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# POINT BLANK: SHOOTING VIETNAMESE WOMEN

SUSAN JEFFORDS

The single most popular image of women in combat available in contemporary U.S. dominant culture is that of Vietnamese women in Hollywood films about the Vietnam war.

There are four general characterizations of Vietnamese women combatants<sup>1</sup> that are specific to the issue of women and combat: one, they are single combatants; two, they do not fight by the rules of war; three, they do not accomplish large-scale missions; and four, they mutilate male bodies.

As distinct from representations of men as combatants, Vietnamese women are depicted as single rather than group combatants. The saboteur in *Apocalypse Now*, the snipers in *Full Metal Jacket* and *Paco's Story*, Rambo's guide, or the NVA informant in "Tour of Duty" all fight alone.<sup>2</sup> This is in keeping with Judith Hicks Stiehm's description of the general situation of women in the U.S. military: "With the abolition of the separate or semiseparate women's corps,... [women] no longer have organizations and commands of their own; they no longer have their own official network; often they both live and work apart from other women. Enlisted women are 'unknowns'—even to each other."<sup>3</sup> The primary contrast here is not simply one woman against groups of men, but of masculine bonding versus feminine isolation.<sup>4</sup> Since the bulk of recent reworkings of the Vietnam war in dominant narrative are motivated by efforts to insure such bonding, it is all too logical that women should be depicted, not simply as being excluded from combat, but as being excluded from its most basic experience as well. As William Broyles, Jr. says, men "loved war for many reasons.... The best reason we loved war is also its most enduring memory—comradeship."<sup>5</sup> Again, because it is through combat that men transcend the "circumstances" that usually divide them—race, class, age, etc.—by depicting women's combat as separate (separatist?) women are logically (apparently by their own "choice") denied access to such transcendences.

Such isolation has logical force when understood within the ethic of visibility that cloaks the vulnerable male body. Though these women often refuse to reveal their own bodies, or are disguised, they are, in these narratives, always "discovered." When this happens, their isolation becomes a detriment rather than an asset to their survival, for they are generally "found out" by a group of men who proceeds, as in Larry Heineman's *Paco's Story*, to punish them brutally. By fighting alone,

women are shown to become vulnerable—not simply to individual men—but, more importantly, to masculine bonding, the primary mechanism whereby the male body is preserved and defended in mainstream culture.

Second, women are depicted as not following the accepted “rules” or codes of combat as practiced by men. Specifically, the most typical role for combatants, that of a sniper, seems to go against codes of masculine warfare as visibility, and of the male body as visible. It is not simply that women have failed at these codes (there are numerous examples of men who cannot meet the rigors of masculinity—from *The Deer Hunter* to *Missing in Action*), but that women combatants seem to show disdain for them. The sniper in *Full Metal Jacket* aims to mutilate, not to kill, the first shot being aimed directly at male genitals.

The failure of women to abide by the codes is described best by *The 13th Valley's* Doc, who concludes, “Women. They all the time doin somethin jus so you can't expect why.... They figure out what you expects then they do jus the opposite.”<sup>6</sup> Men, in contrast, embody consistency and predictability, in other words, knowing and maintaining the codes of warfare, as if by instinct:

The lessons were there in Egan's mind, there from almost eighteen months of combat duty, there from his heritage as an American, as a man, as a human being. All that need be done was to relax, allow the mind to shift, to tap the data banks of 10,000 years of human warfare perhaps 100,000 years perhaps for the entire age of man perhaps earlier.... And his enemy...would bring the collective lessons of tens of millions of men from tens of thousands of years of fighting...the enemy had a mind-set developed by tens of billions of man-years of war.<sup>7</sup>

Using deception as a tactic—“they figure out what you expects then they do just the opposite”—seems to be the hallmark of women's difference as combatants.

The third way in which Vietnamese women combatants are depicted as different from men is that they are not shown as accomplishing any large-scale missions, in other words, that *they* will not win a war. The primary way in which this is accomplished is to depict women's battles as divorced from explicitly nationalist or political struggles and instead link them to more short-term, self-contained, even personal activities. So, for example Co Bao's political motivations for working against a communist Vietnamese government in *Rambo* are explained through her continuation of her father's work, not out of any conclusions she might have drawn herself about political relations. Additionally, the work of a sniper can be only immediate and, to a degree, personal. As a military strategy, sniping can at best delay, disrupt or distract group military activity; it cannot decisively determine a battle's outcome or often effectively combat technological superiority. In such terms,

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characterizing women as snipers necessarily constrains their role to one of limited achievement. And because sniping works as an attack on one individual at a time, it carries the connotations of personal rather than impersonal shooting (i.e. you must decide who you are going to shoot).

