thereby, empower audiences to raise questions about the way Vietnam and American wars of the past have been similarly represented and constructed.

Works of metafiction are as much about creating and storytelling as they are about anything else. Coppola's Vietnam film does say something about Vietnam, but it makes comments on Vietnam largely through commenting on itself. *Apocalypse Now* is really a network of films and narratives rather than just one film, and each version comments on the others and the journey that has produced the collection. By continuing to re-tell and re-view his story, Coppola emphasizes the fictionality of his representation through its mutability. The constellation of films that is *Apocalypse Now* was created by layering fictions rather than attempting to recreate a reality. Each additional layer reestablishes the film as an evolving work of fiction. The film began as a screenplay written by John Milius in 1969 in an attempt to successfully adapt Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. According to Francisco Menendez, the film was originally designed as a low budget "macho journey in which the soldiers discover they'd rather remain and fight to the end, than be rescued and returned alive" directed by George Lucas (32). When Coppola became involved in the project he began reworking Milius' screenplay from a conservative adventure flick to a more liberal anti-war film. Coppola added more *Heart of Darkness* to the screenplay and completely reworked both the beginning and end of the film. Later, Michael Herr brought his hardened, established brand of Vietnam to the production when he was asked to write the narration for Willard. These three writers each

played a significant role in the development of *Apocalypse Now*. Each added his own

perspective and voice, which resulted in a film composed of several different stories.

Even after the film was finally written and filmed, it continued to be revised and

retold. The first version of *Apocalypse Now* was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in

1979. In interviews Coppola has said the film still was not finished when it was first

screened, but he felt it needed to be shown to relieve pressure from the media: "We were

struggling to convince people that the film was worthwhile at a time when everyone was

saying it wasn't, so I was sort of put in a position of having to show it and having to

finish it" ("Apocalypse Now and Then"). Following the film's debut at the Cannes Film

Festival, the first 70mm printing of the film was shown without any credits or end

sequence. After Kurtz (Marlon Brando) whispered "the horror," the film simply faded to

black. The original concept was to show the film with an accompanying program and

without end credits to avoid breaking away from the world of the film; however, as the

film was printed in 35mm and released for wider showings, the programs became too

complicated and expensive ("A/V FAQs"). Credits were added to the 35mm prints, and

to make the sequence "look more interesting," film of the Kurtz compound being

destroyed was included with the credits ("A/V FAQs"). Many audience members

interpreted these images as a new ending: Willard had called in an air strike to destroy the

compound. When Coppola heard of this interpretation, the "35mm end credits were

pulled and were replaced with simple with text over black for end credits" ("A/V

FAQs"). Thus, in 1979 alone, four different versions of *Apocalypse Now* were screened,

none of which can be legitimately claimed as the one true version.

In 1991, *Apocalypse Now* was again retold through the film *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*. The documentary told the story of the production of *Apocalypse Now* using narration read by Eleanor Coppola, interviews with cast and crew, and images shot by Eleanor during the filming of *Apocalypse Now*. In the opening sequence of the film, Eleanor Coppola explains that Orson Welles had attempted an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, but had abandoned the project. With *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Coppola attempted to do what the great filmmaker had failed to do. Using Conrad's novella as a frame and narrative structure for the documentary sets the stage for *Hearts of Darkness* to portray the filmmaking process as a descent into madness by focusing on now famous anecdotes of the film's production, including Martin Sheen's wild scene in the Saigon hotel and his later heart attack. *Hearts of Darkness* merges the original film with the story of its production to the extent that the plotline of the making of *Apocalypse Now* is not just parallel with the *Apocalypse Now*'s plotline, but the two plotlines merge into one story. Ultimately, *Hearts of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* are versions of the same story.

The re-telling of *Apocalypse Now* continued in 2001 when Coppola released an extended version of the film titled *Apocalypse Now Redux*. This version of the film reintroduced moments from the original screenplay that had been cut in the first edit, including the French plantation scene and a second encounter with the USO playboy bunnies. These additions changed the film by adding new surreal elements as well as historical context (particularly through the French plantation scene) and further drawing out the Odyssey-like structure of the film. In the short film "Apocalypse Now and Then,"

editor Walter Murch explains that when Coppola first approached him about working on

Apocalypse Now Redux, he was frightened:

> I was frightened about going back into it because it's like a jungle. It was
>
> almost two years of my life and two million feet of film and just a
>
> tremendous amount of material that we finally got balanced in some
>
> balance back in 1979. So, to go back into it and to upset that balance and
>
> to hopefully find all these pieces twenty years later, it frightened me to
>
> begin with, and then I became curious.

Despite Murch's initial fear of the project, as he took his trip back upriver, back into the

jungle of *Apocalypse Now*, he realized how "flexible film is—it's clay, cinematic clay"

("Apocalypse Now and Then"). This flexibility allowed him to "[start] assembling

[*Redux*] as you would from original material without any reference to how it might have

been done in the past" ("Apocalypse Now and Then"). According to Murch, *Redux* is not

just an expanded version of the original, but its own film that was constructed "from

original material without any reference to . . . the past." The malleability of film allowed

Coppola to create several versions of *Apocalypse Now*, none of which can be established

as the definitive version. Which is the "true" version—the original or the expanded?

Milius' script or Coppola's vision? The film itself or the film about the film? Each

version adds something unique to the film's portrayal of Vietnam, and together the

network of films raises questions about representation and storytelling.

     Like many metafictional works, *Apocalypse Now* is a story about itself. At the

Cannes Film Festival, when Coppola claimed that his film "is Vietnam," he supported his

claim by describing how the film was made rather than describing the film itself: "It's

what it was really like . . . We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had

access to too much money, too much equipment, and, little by little, we went insane"

(*Hearts of Darkness*). Coppola conflates his "film," the cinematic artifact, with the

making of the film. Even before *Hearts of Darkness* was released the story behind the

making of *Apocalypse Now* was familiar to the public. As early as 1976—three years

before the film's initial release—the media was buzzing about the strange occurrences

surrounding the making of the film. In a May 1976 *New York Times* article, Richard Eder

makes the same comparison that Coppola famously made three years later. Eder writes,

"[t]here is an odd, Vietnam-like elaborateness about the whole thing. . . . It seems like a

lavish and complicated way to make a movie. What if somebody elopes, meanwhile, or

develops spots? What if that section of the Philippines is taken by guerrillas? Is there

light at the end of tunnel?" (C6). In May of 1977, the *New York Times* published an

article entitled "Coppola's Vietnam Movie is a Battle Royal," which reported some of the

peculiar happenings in the filming of *Apocalypse Now* including the loss of original lead

Harvey Keitel, Martin Sheen's hospitalization, and the typhoon that struck the area of

filming (Higham D13). Later, on January 31, 1978, the *New York Times* published a piece

that fully detailed Martin Sheen's heart attack (Maslin 16). Thus, from the beginning, part

of the film's draw was its making. It was the product of an award-winning director and

who had gone extremely over budget in his mysteriously elongated shooting on the other

side of the world. When audiences first saw the film, one of the major questions that

framed that first viewing was: "Was it all worth it?" Because *Apocalypse Now* is largely

framed with questions about the film's construction, it raises questions about the

construction of Vietnam itself. How do the layers of war stories carried into Vietnam—

World War II, the Cold War, the French Indochina War, the class and race wars—

influence and shape the Vietnam War story? How have Americans revised Vietnam since

its end? Are the many different versions of Vietnam all viable? Is there one version that is

best? And, finally, was it all worth it? *Apocalypse Now* reveals itself as a layered

construction of differing narratives and voices, and by doing so, indicates the constructed

and conflicting nature of Vietnam itself.

One of the most readily apparent metafictional techniques used in *Apocalypse*

Now is surrealism. From the initial stages of Coppola's involvement in *Apocalypse*, the

film was intended to be a surreal presentation of the Vietnam War. When Coppola began

plans for his Vietnam film in the mid-1970s, few films had been made that directly

portrayed the Vietnam War and even fewer films had attempted to present the war in an

intentionally surrealistic style. For the most part, war films at that time told versions of

the defensive and heroic American war story. In 1975, like many filmmakers who made

war films, Coppola appealed to the Department of Defense for approval to use military

equipment, documents, and footage in the production of *Apocalypse Now*. Because

Coppola wanted to create a surrealistic interpretation of the war, it was especially

important that he use the right military equipment to create a Vietnam that was visually

accurate and realistic. Like the surrealist artists who painted their subjects in a

photorealistic style, Coppola needed visual accuracy in order to give his surreal

displacement the greatest effect. However, the military was not interested in helping

Coppola create his surreal Vietnam. Although from his first contact with the DOD

Coppola presented his film as "a 'surrealistic' interpretation of the issues surrounding the

war in Vietnam," the Pentagon repeatedly denied support for the film on the grounds that it was unrealistic (Suid 333).

After reading the initial script, the Army chief of information, General Gordon Hill, decided the DOD would not be able to assist in the production of the film unless significant changes were made. He wrote, "In view of the sick humor or satirical philosophy of the film, it may be useless to point out individual shortcomings, but there are a number of particularly objectionable episodes which present the Army in an unrealistic and unacceptable bad light" (qtd. in Suid 334). Hill particularly focused on Kilgore's surf party, a scene he considered "ridiculous" (qtd. in Suid 334). The DOD also found problems in the basis for the plot. The idea that an officer would be "terminated with extreme prejudice" did not sit well with the Pentagon, and several military officers who reviewed the script "asserted that an officer would desert only if he had become mentally unbalanced" (334). In a letter to Coppola, Secretary Rumsfeld suggested that rather than being sent to kill Kurtz, Willard should be sent to "[investigate] and [bring] those guilty of wrongful action back for a courtmartial or medical/psychiatric treatment" (qtd. in Suid 338). Rumsfeld felt that such a change "would be of mutual benefit by making the film more logical and factual" (338). The Department of Defense's concern with conforming the film to what they considered to be reality prevented Coppola from receiving any assistance from the military. Repeatedly the DOD deemed the events, characters, and motivations that portrayed the military as sane, compassionate, honest, and powerful as the most realistic. In other words, the military continued to view the hyperreality of the World War II war story as reality despite the challenges posed to it by Vietnam.

