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A Change in Theatre

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American Cinema is a quintessential form of American culture. It is a product of the American ideology and domestic viewers generally judge the films through that lens. From the days of Classical Hollywood through the New American Cinema up to today's contemporary film industry, American society has cast a shadow over the commercialized art form, especially in the war genre. For many years, overt patriotism dripped onto the screen with movies that depicted the military in a positive light. However, the public's perception of war during the Vietnam era headed in a pacifist direction, and the release of three New Hollywood films signaled a shift in the ideology of American cinema to an anti-war sentiment.

Film classification can help to identify specific cinematic patterns in various ways. The year of a film's release tells the viewer about the state of mind of the production. The director can give insight to a style predominant in his or her filmography. Then there is a genre. A film's genre is a definition of how the settings, characters, and motifs in one film are similar to the pattern of conventions in another (Schatz 564-568). Furthermore, a genre can separate films from each other. For example, in 1957, two films directed by Billy Wilder were released: *Love in the Afternoon* and *Witness for the Prosecution*. What sets these two apart is that the former is a romantic comedy and the latter is a courtroom drama. Furthermore, both of Wilder's films can be considered time capsules for what romantic comedies

and courtroom dramas were like in 1957. As Thomas Schatz points out, "changes in cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, the economics of the industry, and so forth, continually refine any film genre" (564). Simply put, film genres are transformative.

One of the most dynamic genres is the war film. As with any other genre, a war film is largely made up of a series of conventions. Stock characters include the seasoned leader, inexperienced recruits new husband/father, loyal companion, and the wise mother, among others (Eberwein 11-12). Narrative elements also reappear across war films. Basic training montages may show physically demanding drills and recruits bonding, combat sequences portray brutal carnage and aerial dogfights, and scenes depicting the aftermath of war include the difficult readjustment of veterans into their daily lives at home (12-13). The symbols and iconography present in these movies have found a way to stay relevant throughout the history of American cinema, even if the genre and mode of filmmaking itself has changed dramatically over time.

The war genre was born in the days of Classical Hollywood, which Schatz describes as "a period when various social, industrial, technological, economic and aesthetic forces struck a delicate balance" (526) from roughly 1917 to 1967. However, Classical Hollywood was not just a period, but a style as well. David Bordwell says that Classical Hollywood style "strives to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and invisible storytelling; that the film should be comprehensible and unambiguous; and that it possesses a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation" (3). Movies were controlled and regulated by the Motion Picture Production Code which censored the industry from 1930 until 1967 with restrictions on what content could be shown on screen.

From the late 1930s through the end of 1941, the topic of US entry into the Second World War dominated the public forum. Isolationists believed that America should be put first and that getting involved in a global conflict would wind up "infringing the nation's freedom of action," a key principle of an individualist society that values autonomy (Rubin 241). On the opposite end, there was interventionism. Interventionists thought that the US had a duty to

support international causes, a belief which quickly became the national policy following the attack on Pearl Harbor (Ray 89-92). And because the film industry inherently follows the national agenda, especially in the time of the Production Code, Hollywood started churning out interventionist movies. Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) documentaries used propaganda to instill patriotism in soldiers (Scott 243-247). For the average American viewer though, it was the film *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) that helped to shift public opinion in favor of fighting in World War II. The film transposed its interventionist ideology to the silver screen as an archetypal product of the Classic Hollywood mechanism through the use of a love triangle (Ray 92-93). The ability to sway an audience with thinly veiled propaganda proved to be effective.

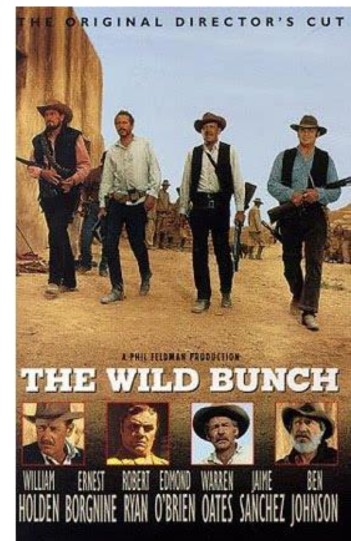
Once the Second World War ended, Americans turned their focus toward the cause of anti-communism. In the midst of a Red Scare, legislators formed the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to purge Hollywood of suspected subversives (Sperber 355). Several movie stars aligned themselves with the crusade. Elites such as John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, Clark Gable, Cecil B. DeMille, and Walt Disney targeted the personal lives and beliefs of their colleagues (Meter 2). Their anti-communist stance, along with the pressure of HUAC and the Production Code, spilled onto the screen.