In his summary of the most widely held views on "Women as Terrorists," Daniel E. Georges-Abeyle concludes that there is a belief that

many, if not most, of [women terrorist's] acts are emotive rather than instrumental, i.e., emotional rather than well-thought-out acts with a rational program of action not tied to a love interest.... Social-control personnel often state that female terrorists are more likely to engage in acts of senseless or non-goal-oriented violence than are their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

By portraying women's combat as "senseless and non-goal-oriented violence," these narratives question the overall effectiveness of women combatants' actions, specifically, that their actions lead to anything more than immediate and short-term destruction. In such terms, the deaths they are shown to cause seem a senseless waste rather than a noble sacrifice. Women combatants' actions by no means carry the weight of other single combat, such as the classic sacrifice in U.S. narratives of one group member who chooses to stay and fight the enemy so that others can escape (as in William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed*) or the single remaining combatant who represents all those who have died or who yet will come to fight (*Bataan*). Such characters gain their heroism through their affiliation with and sacrifice for a group, a feature denied women combatants.

Unlike Rambo, Colonel Braddock (Chuck Norris), or other heroes of Vietnam war films (*Uncommon Valor*, *Green Berets*) who rescue groups of men or save bases or villages from destruction, women combatants are shown not to "save" anything at all, but only to destroy, and their single object of destruction seems to be the male body.

That victimization is visually and viscerally marked through the final characterization of Vietnamese women combatants: these women are shown to be mutilating the male body, the body that has been revealed as "natural" (Rambo's body blends in with and is protected by the nature that surrounds him), coherent, and important. Distinct from the more straightforward killing that is so much a part of masculine representation of warfare in U.S. culture (think of the Western showdown), in which death is often accomplished by one clean shot (as in Rambo's exploding arrow that kills the single Vietnamese soldier pursuing him), Vietnamese women are depicted as shooting deliberately *not* to kill, but to mutilate, and to do so repeatedly.

The sniper in *Full Metal Jacket* shoots at Eightball's genitals, then fingers, legs, arms, all in exaggerated slow motion camera. The opening shot of this sequence is a long shot of the squad from the point of view of the sniper. The audience sees the shots hit the soldiers



frontally, again from the position of the sniper, not from the viewpoint of the U.S. soldiers. The elegance of the slow motion shots holds these male bodies as if in a dance movement, offering the audience pleasure in witnessing pain translated into aesthetic production (or aesthetics as pain production).<sup>9</sup>

The scene immediately prior to this one shows a series of journalistic interviews with the soldiers, asking them their opinions of the Vietnamese. The answers are without exception disparaging, racist, and stereotypical. It is part of Kubrick's satire that viewers are to recognize the inadequacy of these comments as a way of understanding the war. Coming into this sniper scene, viewers have then a distance from the soldiers, have been invited to view them and their attitudes toward the war critically. So when the audience watches these men from the viewpoint of the sniper, the camera is accurately representing the attitude Kubrick has constructed for his viewers, one of "sniping" at U.S. soldiers, or, more precisely, at male bodies in combat.

The slow motion sequence thus succeeds in shifting the subject of the narrative from a satiric reading of the war to a straightforward visualization of masculinity as mutilated and victimized. Margaret Morse discusses the use of slow motion in televised sports, suggesting that

the figures in slow motion are as machine-like as if animated by some supernatural agency rather than human willpower and technology. They possess the deliberate slowness which is the attribute of perfect machines, automatons and robots which are doubles of and exchanged for the human body.... In addition, slowness increases the scale of the bodies on screen to tremendous size and hence power.<sup>10</sup>

But the dynamic of the male body as machine that she correctly analyzes as operating in televised sports gets altered slightly when that same body, made "perfect" by slow motion, is shown to bleed, fall, and be "imperfect" in war narratives.<sup>11</sup>

Far from "machine-like" and "perfect," these bodies appear instead to be faltering, like marionettes whose strings have been cut. The bodies gush blood, recoil, and fall. While it could be argued that Kubrick is employing the slow-motion sequence here precisely to undercut the sensations of power and invulnerability usually accomplished through slow-motion, the effect of the scene is equally to disassociate this injured body from any *real* body. The slow motion shots make possible then the preservation of the invulnerability of a male body that does not look like this one, a body that still moves "naturally."