Despite being denied assistance by the Pentagon, Coppola was able to secure the use of Hueys and other equipment for his film through the Philippines government. The film was shot in the Philippines, which also provided a setting that looked realistic. Coppola's ability to create a film that appeared visually realistic allowed for a more intensely surreal effect. Perhaps the most surreal figure in the film is Robert Duvall's Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore. Through Kilgore the film combines the familiarity of American popular culture and Western high culture with the horrific brutality of war. Probably the most famous scenes of the film are the scenes that throw a California beach party into the middle of the Vietnam War. Kilgore's perilous R and R begins when he discovers that Lance (Sam Bottoms) is an accomplished surfer and decides to take his boys into "Charlie's point" to catch some waves. On the way, Kilgore blasts "Flight of the Valkyries" over the Huey's loudspeakers explaining, "I use Wagner. It scares the hell out of the slopes. My boys love it." Placing opera, often considered the most elite of art forms, into the middle of an air raid lends the scene a surrealistic air. Kilgore not only brings high art into the middle of a war, but he uses it to facilitate the murder of the Viet Cong as well as the young school children. Kilgore's specific choice of Wagner adds another layer of surrealism to the scene. Because Wagner has been associated with the Nazi party and the Holocaust, Coppola connects the American War in Vietnam with the atrocities carried out by the Nazi party during World War II. In this scene, the United States is depicted through a mix of imagery associated with the traditional, righteous American war story. Kilgore's calvary kerchief is a symbol of the American military's historical power and righteousness, but that symbol is juxtaposed with a musical symbol

of the Nazi party. Together, these symbols create a Kilgore that surrealistically takes on qualities of both the good guy and the bad guy.

In the following scene, Kilgore continues to bring non-violent familiarities into the unfamiliar violence of war therein emphasizing the film's fictionality. When the helicopter lands on the beach, the colonel and his men exit to the sound of explosions and chopper blades. While his men crouch low to avoid an impending explosion, Kilgore stands—a mutation of the macho Hollywood war hero in sunglasses, a black cavalry hat, and a yellow neckerchief—checking out the surf. He orders his men to change into their shorts, and when they suggest that it's still a bit "hairy" out there, the colonel explains, "You either surf or fight, that clear?" The image of two young men attempting to surf while bombs explode in the water around them brings popular American culture and the Vietnam War into surreal proximity. Another such moment occurs later on upriver when Clean (Lawrence Fishburn) turns on the radio and dances around to "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" while Lance water skies behind the boat. The USO's playboy bunnies in Hau Phat again bring American pop culture again to the center of the action in Vietnam. In fact, Willard's companions on his journey up-river seem to have more interactions with American and Western culture than actual combat experiences. This surrealist displacement has a metafictional effect because it casts doubt on the realism of the film. Did most soldiers surf and water ski while in Vietnam? Although John Milius claims the surfing scene is actually one of the few of the film that is based on soldiers' lived experiences, surfing under heavy fire was certainly not a common experience. This heightened surrealism continues to emphasize the fictionality of the film.

In the 2001 *Redux* version of the film, several previously cut scenes are reintroduced into the narrative, creating a more surrealistic *Apocalypse Now* than previous versions. The most famous and most surreal of these reinserted scenes is the French plantation scene. Towards the end of the PBR crew's journey up river, the American soldiers discover a large European-style home where a family has been living since the end of the French Indochina war. When the group first approaches the plantation, the house and men who guard it seem to materialize out of a thick white fog, which adds to the dreamlike quality of the scene. Willard and the group stay for dinner at the plantation where they discuss both the American and French wars. Again, Coppola paid close attention to detail to make sure the French dinner was completely realistic and accurate. He flew in actors from France to make sure their accents were authentic and worried over getting the right wine for the meal they were serving. By portraying the refined European dinner with careful realism, the displacement of finding such a dinner in the midst of the jungle in the middle of a war heightens the surrealism of the scene. The placement of aristocratic French culture in the middle of the jungles of Vietnam also creates a kind of surrealistic anachronism that drops the First Indochina War into the middle of the Second Indochina War. The stop at the French plantation is near the end of the PBR crew's journey and suggests a movement backwards in time through the history of colonial war in Vietnam ending with the primitive reign of Kurtz. Of course, such a refined French home in the depths of the Vietnamese or Cambodian jungles was likely not a reality in the 1960s and 70s, but the presence of such a home in *Apocalypse Now* reemphasizes the film's fictionality while providing historical context for the war and raising questions about why and how the United States fought the war in Vietnam.

During dinner, Willard and the French men compare the United States' conflict in Vietnam to that of France.

Although the surrealistic juxtaposition of Western high and pop culture in the jungles of Vietnam works as a Magritte-esque caption that reads "this is not Vietnam," the surrealism of the film also, at the same time, allows the film to communicate some aspects of the hyperreality of Vietnam. This mix of the everyday with the shocking conveys the sense of surreal displacement that many Americans experienced in the hyperreality of Vietnam. The recontextualization of the Wagner and the Rolling Stones in Vietnam demonstrates the strangeness that many American soldiers felt as they knew that life went on in the U.S. while they came face to face with death and destruction everyday. Tim O'Brien's memoir of his time in Vietnam indicates that the average soldier often experienced the kind of surreal displacement that *Apocalypse Now* depicts. When describing the flight home to the United States O'Brien writes, "The stewardess serves a meal and passes out magazines. The plane lands in Japan and takes on fuel. Then you fly straight on to Seattle. What kind of war is it that begins and ends this way, with a pretty girl, cushioned seats, and magazines?" (*If I Die in a Combat Zone* 207). Here, O'Brien's lived experience places American culture—airlines and magazines—in the context of the war. In this way, and also through USO shows, letters from home, and radio stations, American soldiers experienced the surreal combination of the familiar and the brutal that Coppola's unreal depiction so authentically captures. Because many experienced Vietnam as a surreal experience, Coppola's surreal representation of Vietnam is especially capable of presenting particular realities of Vietnam.

Coppola's use of surrealism in *Apocalypse Now* indicates the surrealism experienced by some soldiers while serving in Vietnam, but it also does metafictional work by raising questions about how to tell a war story. When Coppola first contacted the Department of Defense about his "surrealistic" portrayal of Vietnam, the script was rejected because the military expected war films to be realistic. Since the release of *Apocalypse Now*, some reviewers have seemed to agree with the DOD, arguing that the film does not provide an accurate depiction of Vietnam because it is too strange, too surreal. In his 1979 review of the film, James Webb claims that any unrealistic portrayal of war will be a failure. He writes, "In any form of art, absurd characters set on unrealistic terrain can only produce artificial conflict and ultimately unproductive themes." Even some who admit that many soldiers did experience Vietnam as surreal argue that *Apocalypse* takes its surrealism too far. In his book *Guts & Glory*, Lawrence Suid claims that "*surrealistic* remains the one word that best describes the war," but argues that "just as a director does not have to make a boring movie to make a statement about boredom, Coppola did not have to make a surrealistic movie to create the surrealism of war" (366). However, Coppola's surrealism does more than just "create the surrealism of war" because it is not just about individual soldiers' experiences in Vietnam, but it also works on a larger metaphorical scale.

By using *Heart of Darkness*, a critique of European colonialism, as its primary foundation, *Apocalypse Now* sets itself up as an examination and critique of the American involvement in Vietnam. Coppola's surreal depiction and fictional structure underline and emphasize the disruption of the World War II war story in Vietnam. By telling a war story in such a blatantly fictionalized manner, Coppola raises the question, "Can a war

story be surreal and true?" The film distances itself from previous war films by breaking from the conventions of military storytelling. By changing the method of storytelling, Coppola demonstrates that something has changed in the way that Americans experience and commemorate war. The film needs to be surreal, not to demonstrate that American soldiers had surreal experiences in Vietnam, but to suggest that American public memory and historical reality were shaken and challenged at war in Vietnam.

Apocalypse Now also gains authenticity and realism from its intertextuality. The film is a pastiche of quotes, allusions, structures, and plotlines drawn from familiar literary texts. The most prominent of these literary texts is the basis of the film's structure and initial screenplay: Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Coppola and Milius's decision to make a film about a recent war that takes its basic plot from a well-known work of fiction immediately alerts audiences to the film's unreality. The film is clearly not based on real-life soldier's experiences if it follows the pattern of a book that was written decades before. However, Coppola does not downplay the elements of the film patterned after Conrad's novella to make the film more authentic, but, rather, emphasizes literary allusions in the film. Despite this emphasis on the film's fictional origins, the film's intertextuality actually makes the film more authentic by emphasizing the simulated nature of the American War in Vietnam.

By adapting Conrad's 1902 story of a trip up the Congo River, *Apocalypse Now* borrows the centrals issues and themes of the original work and places itself in an important literary tradition. *Heart of Darkness* famously questions the effects of European imperialism and colonization. The story of the journey up-river to Kurtz is communicated through a nameless narrator who meets Marlow, the story's protagonist,

on the *Nellie*, a ship on the Thames. Marlow introduces the story of his one turn as a

"fresh-water sailor" by musing on the colonization of England by the Romans. He begins,

"And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth" (101). Marlow describes

primitive England as a dark place, but explains that the Romans "were men enough to

face the darkness" (102). As prelude to his modern day story of colonization, Marlow

philosophizes: "The conquest of the earth . . . is not a pretty thing when you look into it

too much. What redeems it is the idea only" (103). Following this qualified

condemnation of colonization, Marlow begins his narration of his experience working for

a continental trading company on a steamboat on the Congo. While on his trip, Marlow

witnesses the mistreatment of Africans by European traders, and along the way he

continues to hear about the greatly respected and feared Mr. Kurtz. Marlow is given the

job of going upriver to relieve Kurtz. As Marlow and his crew approach Kurtz, they are

attacked by arrows and spears. Following this attack, Marlow fears that Kurtz has been

killed by the native people, but learns that Kurtz has in fact become a brutal leader, ruling

over the people. Marlow takes Kurtz from his compound and begins to ferry him back

towards his home in Europe; however, as Kurtz becomes more and more removed from

his compound, his health deteriorates. Kurtz dies after whispering his final words, "The

horror! The horror."