During the decade of the 1950s and up until the final years of the 1960s, a plethora of war films were released which promoted a jingoistic attitude. Many of these starred John Wayne, a prominent figure in the anti-communist inquisition against Hollywood. This period was a 'Golden Age' of sorts for war films which tended to glorify and/or romanticize WWII in a manner that rationalized the interventionist policies of the United States in the fight against communism at home and abroad (Laderman 585). After all, historical films work toward "lending the past a present stature" (Sobchack 332). *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan) and *Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annakin) are not about World War Two, but instead a retrospective look at World War II through the lens of 1949 and 1965, respectively. Although pro-war themes would be popular and acclaimed for many years, they could not keep up with a generation gap.

The Sixties were a transitional period for citizens of the United States. During this time, the counterculture movement "developed in response to dissatisfaction with the dominant culture of the Cold War." (Suri 46) The beat generation was becoming the hippie generation. The rejection of authority included an anti-interventionist protest against the Vietnam War. This shift can be seen in the reception of *The Green Berets* (John Wayne, 1968). Wayne's film brought the xenophobic nature of films set during the Second World War to a movie about the Vietnam War. Audiences and critics trashed it. A young Roger Ebert wrote that the film was "offensive not only to those who oppose American policy but even to those who support it . . . perhaps we could have believed this film in 1962," but certainly not "after 23,000 Americans have been killed." (Ebert) Just as a film that directly advocates for interventionism was being released, an era of filmmakers advocating against interventionism was being born.

As pointed out earlier, the Production Code came to an end in 1967 when it was replaced by the Ratings System. In the years following its end, the New American Cinema broke down the barriers of what could be shown on screen. The New American Cinema, also known as the American New Wave, was a cinematic movement in which films made by directors fresh out of college with a sense of authorship challenged the censorship and ideas of Classical Hollywood that failed to resonate with younger audiences (Cook 12-13). This shift in the film industry was happening during the controversial Vietnam War.

In the early years of the New American Cinema films did not often directly address the Vietnam War, but the growing antagonism found its way to the screen in the form of subtle and not so subtle allegory. One example comes from *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). In the violent climax of the revisionist western, opposing forces massacre each other at a village. Afterward, a haunting image is shown of the village's inhabitants, now displaced, being forced to leave their home that has been destroyed by an outside conflict. This conclusion can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for the carnage of the Vietnam War (Arnold 137). The confrontational film was a predecessor of what was yet to come.



After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the film industry began to take a direct look at the conflict through the cinematic lens. Three films, *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), all released at the tail end of the 1970s, examined the impact that the Vietnam War had on the mental and physical state of veterans as well as the overall catastrophic nature of its effect on the society. In the Seventies, Hal Ashby had a continuous string of hits, including *Harold and Maude* (1971),

The Last Detail (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), and *Being There* (1979). He was seen as an innovative director, with *Bound for Glory* (1976) being the first film to showcase the technology of Steadicam (Schrader 59). Although *Coming Home* dealt with the Vietnam War, none of its screen time depicted combat. The story follows Sally (Jane Fonda), whose husband has just been deployed, who falls for a wounded veteran in the hospital where she volunteers. The viewer sees the pain that Luke (Jon Voight) has to endure from his combat injuries. *Coming Home* portrays the sensitive side of the damaged veteran, one who is not the fearless hero but a man who seeks intimacy without "phallic dominance" (Conlon 26). This representation of masculinity would not have been acceptable in the days of the Production Code war film.

Michael Cimino was a polarizing figure of the American New Wave. It is true that his overly aggressive personality in the making of *Heaven's Gate* (1980) effectively "buried the New Hollywood," but he was a beloved director only a year prior to reaching infamy (Biskind 376). Cimino's film *The Deer Hunter* was released in the same year as *Coming Home*. Whereas Ashby's film showed the physical toll of the Vietnam War, *The Deer Hunter* was all about the impact that service had on the mental health of those fighting. The representation of PTSD in the film was explicit. The legendary Russian Roulette scenes illustrate how psychologically traumatic the Vietnam War was for its veterans (Arnold 160). Nick (Christopher Walken), was forced to play the sadistic game when he was a captive at a POW camp. However, long after he has gone AWOL, he willingly volunteered for rounds of Russian

Roulette, each time taking a chance at suicide. Such imagery would not have passed the censors in Classical Hollywood.

Francis Ford Coppola might just be the icon of the New American Cinema. Movies like *The Godfather* (1972), *The Conversation* (1974), and *The Godfather Part II* (1974) are considered among the greatest ever made (Biskind 447). Coppola's most arduous filmmaking task was the production of *Apocalypse Now*. The film was a very loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (Eberwein 32). *Apocalypse Now* shows the impact that an American invasion had on the land where it went to war. Shots of "chaotic battle sequences" and the "tragically absurd slaughter of the boat people" flood the screen (18). These are similar to the combat scenes of John Wayne war movies, but this time they are shown in a way that does not advocate killing the enemy.

Coming Home, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now* are starkly different from films of the war genre that were made in the Classical Hollywood era. At a time when the American public grew angry over the actions perpetrated by their military, the New American cinema was responsive to the society's change in ideology from pro-war and pro-interventionism to anti-war and anti-interventionism.

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