For these specific bodies, the slow motion works as well to sever them from the individual characters they portray in the film. Because they seem so unnatural, they seem to have become, as Morse suggests,

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inanimate,<sup>12</sup> and therefore seem not to be shots of individual men dying as much as visions of mutilated "imperfect," male bodies. At the moments of impact, the bodies cease to belong to individual soldiers and become instead larger than life images of masculine mutilation. The shots of mutilation draw audience attention away from the individual characters that these men portrayed in their interviews to the male bodies they inhabit. As aesthetic objects, the bodies cease to be those of racist or ignorant men and become instead essentially physical entities. The audience watches these bodies being maimed, decimated, exploded into fragments, in other words, being treated only as bodies. In fact, this is the function of the sniper—to recognize these men as *only* bodies (and therefore as only and all male).

In such terms, it is extremely important that the sniper be revealed as a woman, corroborating the emphasis on these exaggerated bodies as absolutely male, being mutilated by a female body. If the sniper were male, the visual concentration upon the male body as the focus for anxiety would be defracted as combat between individual men, the conflict would be made "personal." But, again, these narratives need to insist that the only "personal" treatment of combat is made by the marginal female body, for it is only through the "impersonal" male body that a death within masculinity can be resurrected.

The first (camera) shot of the sniper is now from the point of view of the U.S. soldiers, specifically, that of Joker, the audience's expected focus throughout the film. And that first shot is of her taking a shot at Joker. The distanced satire of the soldiers' racism is released through the aesthetics of male mutilation so that the re-identification as Joker can be firmly fixed as unjustifiably and now "purely" victimized. As she shoots at Joker, she shoots at the audience. Simultaneously, the audience sees that the sniper is she/sees that she is the enemy/sees that she is shooting at us. And because she fires at Joker/the audience, she fires at masculinity, requiring the audience to be that masculinity and to feel that threat and to identify that threat as a woman with a gun. What might have been a display of the vulnerability of the male body is translated into fear of a woman with a gun.

The single most despised action in Vietnam narrative, and the one against which the harshest retaliation is taken, is, I think, not the numerous scenes of rape (in *Platoon* or *Casualties of War*, for example), of torture (in *Green Berets*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Hanoi Hilton*), of betrayal (in *Rambo*), or even of combat (in *Hamburger Hill*), but the action of a single Vietnamese woman. In *Apocalypse Now*, during a fight between U.S. helicopters and Vietnamese gunners, a single helicopter lands to pick up U.S. wounded. While on the ground, a woman who had formerly been seen ushering a group of schoolchildren into a bunker suddenly appears as if from nowhere and tosses a hand grenade into the pausing helicopter. It explodes, killing the wounded and the helicopter crew. She is immediately pursued and gunned down by another helicopter crew.

This is an action seemingly without explanation. While the film can imagine the reasons why Vietnamese men would fire on helicopters, or why U.S. men would fire on a Vietnamese village, it seems not to be able to see why a single woman would want to kill already wounded men. Her act appears to be purely and unnecessarily malicious, not even graced with the perverse rationality that initiates the U.S. attack, wanting to find the best surfing beaches in Vietnam.

Coppola constructs the scene in such a way that this saboteur's act is foregrounded as disturbing.<sup>13</sup> Placed toward the close of the battle, after the artillery fire has been destroyed, her act takes on a more powerful disruptive force. When the music, narrative, and audience expectations are constructed toward a closure of the battle, she enters the scene. Not only does her act seem contradictory of western military ethics (not to kill the already wounded), it negates viewer satisfaction in the resolution of the scene. If the same shot had been cut into the midst of the battle scene, it would not, I think, have carried such power.

Additionally, the scene functions to redeem the technology and military that had been portrayed as so idiosyncratically destructive. The very helicopters that had been portrayed with the aura of invulnerability and ascendancy as they rose over the trees to the strains of Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" now seem smaller and less sufficiently powerful. And the men who had been portrayed as ruthlessly selfish and ignorant are now seen to be unwitting victims of a breach of the codes of warfare. In this single act, then, an isolated woman combatant is able to withdraw some of the harshness and irony that had almost overwhelmed the earlier scenes of the film and brought it to a halt. She is made to prepare the ground for Willard's final redemption in her prefiguring of a combatant who had gotten "off the boat," who, like Kurtz, had gone too far and broken too many rules and who, like Kurtz, would deserve what she got.