  While *Apocalypse Now* certainly departs from Conrad's text in many ways, it

maintains the general structure as well as several themes of the original. Of course,

Coppola's version takes place during the Vietnam War and focuses on the horrors of

American aggression rather than European colonization. In her discussion of the film's

similarities to Conrad's novella, Linda Cahir points out that both the film and the novella

are "framestories with mediating narrators" and that "[e]ach tale-proper begins with the

protagonist's explanation of how he got the appointment which necessitated his excursion

up a river" (182). Cahir also points out that both texts include three stops along the river

on the way to Kurtz's compound (183); however, with *Apocalypse Now Redux*, the

number of stops is increased to six. Although Milius's script changed much of the content

of the film, Coppola ensured that the criticism of imperialism and the structure remained.

In addition to the structure of the film, Coppola revised the screenplay to more closely

follow Conrad's text.

  Apocalypse Now draws attention to itself as an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*

through the use of a similar frame. Except for a few pages at the beginning and a short

paragraph at the end, Conrad's novella is one long quote. Several scholars have argued

that *Apocalypse Now* employs a similar frame. Linda Cahir suggests that the mediating

narrator in the film is the Coppola's camera (182). Alternatively, Louis Greiff suggests

that the frame is created through The Doors' "The End" (188). Greiff calls the use of

"The End" to both open and close the film "a creative imitation of the Conradian frame"

because "the film's very first line … 'This is the end, beautiful friend' … announces itself

as the ending, just as in *Heart of Darkness* the initial scene on board the Heart occurs,

chronologically, long after the events recounted in Marlow's yarn" (188). Coppola's use

of "The End" connects *Apocalypse Now* to *Heart of Darkness* not only by mimicking its

frame structure but also by using that frame to emphasize the stories place of origin. Like

Conrad's frame of a story told on the Thames, "The End" locates the film's frame outside

the world of the story proper. Marlow's tale and the darkness of colonization is centered

in London, and by extension, Europe, just as Coppola's "heart of darkness" is located in

the United States. By following Conrad's structure, Coppola is both connecting the

American war in Vietnam to the horror of European colonialism and placing his film into

conversation with the English literary tradition.

   Coppola continues to emphasize his film's literary source by additionally

borrowing elements of plot, dialogue, and characterization from Conrad's novella. In the

novella, before reaching the Kurtz compound, the steamboat is attacked. Similarly, in

Apocalypse Now, the PBR crew boat is attacked by arrows and Chief (Albert Hall) is

killed by a spear just as the native helmsman is killed by a spear in *Heart of Darkness*.

When the remaining members of the PBR crew reach the Kurtz compound, they meet the

tripped-out photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) who is carefully patterned after the Russian

trader (sometimes called the Harlequin) in Conrad's story. The trader asks Marlow for

tobacco; the photojournalist asks for a cigarette. Both characters are devoted to Kurtz,

and Coppola even borrows some of Conrad's language. The photojournalist says, "Hey,

man, you don't talk to the Colonel. You listen to him" while the Russian trader says,

"You don't talk with that man—you listen to him" (Conrad 152). While none of these

adaptations of Conrad's novella were included in Milius' original screenplay, Coppola

wished to connect the film more directly to *Heart of Darkness* and used these details to

do so.

   Coppola continues to build *Apocalypse Now*'s literary pedigree by connecting his

film to Homer's *Odyssey*. The film is a series of events linked by the river and leading to

the final confrontation with Kurtz. In the documentary *Hearts of Darkness*, Coppola once

compares his film to the *Odyssey* by associating Kilgore with the Cyclops and the

Playboy bunnies with the sirens, and in a moment of frustration, he self-deprecatingly

called the film the "Idi-odyssey." During the ten-year process of making *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola increased the *Odyssey*-like structure of the film by never settling on a final script. The film crew traveled around the Philippines searching for scenes and ideas without a strict structure or schedule. Some days the call sheet would list the work to be done that day as "scenes unknown," and the actors and crew would come to work without knowing what they would be filming that day (*Hearts*). The actors began contributing their ideas for scenes to add to the film. The scene in which the PBR crew inspects a sampan and kill all of the Vietnamese on board was inspired by the actors, who wanted to do a kind of My Lai massacre in the film (*Hearts*). The journey-like process of making the film and the mythos surrounding that making further connect the film to Odysseus and his journey.

Coppola most directly presents his film as a piece of literary art through his use of T.S. Eliot. Kurtz, whom the photojournalist calls a "poet warrior," is particularly fond of Eliot's poetry. When Willard first arrives at Kurtz's compound, the photojournalist, while explaining what a wonderful man Kurtz is, quotes a couple lines, which he clearly learned from Kurtz, of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Later, Kurtz directly quotes several lines of Eliot's "The Hollow Men." At this moment, *Apocalypse Now* pushes the intertextuality of the film to a complex entanglement. The epigraph of "The Hollow Men" is a direct quote from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." Thus, Marlon Brando as Kurtz is reciting a poem the epigraph of which not only quotes the text upon which the film is based but also directly references the character who is reciting the poem. *Apocalypse Now* is not just based on another text, but

consciously encapsulates the reaction to that text in later modernist literature. By so doing, Coppola does not just place the film in conversation with the literary tradition, but positions it as an important part of that literary tradition. In Linda Dryden's words, "Apocalypse Now pays homage to two of the most influential texts of the modernist movement, and in doing so stakes claim to a status that transcends popular culture and announces its ambition as serious art" (157). The film further connects to the work of Eliot by placing among Kurtz's reading, two books—*The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie L. Weston—that Eliot cites as influencing his *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1981). By asserting itself as serious art and aligning itself with this tradition, the film also reiterates its status as a fiction and declares its origins to be in great literature rather than history.

Although some have argued that Coppola uses other texts out of convenience of structure or out of ego, the intertextuality of the film serves another purpose. In his review of *Apocalypse Now*, Roger Ebert argues that Coppola chose to adapt *Heart of Darkness* because it allowed him to easily string together several vignettes: "the narrative device of the journey upriver is as convenient for him as it was for Conrad. That's really why he uses it, and not because of literary cross-references for graduate students to catalog" (Ebert ¶ 10). While it is true that Coppola did not adapt Conrad's canonical text to simply provide graduate students with hours of cataloguing pleasure (although, as demonstrated here, graduate students have certainly taken advantage of the opportunity), the film's complex intertextuality does more than just set up a convenient narrative structure. The intertextuality of the film reminds the viewer of its status as a fiction, and it is not just any fiction but part of an important literary tradition. This intertextuality is

important in establishing the film's unreality because from the very beginning the viewer

is aware that the film is not based on a soldier's lived experience in Vietnam, but that it is

based on other fictionalized texts. It is a simulation of a simulation.

However, the unreality created by the overt fictionalization of *Apocalypse Now*

does not mean that the film cannot present audiences with some reality of the Vietnam

War experience. The fact that the film is an obvious simulation brings it even closer to

the hyperreality of Vietnam because, in many ways, the war itself was a simulation and

representation. Coppola depicts the feeling of simulation created by the presence of film

crews and reporters in Vietnam when Willard and the PBR crew meet up with Colonel

Kilgore and the Air Cav. With bombs exploding and Hueys swarming above, Willard

runs ashore looking, as he always does, for the commanding officer. Willard suddenly

finds himself in front of a film crew. Surprised, Willard stops and looks at camera; the

director, played by Coppola himself, hurriedly shouts, "Don't look at the cameras. Don't

look at the cameras. Just go by like you're fighting. Like you're fighting. Don't look at

the cameras. It's for television." The director's choice of words indicates the element of

simulation even in during *real* combat: "Just go by *like* you're fighting." In this instance

the simulation is being privileged over the reality. The presence of the camera transforms

the real experience of war into a simulated war.

This unexpected camera crew works as a metafictional stress of the film's

medium, but it also realistically portrays one aspect of the war. The Vietnam War is often

called "the first television war" for a reason. Reporters and photojournalists were such an

important part of the Vietnam experience that they have become stock characters in

Vietnam film and literature. Michael Herr, one of the most prominent Vietnam writers,

who also wrote the narration for *Apocalypse Now*, was himself a reporter in Vietnam. In his book *Dispatches*, Herr describes how the young soldiers fighting in Vietnam often experienced their time in Vietnam through the lens of the war films they had seen. He writes:

> I kept thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. (209)

Herr's description of the way that grunts imagined their war experience demonstrated the hyperreality of the time. The simulations of war that they had seen in movie theaters back home shaped the reality of combat. In addition to the simulations they had seen before getting to Vietnam, the presence of cameras in Vietnam turned their real-life war into a made-for-television movie.

The unreality of a television war was not just experienced by soldiers in Vietnam but was also experienced by the Americans who watched the war at home. Although some argued (and continue to argue) that the television coverage of the war made it more real for those at home, it also made the war less real by presenting it through a medium used for simulation. The same box that brought *The Lucy Show* and *Bewitched* into homes around the nation also brought brief snippets of the war on the evening news. In *Living-Room War*, Michael Arlen argues that the frame of the television failed to make

the war more real for television audiences because it "show[ed] a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household" (3). For those who watched the Vietnam War from home, the war itself often became primarily an experience with simulacra. Because the Vietnam War was sometimes experienced as a TV special both by Americans in Vietnam and at home, a film such as *Apocalypse Now* that presents a deliberately fictionalized and simulated representation can be particularly realistic.

