

Deer Hunter kills the truth

by Roger Metcalfe

When I was 13 or 14 I went to see **The Green Berets**. At such an impressionable age I was caught up with the heroics of John Wayne shooting down the gooks as he had shot down the redskins in his innumerable westerns. **The Green Berets** made it all clean and simple to me and the audience; the Americans were in Vietnam to protect democracy, justice and a loyal American ally. We all cheered and clapped at the end of the movie, and for months afterwards all school and family arguments were settled by pointing to **The Green Berets** and its explanation of the American presence in South East Asia.

The subsequent years were hard on **The Green Berets**. It was the first and only pro-war film on Vietnam, as American opinion swung against the war and its backers. It deserved the death it got. Besides the lies it told about the American involvement in Vietnam, it was an awful film; its bad acting was matched by only the atrocious plot.

I was reminded of all this last week after I had seen **The Deer Hunter**. It is undoubtedly the most widely-heralded of the recent post-war American cinema that deals with the war effort, such as **Coming Home** and **The Boys in C Company**. It is in some parts a brilliantly made film, particularly in its acting and photography. **The**

Deer Hunter is also the most dishonest film about the Vietnam war since **The Green Berets**.

The number of enthusiastic film reviews that have greeted **The Deer Hunter** since its release have all treaded lightly over the film's unabashed patriotism. The media's enthrallment with the movie's symbolism (You've got to shoot the deer with one shot) is consistent with their self-induced amnesia about the lessons of the Vietnam war. For the media the scenes of Vietnam in **The Deer Hunter** are metaphor, which could easily have been replaced by any other exciting outing such as a canoe ride down a backwards river.

These reviews conveniently avoid what's obviously so deliberate in the film. The media's amnesia aside, **The Deer Hunter** is about Vietnam. It tells the story of three young working class friends from a steel town in Pennsylvania and the impact of the war upon each of them. One returns to America as a hero, a second returns a cripple and a third returns in a casket. In making its comment on the war through the story of these friends **The Deer Hunter** reports all the myths about America in Vietnam that I had thought were long buried with **The Green Berets**.

The Deer Hunter's principle myth-making lies with its treatment of the Vietnamese.

No one seeing the film could help but be left the impression that all Vietnamese are tricky orientals who play Russian roulette with human lives with the same intensity as Canadians play hockey. The film could find nothing positive to say about any of the Vietnamese people it portrayed. The impact of the film's racism upon the audience is therefore hardly supporting. "So they're the gooks" was one repetitive comment the audience heard while leaving the theatre.

The Deer Hunter's portrayal of the Vietnamese guerillas might as well have been written by General Westmorland (American Commander in Vietnam during the war's height). The film's first scene in Vietnam is of a guerilla blowing up innocent women and children in a village hamlet. Naturally, the audience reacts against this. It would be a healthy reaction if it was true.

Enough documentation has been collected over the past fifteen years to amply disprove almost all of the American government's allegations of massacres by Vietnamese guerillas. The most celebrated allegation, the Communist slaughter of thousands of civilians in Hue during the Tet offensive in 1968, was subsequently proved to have been caused by the fleeing Vietnamese army and American bombing. The frequency of guerillas slaughtering innocent civilians in Vietnam was possibly the same as French resistance fighters killing innocent women and children in France during the Nazi occupation. In both cases, they were fighting to free these very people from foreign occupation. Why would they needlessly slaughter them?

The climax of **The Deer Hunter** is shortly after the massacre scene, when our three young friends, now captured by the guerillas, are forced to play Russian roulette with each other. They escape in a John Wayne like shootout much aided on by the audience.

This scene was well done. It was also a lie. Correspondents who spent years in Vietnam have written in the wake of the film's release, that they have never heard about this game. Interviews with American prisoners of war also never once mention this. What is obviously the director's fantasy will now likely become accepted fact by the many millions that will see **The Deer Hunter**.

The Vietnam scene aside, the other obvious distortion of the film is its complete omission of any protest or even questioning of the war. Funny, I thought that the anti-war movement was a principle feature of American political and social life during the time of the war. Yet not only is no questioning of the war shown, but the film ends with a funeral rendition of God Bless America, the character unperturbed by the futility of this dead friend's funeral.

"Kill the gooks, My Country, Tis of Thee, Give me your

continued on page 13

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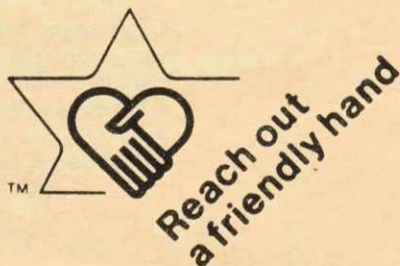
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