Two other scenes hold similar forcefulness. In both *Full Metal Jacket* and *Paco's Story*, Vietnamese women snipers are brutally punished after methodically and effectively wounding and killing entire squads of U.S. soldiers. In *Full Metal Jacket* it is a sign of the hero's capacity for mercy that he murders, at point blank range to the head, the wounded sniper who had devastated his squad (she even asks him to do it: "G.I. Shoot me," she whispers); other soldiers want to leave her to be eaten by rats. And in *Paco's Story*, the sniper is bound, her arms hoisted over a rafter, and then dispassionately gang-raped by an entire company; afterwards, she is shot, again at point blank range in the head.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to recognize the weight these images carry in Vietnam war representation. To be clear, to the best of my knowledge, *there is not a single similar image of a Vietnamese man being shot in the head at point blank range,*<sup>15</sup> certainly not an image of a Vietnamese man being treated with similar brutality, and not a narrative in which the murder of a man is witnessed and condoned by so many. Consequently,



awe with which these heroes are viewed by other men within the same films.

In such terms, it is indeed safer—for all the protected needs of masculinity—that the male body not be the visible target of other male shooting.

During the gang-rape of the Vietnamese sniper in *Paco's Story*, Paco speculates about how a male sniper would have been handled differently:

If the zip had been a man, we would not have bothered with the motherfucker, you understand that, don't you?... That cocksucker would have been pounded on till his face was beat to shit; till our arms were tired.... Jonesy would have flicked that [pearl handled straight razor] open with a flashy snap, showing that puffy-eyed, bloody-faced zip four inches of the goddamndest Swedish steel he's likely to come across, and then just as slow and calm and cool as you'd have a melon, James, Jonesy would have slit that zip's throat from nine to three.... The razor cut would have bled horrible abundance, the zip's life gushing from his neck in terrific spurts, with him watching it.... You've got to understand, James, that if the zip had been a man we would have punched on him, then killed him right then and there and left him for dead.<sup>17</sup>

Though not at a distance, this Vietnamese sniper (only hypothetical, still keeping the possibility of such activity at a remove) is killed, but only after he has been made unrecognizable—his face “beat to shit” and “puffy-eyed, bloody-faced”—only after he has been effectively feminized—“four inches of the goddamndest Swedish steel he's likely to come across”—and still he is not shot, but his throat slit and “left for dead.” As even Paco knows, killing a man and killing a woman are two different things. The man can be killed only after his body as a man has been altered so that it is unrecognizable to the men who will kill him. (Can this help to explain the sometime castration of the enemy—reportedly, on both sides—in the Vietnam war, cutting off a man's genitals and then putting them in his mouth either shortly before or after he died?) The dead body *cannot* be a man's. In such terms, death is itself a form of castration, or, more accurately, death is accommodated as castration, i.e. if he had been a real man he would not be dead; if he is dead, he must not have been a real man.

Men can shoot women at point blank range then for two mutually-confirming reasons: the dead body is not a man's, and the female body must be dead. Though slitting the male sniper's throat will certainly kill him, he is only “left for dead”; the men do not see him die. For the female sniper, the story is very different:

Her head was so close to the hooch that we heard the shot simultaneously with the clack and clatter of bone chips against



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the brick and stucco.... Just that quick there was blood all over everything and everyone, and splinters of bone and brick stuck to our clothes and the bare skin of our arms and faces. And the girl was dead in that instant (and we mean *stone* dead, James) and lay in her own abundant blood.<sup>18</sup>

Not only is she dead “in that instant,” but each of the men around feels her death, the sound of the pistol “a sound you feel in every bone of your body from the marrow out,”<sup>19</sup> and participates in her death, not just visually but viscerally, “there was blood all over everything and everyone.”

As Mady Weschler Segal reminds us, in the U.S. military, “Women are currently excluded from operating offensive *line-of-sight* weapons and from other jobs in units that use such weapons.”<sup>20</sup> Line-of-sight weapons—those in which one can see the opposition while firing: rifles, pistols, armored vehicles, and tanks—are prohibited to women as *offensive* weapons in most western militaries,<sup>21</sup> though women in those same militaries are trained to use such weapons defensively.<sup>22</sup> One might well speculate that the use of the line-of-sight weapon as the discriminating barrier for women serving in ground combat units is related to this issue of visualizing the male body as the object of one's fire. Such visualizations require the recognition that body is in fact vulnerable to one's weapon.