Finally, *Apocalypse Now* works as a metafiction by repeatedly drawing attention to its narration. Coppola uses various elements to create scenes of film-within-the-film. In one scene, Coppola places himself in the film in the role of a director shooting a war scene for television. By depicting himself as a creator of film within the film, Coppola places the creation of the artifact within the artifact, emphasizing that *Apocalypse Now* was created in a similar manner. Coppola also creates a film-within-the-film by allowing Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore to select his own soundtrack during the famous air raid scene. While it is natural to hear music playing over images of helicopters in the movie theatre, the fact that the characters also hear the music too and actually chose the music gives the scene its surreal edge. The soldiers in Coppola's Vietnam experience a "real" air raid as something straight out of a Hollywood film, complete with an epic soundtrack. By placing the elements of filmmaking within the film, Coppola further emphasizes the fictionality of his work. Another example of film-within-the-film comes through the character Lance who acts as a member of the audience rather than a player in the action. When Colonel Kilgore asks him what he thinks as they fly over the water with artillery flashing and exploding around them, Lance answers, "Wow, it's really exciting." Kilgore

is referring to the waves, but Lance is caught up in the excitement and thrill of the attack, as if he were watching a film instead of participating in the fighting himself. Similarly, when the crew draws near the brilliantly lit Do Lung Bridge, Chef (Frederic Forrest) asks Lance what he thinks. Lance responds, "It's beautiful." Again, Lance watches the unreal beauty of the world around him as if it were a simulacrum rather than his reality. This position is further demonstrated in his response to a letter he receives from a friend. He reads the letter out loud: "Lance, I am fine. Sue and I went tripping in Disneyland. Sue skinned her knee. There could never be a place like Disneyland, or could there? Let me know." Lance responds to his friends question by saying, "Jim, it's here. It really is here. . . . Man, this is better than Disneyland." Lance compares his experience in Vietnam to one of Baudrillard's principle examples of simulacra. Lance lives through Vietnam as if it were the Jungle Cruise rather than a real war. From waterskiing to tribal dances, Lance repeatedly experiences the war as fun and exciting rather than truly violent or threatening. By allowing Lance to experience the war as a simulation, as an audience member within the film, Coppola again draws attention to the work as a film, a fiction, and not a reality.

Apocalypse Now also draws attention to itself as a film through its aesthetic style. Coppola used vibrant colors, sharp contrast, and various cinematic effects to represent a Vietnam that is both beautiful and unrealistic. As much as critics have sought to determine exactly what the film says about war in general and the Vietnam War in specific, what has made the film last and has placed it among the American film classics is its disturbingly beautiful portrayal of the destruction caused by war. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert explains that he does not care much about the ideas presented in the film; the reason *Apocalypse Now* is on his list of "100 Great Movies" is "the weird beauty

of the massed helicopters lifting over the trees in the long shot, and the insane power of Wagner's music, played loudly during the attack" (¶ 12). Coppola uses a strange original score, a carefully chosen color palette, expensive epic battle scenes, unusual composition, and other cinematic means to turn the experience of the Vietnam War into images that are beautiful because of their extremes.

The "look" of *Apocalypse Now* that Storey calls the standard of realism, is distinctive and, in many ways, unreal. The film repeatedly splices images over one another through the use of fades and different editing techniques. One of the most famous of these is the image of helicopters fading into the image of a ceiling fan in Willard's Saigon hotel room. The use of such editing techniques draws attention to the film as a film. Another important aspect of the look of *Apocalypse Now* is its use of color and high contrast. Repeatedly throughout the film, extremely dark darks are juxtaposed with areas of bright light and color. In the remastering of the film for the *Redux* version, a special Technicolor process was used to intensify the colors and contrast. Coppola said of the process, "it's not a photographic process, it's a printing process. So the colors are very vivid and the blacks are very black" ("The Color Palette"). The film's most iconic images—black Hueys against a brilliant orange background or Kurtz's yellow head emerging from a completely black screen—make use of brilliant color and high contrast. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro explained that the true blacks of the film correspond with the blackness of the heart of darkness; however, beyond reinforcing the film's themes, the extreme color emphasizes the fact that *Apocalypse Now* is a film ("The Color Palette"). In *Redux*, the film was literally painted to intensify the natural color captured

through photography. This color technique creates a beautiful world in which the colors are a little too intense to be real. These filmic techniques aestheticize warfare.

By creating images that take full advantage of the artistic capabilities of the medium, the film necessarily moves away from the reality of the American soldier's experience. Coppola creates beautiful images despite obvious inaccuracies. In one scene, the Do Lung Bridge is lit up with brilliant white lights like a Christmas tree against a pitch-black night sky. In another, USO girls dance on a well-lit stage at the edge of the river. Although the contrast of the scenes creates beautiful images, certainly such bright lighting in enemy territory would not have been common in Vietnam. While many of the actual images captured in *Apocalypse Now* are unreal in the sense that most soldiers probably saw nothing like them in Vietnam, they are still able to create a realistic aesthetic experience that soldiers in Vietnam experienced. By making something as horrible as war beautiful, the images create a surreal experience for the viewer by placing beauty in the unexpected context of horror. Although disconcerting, this surreal aestheticizing of war is an authentic part of the American experience in Vietnam. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien describes the dark beauty of war:

> For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat.
> . . . You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies
> of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming
> down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the
> purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. . . . . You hate it,
> yes, but your eyes do not. . . . any battle or bombing raid or artillery
> barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a

powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about

this, though the truth is ugly. (81)

O'Brien's description of the aesthetic pleasure of war includes images that seem straight

out of *Apocalypse Now*, and he emphasizes an important aspect of this kind of aesthetic

experience: the recognition that there is something horrible about finding war to be so

beautiful. When viewing *Apocalypse Now*, the audience is often invited to enjoy the

beauty of the images and then consider the violence and horror behind those images.

Although the images are unrealistic, their unreality makes them beautiful enough to

convey the experience of soldiers in Vietnam who experienced first-hand the aesthetic

qualities of war.

Each of the metafictional techniques at work in *Apocalypse Now* work to remind

audiences that the film they are watching is, in fact, a film. However, just because

Apocalypse Now is obviously a simulation of Vietnam and not the "real" Vietnam does

not mean that it cannot present any truth or reality about Vietnam. Comparisons have

been drawn between the making of *Apocalypse Now* and the making of Vietnam, but the

similarities between the two do not end there. Like Coppola's Vietnam, the Vietnam of

American memory is a complex hybridity of simulation and reality. Despite its obvious

unreality, *Apocalypse Now* is able to tap into some of the experiences with simulacra that

make up the hyperreality of Vietnam. The film presents a Vietnam in which layers of

stories merge and mix, reality is captured on film for the entertainment of others, the

comfortable and familiar is surreally juxtaposed with the unfamiliar and terrifying, and

the horror of war is made beautiful and appealing—all of which are true aspects of the

hyperreality of Vietnam. As audiences recognize elements of reality in this seemingly

unreal representation of Vietnam, they are better prepared to judge representations of war and reality in general—which are all necessarily fictionalized—and to recognize the complex nature of history and memory.

In addition to accurately representing some of the unreal elements of the "real" Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now* has entered the hyperreality of Vietnam to the extent that it is part of that Vietnam regardless of its inaccuracies and extravagances. The images of Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore's perilous R and R have become some of the archival images of Vietnam, locked into the American memory along with images of the monk self-immolations, zippo fires, John Wayne, and dozens of Hollywood platoons humping through the jungle. Those who continue to attempt to represent and interpret Vietnam must face the Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now*, and Tim O'Brien is one artist who has addressed Coppola's Vietnam within his own.

TELL IT AGAIN TO TELL IT RIGHT: METAFICTIONAL REALISM IN

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

Invocation of the truth is a sign of lying.

—Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*

This is true.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Tim O'Brien is one of the best-known and most celebrated American authors to write about the Vietnam War. O'Brien's books have received many honors, including being awarded the National Book Award in Fiction, the James Fenimoore Cooper Prize from the Society of American Historians, the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger, and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize. *The Things They Carried* was also a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Like most successful literature of the Vietnam War, O'Brien's work is often judged by standards of realism and authenticity. The Broadway paperback edition of *The Things They Carried* begins with eight pages of acclaim for the book; however, the reviewers often view the text in very different ways. William Robertson of the *Miami Herald* writes "[t]he stories have a specificity of observed physical detail that makes them seem a model of the realist's art" (*TTTC* iii). While Robertson treats *The Things They Carried* as a work of literary realism, other reviewers value the book for a completely different artistic style. In fact, *Time* concludes that *The Things They Carried* captures the "free-fall sensation of fear and the surrealism of combat" (iv). *The Things They Carried* is difficult to nail down because it includes so many styles and genres. The question of what exactly *The Things They Carried* is has been continually debated by critics and reviewers since the book's release.

Is it a novel? A short story cycle? Fiction? Nonfiction? War story? Autobiography? In a 1991 interview with Martin Naparsteck, O'Brien said of the book, "It's a new form, I think. I blended my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary" (8). The book incorporates many different styles and genres and by doing so, further emphasizes one of the book's most important elements that O'Brien describes as "writing about stories": metafiction. Like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Things They Carried* is about itself as much as it is about Vietnam. By continually re-telling the same stories, by focusing on the medium of stories, and through the use of intertextuality, O'Brien draws attention to his work as a fiction and by so doing, allows readers to participate in the construction of his narratives and teaches them to be better readers of war stories they will encounter elsewhere.

Like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Things They Carried* is made up of layers of narrations. It is impossible to nail down one version of a story as the true or real version. The structure of the book itself is a complex network of stories. The book does not follow one unified story throughout, but the various stories do revolve around the experiences and memories of the narrator "Tim O'Brien." Although the stories are repeated and retold throughout, the book does follow a generally chronological progression. Nearly every section of the book can stand on its own, but the individual sections also comment on and color one another. The individual strength of the individual stories is demonstrated by the copyright page of the book, which indicates that several of the stories have been previously published elsewhere:

> Of these stories, five first appeared in *Esquire*: "The Things They
> Carried," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra

Bong," "The Ghost Soldiers," and "The Lives of the Dead." "Speaking of

Courage" was first published in *The Massachusetts Review*, then later, in a

revised version in *Granta*. "In the Field" was published in *Gentlemen's*

Quarterly. "Style," "Spin," and "The Man I Killed" were first published,

in different form, in *The Quarterly*. "The Things They Carried" appeared

in *The Best American Short Stories 1987*. "Speaking of Courage" and

"The Ghost Soldiers" appeared in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*

(1978 and 1982). "On the Rainy River" first appeared in *Playboy*. (xii)

While the stories were all at least slightly revised before being published in *The Things*

They Carried, eleven of the twenty-one stories published in the book had been previously

published elsewhere. Because much of *The Things They Carried* had already been told,

the versions of the stories included in the book cannot necessarily be considered the

correct or "true" versions. All of the versions of the stories work together to present

possibilities of "story-truth."

The Things They Carried is essentially a retelling or re-narrating of stories that

have already been told. To be clear, I will use the terms "story" and "narrative" as

defined by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Genette defines

story (*histoire*) as "the signified or narrative content" and narrative (*recit*) as "the

signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (27). The story can be defined as

the sequence of events recounted in a text, while the narrative is the text itself.

Throughout his career, O'Brien has written many narratives that all contain the same

story. In these works, the story remains basically the same (the same basic things take

place in each of the various versions) while the narrative changes (O'Brien uses different

details, wording, and structure). *The Things They Carried* contains several narratives of stories that O'Brien had previously narrated elsewhere. Although most of the republished works retained their original titles, they were all at least slightly—some significantly—revised, creating new narratives even when the stories went basically unchanged. By the time *The Things They Carried* was published in 1991, O'Brien had been reworking and retelling some of these stories for ten or more years. How much of these narratives are based on O'Brien's memories of Vietnam and how much is based in previous narratives? In "Spin," O'Brien writes, "Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (38). Often when a story is told over and over again, the narrator relies more on the memory of previous narrations than the memory of the event itself. These narratives become simulacra that simulate other narratives rather than experience. O'Brien's stories have been told and retold so many times that each narrative expresses and reinterprets other narratives and not just O'Brien's lived experience in Vietnam.

Because O'Brien has told and retold his stories in various publications, speeches, and interviews and because every time the story is narrated in slightly different form, it is impossible to know if there is one true narrative. O'Brien creates a network of narratives that insist that none of them is true on its own. In fact, O'Brien's text argues that story-truth—which adapted to Genette's terms might become "narrative-truth"—can only be accessed by continuing to narrate and re-narrate the same story; "[y]ou can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (*TTTC* 85). In his article "The Solace of Bad Form: Tim O'Brien's Postmodernist Revisions of Vietnam in 'Speaking of Courage,'" Michael Kaufman argues that O'Brien moves from a modernist aesthetic in *Going After Cacciato*,

to a postmodernist aesthetic and morality in *The Things They Carried*. Kaufmann

suggests that in *Going After Cacciato* O'Brien attempted to follow Hemingway's

admonition to write "one true sentence," but that he realizes "[t]he truth he must tell here

will not fit into Hemingway's one true sentence; further, it is not a single truth. He must

risk the messiness of many sentences—some true, some perhaps not true—to tell the

story more fully" (337). O'Brien retells the same stories several times in *The Things They*

Carried, presenting readers with different perspectives, different details, different truths,

but the multiplicity of narratives is not limited to the book itself. The stories narrated in

The Things They Carried were told before the book was published and have continued to

be told since. All of the narratives work together to produce a constellation of narratives

that casts doubt on the factuality of any individual version, and at the same time, this

network of narratives is able to present certain truths about experience and about

Vietnam. The various narrations of the stories overlap and connect in a circular pattern

like Mitchell Sanders' yo-yo and Norman Bowker's drive around the lake. As O'Brien

writes, "[y]ou can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end" (*TTTC* 76).

  When O'Brien re-narrates the same story, that story approaches what Roland

Barthes defines as "Text" because it cannot be contained within one work or narrative.

Barthes writes of Text, "the Text cannot stop, at the end of a library shelf, for example;

the constitutive movement of the Text is a *traversal* [*traversée*]: it can cut across a work,

several works" (75). O'Brien's works or narratives tell the same story; however, with

each repetition the story also changes to include the differences that are part of that

narrative. It is impossible to tell which narrative is true because there is no *one* narrative.

Each of O'Brien's individual works or narratives contributes to the Text that traverses

their pages. The various works' differences create an indefinite story, a Text that "practices the infinite deferral of the signified" (76). As Barthes writes, "[t]he Text is plural. This does not mean just that it has several meanings, but rather that it achieves plurality of meaning, an *irreducible* meaning" (76). Similarly, O'Brien's stories achieve a plurality of meaning through their irreducible plurality of narratives. By allowing each story to take on a plurality of meaning through its many narrations, O'Brien is able to raise metafictional questions about storytelling, about reality, and about Vietnam. By juxtaposing different narrations of the same story, O'Brien begs the question, "Which is true?" Rather than answering this question by privileging one narrative over the other, O'Brien answers by suggesting another question: "What is truth?" By refusing to identify one narration as true, O'Brien empowers readers to determine truth and to find truth in different, even conflicting representations.

O'Brien continues to raise these questions outside of his published works in his interactions with the public. In a President's Lecture at Brown University on April 21, 1999, O'Brien offered some brief writing advice to the student body before narrating two of his stories, "On the Rainy River" and "The Man I Killed." However, O'Brien did not indicate that the stories he would be sharing had already been published, nor did he identify them as fictional. In fact, O'Brien framed them as "real" experiences by connecting them to the biographical introduction he had received by beginning with, "I grew up, as President Gee said, in a small prairie town in southern Minnesota" ("Tim O'Brien"). O'Brien moved smoothly into the narratives and related their stories conversationally, filling in details rather than reading directly from a book or manuscript.

After narrating "On the Rainy River," O'Brien characteristically challenged the classifications of fiction and nonfiction when he said:

> [N]one of it's true. Or very little of it. It's—invented. No Ellroy, no Tip-Top Lodge, no pig factory . . . . [I]f I were to tell you the literal truth of what happened to me in the summer of nineteen sixty-eight, all I could tell you was that I played golf, and I worried about getting drafted. But that's a crappy story. Isn't it? . . . That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth. . . . . The story is still true, even though on one level it's not; it's made up. ("Tim O'Brien)

Here, O'Brien confuses his lived experience with the fictional events of his imagination. He describes the happening-truth of the summer before he entered the army was that he "played golf" and "worried about getting drafted." However, it is difficult to know if that is true or not. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, a supposedly nonfiction book about O'Brien's experience, he does mention "[g]olden afternoons on the golf course" (19); however, O'Brien also describes himself circling the town's lake, a detail central to Norman Bowker's and Paul Berlin's experiences in various narrations of the story "Speaking of Courage." The same stories appear throughout O'Brien's narrations of Vietnam even though some of those narrations are classified as nonfiction and some are classified as fiction. How can the same stories be both fiction and nonfiction? O'Brien uses the repetition of the same story in different narrations to challenge the categories of fact and fiction and to suggest that in storytelling, it is not so simple to separate truth from imagination.

O'Brien continues to challenge the distinction between fact and fiction by writing and speaking about his stories. Through metacommentary, O'Brien further confuses what is "real" and what is not even when he appears to be distinguishing fact from fiction. At the end of O'Brien's lecture at Brown, an audience member asked "how much is real and how much isn't real," specifically mentioning the story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" ("Tim O'Brien"). In response to the question, O'Brien maintains his form by offering multiple truths, multiple answers:

> Well, is it true? Number one, irrelevant. Number two, it's one of the few pieces in *The Things They Carried* that's actually based on some fact. That is to say, as absurd as it sounds, that shows you how nutty that war was. Uh, I can't guarantee the authenticity of the story, but there were women in Vietnam ("Tim O'Brien")

O'Brien's response to the question both confirms and denies the factuality of the narrative and the story it portrays. He first denies the question's validity by declaring the "happening truth" of the story to be "irrelevant;" however, he undercuts that comment by claiming that the story is "one of the few" factually true stories in the book and, thus, gives the story a privileged status. Immediately after suggesting that "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"—the most surreal story in *The Things They Carried*—is based on fact, O'Brien says he cannot "guarantee [its] authenticity," and offers only one small fact in support of the story's factuality: "there were women in Vietnam." O'Brien's response to his audience's request to explain "how much is real and how much isn't" does not do much to elucidate what parts of the story are based on things that "really" happened. Instead, O'Brien plays off of the audience's need to know what is "real" by challenging

the designation. He denies the relevance of happening truth, declares the story to be

something that truly happened, and instills doubt that it ever happened all at the same

time. This technique of refusing the authority of the author places power within readers to

determine what is reality and what is truth.

In addition to re-narrating stories both in different publications and in public

speeches and interviews, O'Brien re-narrates the same stories throughout *The Things*

They Carried. The stories that are repeated the most are the events surrounding the deaths

of Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, Kiowa, and the man O'Brien killed. Each of these stories

is narrated several times and each narration presents different aspects or perspectives of

each story. Ted Lavender's story is narrated in "The Things They Carried," "Love,"

"Spin," and "The Lives of the Dead." Curt Lemon's death is retold in "Spin," "How to

Tell a True War Story," and "The Lives of the Dead." Kiowa's story is narrated from

different perspectives and times in "Spin," "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the

Field," "Field Trip," and "The Lives of the Dead." The story of the Vietnamese man that

the narrator imagines himself killing is narrated in "Spin," "On the Rainy River," "The

Man I Killed," "Ambush," "Good Form," and "The Lives of the Dead." These four

stories are also mentioned in several of the other narratives. As O'Brien re-narrates these

stories, he adds new elements, new perspectives, and occasionally details that contradict

other narratives within the book, which denies readers one definitive version.

The various narrations of the story of the man O'Brien kills present different

possibilities although all are based on the same basic story. In "On the Rainy River,"

while O'Brien tries to determine if he will run away to Canada or go to the war, he sees

hundreds of people on the banks of the river "urging [him] toward one shore or the other"

(*TTTC* 59). The last person he lists is "a slim young man I would one day kill with a hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village of My Khe" (59). With that brief sentence, O'Brien establishes the basic structure of the story that will be re-narrated throughout the book. The story is first expounded in "The Man I Killed." Even within this one narration, O'Brien repeats elements of the story over and over again, particularly the description of the dead man's face: "His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut and the other was a star-shaped hole" (126). In "The Man I Killed," there is no question as to whether or not the narrator had killed the young man. The title itself unequivocally declares the fact. However, the title of the following chapter, "Ambush" refers to not only the squad's ambush outside My Khe and the narrator's daughter's ambush when she asks him if he ever killed anyone, but also to O'Brien's ambush of his readers as he uses the narrative to undermine the previous narrative. At the end of "Ambush," O'Brien writes a different story in which the young man "pass[es] within a few yards of [him] and suddenly smile[s] at some secret thought and then continue[s] up the trail to where it bends back into the fog" (134). In this narrative, the narrator imagines himself letting the young man live, changing the events of the story. In "Good Form," O'Brien changes the story again. O'Brien writes, "twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough" (179). In this narration of the story, the narrator states that he did not literally kill the man although he felt himself responsible in some way. By narrating the same story several different ways within this one book, O'Brien creates a network of contradictory narratives in which no one can be determined *the* true version.

O'Brien uses contradictory narrations of the same stories to challenge the designations of fact, fiction, truth, and reality. Each of the narrations builds on the other narrations of the same stories. The narrations grow together into a Text of irreducible plurality. No one version can be deemed the true version. By continually retelling his stories, O'Brien reveals his work to be a work of fiction. None of the stories can be completely based on lived experience because each has been told differently so many times. O'Brien draws attention to his writing process by re-narrating stories because his he presents his writing as a work of revision and a work in process rather than a direct representation of lived experience. The layers of narration that are so prominently featured throughout O'Brien's work clearly mark his writing as fictional. However, it is also through this complexity that O'Brien comments on the relationship of storytelling and reality and is thereby able to present some reality or truth of Vietnam. By placing conflicting narrations in juxtaposition, he raises questions about truth and perception. Can different versions of the same story all be true? O'Brien suggests the possibility that two narrations can tell the same story completely differently, and yet both stories can offer some element of truth because it is often difficult to know what the truth really is. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien writes:

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what
> happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes
> its own happening and has to be told that way. . . . . When a guy dies, like
> Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then
> look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And
> then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal

seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact

represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (*TTTC* 71).

O'Brien's Texts are true in the sense that they accurately represent the difficulty of

knowing exactly what happened. They represent experience as complex and

contradictory rather than simply true or false. Vietnam is a large and complex

hyperreality that contains both fact and fiction and is composed of thousands of

contradictory narratives. Although O'Brien's writing fails to accurately portray the "real"

Vietnam, the textual constellations O'Brien has created through retelling the same stories

allow readers to better view and understand one reality of Vietnam—a reality of

confusion and contradiction. O'Brien's layers of narration may demonstrate that it is

ultimately impossible to tell a completely true war story; however, by challenging

designations of fact and fiction, O'Brien can present some truth of Vietnam as it *seemed*.

Another metafictional technique used frequently in O'Brien's writing is a focus

on the medium of representation rather than the message or story being conveyed, which

draws attention to the fact that the stories *are* stories, not reality. Several of the chapter

titles in *The Things They Carried* demonstrate a focus on writing and storytelling: "Spin,"

"Style," "Notes," "Good Form," and especially, "How to Tell a True War Story."

Although *The Things They Carried* is a book about Vietnam, it is also just as much a

book about storytelling. Throughout the book, O'Brien-the-narrator regularly interrupts

the narration of Vietnam in order to narrate that narration. O'Brien tells how the stories

came to be, providing origin myths for his narrations. In "Love," the narrator asks Jimmy

Cross if he can "write a story about some of this" (29). Similarly, in "Notes," the narrator

describes a letter he received from Norman Bowker in which Bowker asks O'Brien-the-

narrator to write his story. Variations of the line "I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now" are repeated several times throughout the book, emphasizing the medium through which the stories are presented (34, 179, 225). Similarly, the narrator often describes how he has told stories in the past and why he has told them the way he has. In Good Form, O'Brien writes, "Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is" (179). This kind of metacommentary—telling the reader "why this book is written as it is"—is exactly the way that the book is written; it is an essential part of O'Brien's form. By discussing the stories as written artifacts, O'Brien draws attention to the work's fictionality and also allows for a particular reality of Vietnam to be expressed.

The chapter of *The Things They Carried* that is most blatantly metafictional is "How to Tell a True War Story." The chapter is a blend of storytelling theory and examples of storytelling that trains readers in the responsibilities of both readers and writers of war stories. As Milton J. Bates points out in his book *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, *The Things They Carried* "alternates between expounding the terms of the reader-writer contract and testing them. When both parties honor the contract, 'How to Tell [i.e., narrate] a True War Story' is implicitly also 'How to Tell [i.e., recognize] a True War Story'" (248). O'Brien's storytelling theory is both prescriptive and descriptive, and it raises questions about the success of O'Brien's storytelling. Readers are given the tools with which to decode and evaluate the work itself. When O'Brien writes, "[a] true war story is never moral," it begs the question "is this war story moral?" (68). By providing the measuring sticks by which to judge war stories, O'Brien emphasizes the constructed nature of stories. It is clear that O'Brien has not directly

communicated his lived experience; instead, he has carefully built stories in hopes of conveying some truth about Vietnam as well as reality in general. The multiple narrations of one story demonstrate that Vietnam can be narrated in many different ways because it is also a construction.

O'Brien continues to emphasize the constructed nature of Vietnam by placing storytelling performances within his narratives. In several places throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien lets his readers witness the narration of a war story, including the reaction of the audience. By placing narrations within his narration, O'Brien again draws attention to his book as a work of fiction, a narrative. These narrations also provide readers an opportunity to test out the storytelling theory they have learned and determine the success of each narration. O'Brien even places a narration within "How to Tell a True War Story," thus directly juxtaposing examples of narration with his theory of narration. Each narrator and listener has his own understanding of how true war stories should be told, and there is always an urgent concern that the stories are told right. Mitchell Sanders admits to making up a few things in his narration because he wanted his audience to "believe by the raw force of feeling" (76). O'Brien begins Rat Kiley's narration of "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" by warning readers that "Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement" because "he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt" (89).

Those who listen to the stories are similarly invested in the way that the stories are told. When Rat Kiley tells the story of Mary Anne Bell, Sanders dislikes Kiley's commentary, which he says "breaks the spell," and tells Kiley to "tell it right" by getting "the hell out of the way and let[ting] it tell itself" (106-107). Similarly, in "Ghost

Soldiers," when Norman Bowker tells the story of how "Morty Phillips used up his luck,"

Azar can't keep himself from butting in when he feels that Bowker has left out important

details. When Bowker indicates his displeasure at Azar's interruptions, Azar says, "Okay,

but *tell* it" (195). By allowing the performance of these narrations space within the text,

O'Brien is able to further develop his theory of storytelling by demonstrating how true

war stories are told. These narrations also raise questions about how *The Things They*

Carried was written and whether or not it is successful in telling a true war story. When

Sanders and Kiley feel the need to exaggerate and fabricate to make their stories more

real, it begs the question of whether or not O'Brien similarly embellished. O'Brien

presents himself as a writer who, like the narrators within his book, feels an urgency to

tell it right and who uses various storytelling techniques in his attempt to do so. However,

like Kiley, O'Brien cannot "get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself," nor does he

want to. Continually emphasizing the medium of representation is an essential part of his

form. It is by so doing that O'Brien is able represent the constructed nature of Vietnam

itself.

   Another technique O'Brien uses to draw attention to his text as a written artifact is

the use of accurate details from his personal life. The main character and the narrator of

The Things They Carried is named Tim O'Brien and shares some characteristics with

Tim O'Brien-the-author. When O'Brien revised the previously published stories to be

included in *The Things They Carried*, one important revision he made was to change

several of the stories so that Tim O'Brien was the new narrator or protagonist. "The

Ghost Soldiers" was originally published in *Esquire* in March 1981. In the original

narrative, the narrator was named Herbie, and he used more idiomatic and colloquial

language than the narration attributed to Tim O'Brien in the version published in *Things*.

Herbie's voice reflected that he "never went to college, and [he] wasn't exactly a whiz in

high school either" ("The Ghost Soldiers" 95). However, in *Things*, the new narrator, like

the author, went to college, and so the information about Herbie's lack of education was

deleted. Similarly, in the original "Ghost Soldiers," Herbie was in Delta Company, but in

the revised narrative, the narrator belongs to Alpha Company, the author's company.

Those narratives published closer to the 1990 publication of *The Things The Carried*

typically received fewer revisions before being republished in the book. For example, in

the original "The Lives of the Dead," the narrator was already named "Tim O'Brien" and

did not need to be revised to fit more smoothly into the world of the book. However,

O'Brien still made revisions to make the narrative fit more accurately with his own life.

The first version of the story was published in January 1989, and the narrator writes, "It's

now 1988. I'm forty-one years old" ("TLOTD" 138). In the revised version of the story

published in *The Things They Carried*, the dates and ages are changed to reflect author

O'Brien's real age at the date of publication. However, *Things* cannot be considered

exactly autobiographical either. Several details of O'Brien the narrator's life are not

consistent with that of O'Brien the author. For instance, O'Brien the author does not have

a nine year old daughter named Kathleen and did not return with her to Vietnam years

after the war (Calloway "How to Tell" 250). O'Brien deliberately mixes fact and fiction

to blur the line between the two and demonstrate that the hyperreality of Vietnam can be

made of both fiction and reality.

Other narratives were revised to give the character "Tim O'Brien" a more

prominent role. The revision of the chapter "Speaking of Courage" and the addition of a

chapter called "Notes" allowed the narrator Tim O'Brien to take a much more prominent role. "Speaking of Courage" was first published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1976 and initially told a story about the main character of *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin, after he came home from the war. In "Notes," a piece of metafiction about the creation and revision of "Speaking of Courage," O'Brien the narrator explains how he had originally written the story to be part of *Going After Cacciato* but was unable to tell the story accurately and still have it fit in the novel. The *Massachusetts Review* version of "Courage" tells the story of Berlin thinking about how he could have won the Silver Star if he had saved Frenchie Tucker from the tunnels, an event that takes place in *Going After Cacciato*. However, in the revised narrations published in *Granta* in 1989 and *Things*, the main character is changed to Norman Bowker, who drives around a lake in his hometown thinking about how he might have won the Silver Star if he would have been able to save Kiowa from the shit field. Through the addition of "Notes," the revised narrations of "Courage" are not only about a man's inability to verbalize his experience at war once he is home, but are also largely about the narrator O'Brien's failure to tell his friend's story right. O'Brien uses details from his life to connect himself to O'Brien the narrator and to make his origin myth for "Courage" plausible.

  In "Notes," the narrator explains that he wrote "Courage" in 1975 "at the suggestion of Norman Bowker (*TTTC* 155). Because the initial version of "Courage" was published in 1976 it is likely that O'Brien wrote the story in 1975. In "Notes," O'Brien the narrator mentions two of his books, *Going After Cacciato* and *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, titles O'Brien the author had written and published. In his writing, O'Brien bestows characteristics of the author upon the narrator in order to confuse reality and fiction, and

similarly, in interviews, O'Brien the author will often take on characteristics of O'Brien the narrator. In an interview given in 1989 before *The Things They Carried* was published, O'Brien tells the story of receiving a letter from Norman Bowker as something he experienced:

> "Speaking of Courage," for example, came from a letter I received from a guy named Norman Bowker, a real guy, who committed suicide after I received his letter. He was talking to me in his letter about how he just couldn't talk to anybody about it. He didn't know what to say; he felt inarticulate. All he could do was drive around and around in his hometown in Iowa, around this lake. (Naparsteck 7)

O'Brien claims the story is something that really happened, but the details are suspicious. The copyright page indicates that the name "Norman Bowker" is imaginary. The detail of driving around the lake has already been attributed to both O'Brien in his memoir and Paul Berlin in the original "Speaking of Courage"—is it really Bowker's experience? Probably not. In fact, in the same interview, O'Brien says, "The story about Norman Bowker is made up. There is no Norman Bowker" (8). O'Brien continues to challenge designations of reality and fiction by affirming both that the story is real and that it is not. By refusing to outline which parts of his stories are true and which aren't, O'Brien emphasizes the ability of fiction to convey truth. Vietnam is constructed of both real events and simulacra, and, thus, fictional representations are capable of presenting particular realities of Vietnam.

At the end of "Notes," O'Brien is tied up even more in the story of "Speaking of Courage." The narrator writes, "In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear

that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own" (160-61). Finally, the story is not Paul Berlin's or Norman Bowker's; it is Tim O'Brien's. This is confirmed by placing "Notes" and "Speaking of Courage" among other stories that demonstrate O'Brien's complicity in Kiowa's death. "In the Field" depicts O'Brien returning to the field where Kiowa died. In the revised version of "The Lives of the Dead" published in *The Things They Carried* one line is revised to change the character O'Brien's role in Kiowa's death. Originally the line read, "I helped dig my friend Kiowa out of the muck along the Song Tra Bong" ("TLOTD" 142). In the revised version the line is changed to, "I watched my friend Kiowa sink into the muck along the Song Tra Bong" (*TTTC* 242). O'Brien has changed the narrator's role from someone who helped in the aftermath to someone who watched his friend die. Of course, because the events of "Speaking of Courage" have been narrated so many times, this narration with O'Brien as the central character is not the "true" narrative anymore than any of the previous narratives are. All of the narratives form one Text in which Paul Berlin, Norman Bowker, and Tim O'Brien can all live the same story without there being any contradiction. The story presents truth about the difficulties of friendship, guilt, and courage regardless of who—if anyone—really lived through the story's events.

By allowing Berlin, Bowker, and O'Brien to all carry the burden of having "almost won the Silver Star for valor," the Text further emphasizes the nameless responsibility for death and destruction carried by all soldiers (*TTTC* 140). In "In the Field," Norman Bowker describes Kiowa's death as "Nobody's fault, . . . Everbody's"

(176). Similarly, O'Brien the narrator offers one narration of the story about the man he killed in which he does not actually kill the man but feels guilt regardless. He writes, "twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough" (179). Similarly, in *Going After Cacciato*, all of the men in the squad are told to touch the grenade that is used to kill Lieutenant Sidney Martin. The Text of "Speaking of Courage" presents itself as a fictional story because the same events are variously attributed to different actors and different circumstances; however, this fictionalization allows O'Brien's writings to present a particular truth about the way that many soldiers can experience guilt and grief. By refusing to attach the guilt of letting Kiowa (or Frenchie Tucker) die, O'Brien is able to demonstrate the complicity many soldiers felt regardless of individual actions.

    The Things They Carried is not only a retelling of O'Brien's previously narrated stories, but it also re-narrates other texts and stories about the Vietnam War and about war in general both to present the shortcomings of literary representation and to attempt to present some truth about Vietnam through multiple narrations. Through its intertextuality, *Things* further identifies itself as a fiction, a response to other fictions. Because of his focus on telling true war stories, O'Brien places his writing in conversation with previous attempts to tell war stories. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien warns, "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (68-69). In twentieth-century writing about war one particular phrase has repeatedly been described as an "old lie," perhaps most famously in Wilfred Owen's best-known World War I poem. The phrase—"dulce et

decorum est mori pro patria," roughly translated as "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country"—comes from Horace's *Odes* and, thus, is a part of a war story itself. O'Brien directly references this phrase in his 1975 memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, in which his friend quotes "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly":

> These fought in any case,
>
> and some believing,
>
>   pro domo, in any case . . . .
>
> Died some, pro patria,
>
>   non "dulce" non "et decor" (37-38)

O'Brien ends the quote there, but the poem continues:

> walked eye-deep in hell
>
> believing in old men's lies.

Pound, Owen, and O'Brien all condemn the sentiment that it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country, but in so doing, all three writers also indicate "the impotence of poetic tradition to speak truthfully of war" (Griffith 37). Because the source of the "old lie" is a Horatian ode, these modern texts that quote Horace's claim not only challenge the nobility of war, but also confront the ability of language and literature to represent war. O'Brien directly questions the possibility of ever writing a true war story when he writes, "it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (82). O'Brien does not lose hope in storytelling; in fact, he claims that "stories can save us" (225). However, O'Brien confronts the failed literary representations of the past and attempts a new form in hope of presenting some truth about war and particularly about Vietnam.

In addition to the tradition of war poetry, O'Brien responds to popular representations of Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*. Although O'Brien calls "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" "one of the few pieces in *The Things They Carried* that's actually based on some fact" ("Tim O'Brien"), "Sweetheart" is also one of the stories most blatantly adapting and revising other texts, particularly *Heart of Darkness* and, thereby, *Apocalypse Now*. In their article "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong: Tim O'Brien's (Feminist?) *Heart of Darkness*," Terry J. Martin and Margaret Stiner argue that "*Heart of Darkness* was O'Brien's principal source for the story ["Sweetheart"]" and draw several comparisons between the two texts (94). Martin and Stiner point out that both Mary Anne and Kurtz "display the trophies of the kill"—Kurtz's heads and Mary Anne's tongues. They also underscore Marlow's and Mary Anne's "egoist desire[s] to ingest and dominate the world: Marlow describes seeing Kurtz 'open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him' (61); likewise, Mary Anne claims, 'Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country'" (94).

There are many more similarities between "Sweetheart" and *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. Like *Heart of Darkness*, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" uses a frame. The narrator of the story is unnamed but could be considered to be the same narrator of many of the other stories in the book, "Tim O'Brien." As Marlow's story in *Heart of Darkness* is mediated through an unnamed narrator, Rat Kiley's story is mediated through an unnamed narrator. Like Tim O'Brien in his address at Brown, the narrator of "Sweetheart" refuses to "guarantee the authenticity of the story" by describing its source, Rat Kiley, as someone who has "a reputation for exaggeration and

overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts" (*TTTC* 89). Thus, the story has not only

gone through several revisions and retellings—particularly the ending which Rat heard

through Eddie Diamond later on—but the primary storyteller is identified as prone to

exaggeration. This mediation of the narrative follows *Heart of Darkness* and also gives

the story a mythic quality.

Like *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, "Sweetheart" tells the story of a

journey into the dark soul of man. Unlike Conrad's novella and Coppola's film,

O'Brien's story does not trace the journey of a military man; instead, O'Brien places

sweet Mary Anne Bell of Cleveland, Ohio into the role. The story's surreal quality comes

from this placement of a symbol of American innocence and youth in the jungles of

Vietnam. The narrator describes Mary Anne as having "long white legs and blue eyes and

a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too" (93). She is the girl next door

who wanted the American Dream—to "be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house

near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children" (94). This change in the

narrative from a hardened military man—a character that readers, especially those

familiar with the *Heart of Darkness*/*Apocalypse Now* story, would view as more likely to

fall victim to the horror of war—to a sweet young girl adds a new level of surrealism to a

familiar story and allows O'Brien to question the innocence of the Americans at home in

comparison to those who go to war.

"Sweetheart" also uses themes and elements from the film *Apocalypse Now* in

order to re-narrate Coppola's story into a form that suits O'Brien's Vietnam. O'Brien

connects "Sweetheart" directly to *Apocalypse Now* when, after building interest in Mary

Anne's character and development, Rat admits that he does not know the end of the story.

Like Coppola, Rat is unsure how the story ends, a failure that Mitchell Sanders, who

reminds both Rat and readers of the conventions of storytelling throughout the story,

finds particularly offensive: " 'it's against the *rules*,' Sanders said. 'Against human

nature. This elaborate story, you can't say, Hey, by the way, I don't know the *ending*. I

mean, you got certain obligations'" (113). Of course, telling an elaborate story without

knowing the ending is exactly what Coppola did in the filming, editing, and re-releasing

Apocalypse Now. In a parody of *Apocalypse Now* on *Saturday Night Live*, Martin Sheen

plays a studio representative sent to "terminate" Coppola's filming "with extreme

prejudice" (Suid 366). Sheen tells Coppola that the studio has decided to blow up the set

to prevent him from continuing work on the film. When someone suggests that they

should film the bombing, Coppola says, "Yeah. A B-52 strike. . . . That's it. That's it! My

ending!!! One of my endings!!" (366-367). O'Brien recreates the public's expectations

for storytelling and the public's confusion at Coppola's telling a story without an ending

through the character of Sanders and, thus, connects his story to *Apocalypse Now*.

O'Brien re-narration of *Heart of Darkness*/*Apocalypse Now* allows him to change

elements of the Coppola's narration that he disliked. In a 1979 article published in

Esquire, O'Brien expresses frustration at the stereotypical image of the Vietnam veteran

propagated through media representations. He particularly focuses on *Apocalypse Now*,

the most recent and most surreal depictions of the Vietnam vet:

> *Apocalypse Now* offers a souped-up version of the old stereotype: the
>
> weird, numbed-out, berserk GI. Despite its clear metaphorical intentions,
>
> the film carries a quite literal message: Not only was the war crazy, but so
>
> were the men who fought it. . . . Vietnam, the film seems to say, was a

loony bin, and American soldiers were its inmates. . . . . Power, greed, megalomania—these, so it would seem, were the fuels that fired American behavior in Vietnam. While all this is surely a comment on the forces that led us into war, a rendering of that "heart of darkness" lurking in the national bosom, one can't help wondering how many moviegoers will interpret it so subtlety. ("Violent Vet" 100)

By re-narrating the story of *Apocalypse Now* (or *Heart of Darkness* in Vietnam), O'Brien is able to discard the meanings he dislikes in Coppola's adaptation and refill the story with new meaning. He does this by recasting Kurtz as innocent, mainstream America through Mary Anne Bell. The metaphor of America taking the journey to the heart of darkness is more dramatically depicted when it is embodied in a seventeen year-old cheerleader. This revision to the story does not allow the audience to "shove [their culpabilities] off onto ex-GIs" as O'Brien suggests stereotypical depictions of Vietnam vets do ("Violent Vet" 100).

     The Things They Carried is not easily categorized or contained. It is a Text that stretches beyond its covers and that continues to re-narrate its war stories. Because so much of the book's focus is on storytelling and narration rather than Vietnam itself, it is especially capable of presenting particular truths about Vietnam. The Vietnam that Americans remember and continue to experience today is largely shaped by stories— historic, filmic, literary, and oral—and because the hyperreality of Vietnam is formed through these simulacra, O'Brien's focus on how stories are shaped and told provides insight into how Vietnam is similarly shaped and told. O'Brien's network of stories and

narratives instructs readers in "how to tell a true war story" among the larger network of

stories and narratives about America and its wars.

THE ETHICS OF A FICTIONALIZED REALITY:

IMPLICATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

And, in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story,

except maybe "Oh."

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

In his book *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative*,

Jim Neilson takes issue with the positive critical reception of *The Things They Carried*,

which he describes as "little more than a new aestheticism, a belief in the power of

storytelling and the literary imagination" (197). Neilson argues that highly fictionalized

representations of the Vietnam War, such as *The Things They Carried* and *Apocalypse*

Now, ultimately fail because they cannot and do not present the reality of the war. He

writes:

> To speak of the surreality and unreality of Vietnam is to mystify the war
>
> by confusing its perceptual experience with its material fact. True, from a
>
> soldier's viewpoint the chaos of battle was surreal, and some of the
>
> elements of war . . . may have seemed "unreal." The problem with this
>
> perception is that it has dominated literary portrayals of the Vietnam War.
>
> To see Vietnam as resisting finality, as many critics have, is to see the war
>
> as inexplicable, therefore with no lesson to be learned. This denial of
>
> finality means denying any certain and explicit understanding of the war.
>
> (195)

Neilson's argument raises important ethical issues in relation to representation. Any artist

who attempts to represent Vietnam faces the challenge of representing an extremely

complex and emotionally significant event that spanned nearly twenty years of American history and that continues to shape perceptions of the United States at war today. Such a task entails a considerable ethical responsibility to present the war as "authentically" as possible. The preoccupation with accurately portraying Vietnam is a common theme in the literature of Vietnam. As Neilson points out, representations of Vietnam that present the war as surreal and unreal can be viewed as failing to present some of the realities of war. Similarly, the veterans' bumper sticker "Vietnam was a war not a movie" serves as a reminder that despite the war's surreal and unreal elements, Vietnam was a real war in which real men and women were killed. However, while it is important to recognize that metafictional representations of Vietnam such as *The Things They Carried* and *Apocalypse Now* do not present *the* real Vietnam, Neilson's claim that "[t]o see Vietnam as resisting finality" denies "its material fact" and precludes the possibility of any lessons or understanding being taken from the war or its narration is flawed.

Vietnam has grown into a multiplicitous signifier shaped by both real events and simulacra that has taken on and will continue to take on a plurality of meanings. The reality of Vietnam is really a hyperreality in which fiction is as real as reality, and because of this, representations of Vietnam that "resist finality" are often those most capable of presenting that complexity. However, highly fictionalized texts that refuse the limitations of one narrative and emphasize the constructed nature of both stories and reality must still face the ethical demands of representation, including the demand that their representations do not lose sight of the war's "material fact." O'Brien's "Notes" demonstrates concern with this responsibility of not losing Vietnam in the process of storytelling. After publishing the first narration of "Speaking of Courage," the narrator

receives a letter from Bowker who writes, "It's not terrible, . . . but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?" (*TTTC* 160). O'Brien shows that leaving Vietnam out is unacceptable even though earlier in the book he writes, "And, in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. . . . . It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (*TTTC* 85). Although O'Brien claims that true war stories are not about war, even in O'Brien's list of the non-war elements of his stories he includes "sunshine," which is cited as the cause of Curt Lemon's death: "Lemon step[ped] from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining . . . . and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree" (*TTTC* 70). Here, sunshine is a land mine, an implement of war. Similarly, love, memory, and sorrow are elements of war. O'Brien suggests that while it is inexcusable to leave Vietnam out of a true Vietnam war story, Vietnam contains more than the material fact of combat.

Nielson's claim that representations of Vietnam that "resist finality" are unable to provide lessons or understanding is similarly flawed. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* both refuse to present one narration of their respective Vietnams, but both also provide their own lessons of Vietnam. The lessons readers and audiences can take from *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are lessons in reading. These texts demonstrate how reality is shaped through storytelling and how histories are emplotted into fictional narrative structures. *Apocalypse Now* emplots the events of Vietnam into the storyline of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and takes on much of the novella's thematic concerns. By so doing, *Apocalypse* is able to both demonstrate the construction of history

and raise ethical questions about the American War in Vietnam. Just as *Heart of Darkness* questions the morality of European colonization, *Apocalypse Now* works as a metaphorical examination of the United States' journey into Vietnam; Were the country's actions in Vietnam a form of imperialism or colonialism? Did the American war in Vietnam repeat the mistakes of the French war? Were the Americans too rich and too numerous? Similarly, *The Things They Carried* teaches readers to be suspicious of narratives that present themselves as reality and offer up tidy morals, but still manages to slip in a few lessons. O'Brien uses his stories to challenge traditional notions of courage, and teaches that there is more to courage than Hollywood heroics. In "On the Rainy River," rather than presenting the hero as one who goes to war to fight for his country, O'Brien associates courage with *not* going to war. He writes, "I was a coward. I went to the war" (*TTTC* 61). At one point in *Things*, O'Brien directly addresses his readers and charges them with preventing future wars: "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" (*TTTC* 69). O'Brien's Vietnam offers specific lessons in courage and politics to its readers, but perhaps the most significant lesson offered to readers is the instruction to carefully examine war stories and to recognize the fictional elements of reality.

Ultimately, it is impossible to produce a representation of the Vietnam War that is factually authentic, a representation that accurately captures all of the elements, events, and simulacra that compose Vietnam. As Hayden White argues, "[T]here is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found" ("Literary Theory" 9). O'Brien's and Coppola's stories were not found. They were constructed to present the reality of

Vietnam as it *seemed* both to a director interested in larger metaphorical questions who had never gone to war and to a soldier-turned-writer who wanted to save his friends through stories. Their Vietnams are different, but both access particular realities of the war even if they are unable to present *the* reality of Vietnam.

As Vietnam continues to be narrated, its hyperreality will continue to shift and change. As new artists add their voices to the mobile script of Vietnam, new perspectives and new realities of Vietnam will be presented. These artists will address and re-narrate the stories told in previous narrations of Vietnam, just as O'Brien re-presented Coppola's Vietnam. This infinite narration of Vietnam will not guarantee that Vietnam will be finally accurately and realistically portrayed; rather, this continual narration will add new meaning and new simulation, making Vietnam more complex and thereby more resistant to representation. Neither one single text nor a network of texts can ever fully portray Vietnam. The realities of Vietnam are irreducible. However, many texts can present individual realities and truths of Vietnam, and because Vietnam is a hyperreality, some of those realities can best be portrayed through fiction and unreality. *Apocalypse Now* and *The Things They Carried* are able to present specific realities of Vietnam specifically because of their metafictional techniques, which emphasize the texts' fictional or unreal natures. Thus, for some war stories, the contradictory notion that "in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" is nothing but the truth (*TTTC* 82).

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