Why do women shoot at men from a distance? Of course, for a lone combatant, generally the lesser armed, sniping is a safer and more viable form of combat. But we must remember that these images of women as snipers are produced by and within the framework of a masculinist aesthetic of warfare, so the question must be rephrased from how women shoot at men to “Why do dominant culture (masculinist) narratives want to depict women as snipers?” Much of the answer has to do with the ethic of visibility that underlies the masculine logic in warfare—standing and facing an opponent to shoot him.<sup>23</sup> In such terms, any failure to disclose the body in combat is characterized as feminine (a frequent characterization of U.S. enemies) and therefore a betrayal of the codes of warfare.

The best contrast for depictions of Vietnamese women as snipers is, to say the least, the figure of Rambo. Oddly, he shares many of the features that distinguish women combatants from men: he fights singly, he kills off the enemy one by one (in *First Blood* especially, mutilating the male body), and he camouflages his body. Yet each of these features is altered in his case: he fights alone *by choice*; and he mutilates male bodies so that they will live and tell of his prowess, not so that they will die painfully and draw others in to die with them. But most important in this context, though Rambo may camouflage his body by hiding behind or as trees, water, or earth, he *always reveals his body before he kills*. He discloses himself as he confronts his enemies, whereas in *Full Metal Jacket*, it is not clear until almost the end of the scene that the sniper is even a woman at all. In such terms, for these narratives, women

shoot at men from a distance because it is only from a distance that they can prevent disclosure of their bodies, can hide that they are women, can, perhaps, put forth an illusion that they are men.<sup>24</sup>

In this logic, women are snipers for two reasons: one, that they can "take shots" at men with less risk to themselves (here, at least until recently, sniping acts as a metaphor for the legal system, suggesting that women here used the legal system to achieve their goals, rather than confronting men directly); and two, that they can play at a man's game only by failing to fulfill one of its chief requirements—that one first prove that he is a man.

The answer to the fourth question follows quickly upon the heels of the third. Why do women not shoot other women? Because there is nothing there worth shooting—the "point" is "blank." More precisely, because women are worth shooting only if they shoot men, where is the interest in women who shoot other women? But perhaps more to the "point," women shooting at other women would yield a stage on which the male body would no longer be the visible focus. Whether as hero or victim, in dominant culture war narratives, the ethic of visibility is in force because it insures that we *always* see the male body. Though denied to military women in war narratives, the male body is *always* in our line-of-sight.

It is not difficult to draw conclusions about the constructed threats posed to masculinity by women in combat from the four features here ascribed to Vietnamese women combatants—isolation, breaking codes of warfare, the failure to accomplish any mission, and the mutilation of male bodies. There are several implications that can be drawn from these characteristics. One, that because she fights alone, a woman combatant is seen to have no larger, shared interests behind her battles, no "goal" to her destruction (while masculine destruction seems always and already to be justified by a goal).<sup>25</sup> No one else will stand with her (so unlike the many masculine bonding action films in which a man whom his enemies believe to be alone is suddenly and even unexpectedly joined by other sympathetic men); her cause is individual, even, these narratives hint, petty and vengeful. Two, her actions are futile; there is no possibility that they might "win" any of these battles, only that she can prolong male agony as she loses. Three, in the context of the most well-known Vietnam war narratives, in which veterans rescue POWs still held in Vietnam, these women combatants must, I think, be read as having no similar task to perform, in other words, there are no women to rescue, only men.

It is in this way that these narratives speak most directly to characterizations of the feminist movement in the United States. Though the features of isolation, mutilation, and not playing by the rules underlie a masculine response to feminist alterations in social relations, the test of having no "mission" to accomplish bears the greatest burden here. Feminist women (combatants) in the U.S. have, in such a scenario, only the (petty) goal of harassing masculinity by "sniping" at its most

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vulnerable bodies (the men of the Lusthog squad are crossing an open and barren square, fully exposed to all sides). They have no women behind them because their goals are individual and, need it be said, selfish. And, most important to this logic, there are no women to rescue, i.e. women are no longer society's "victims" that need defending.<sup>26</sup> Instead, in these terms—close-up and in slow motion—it is men.

The greatest threat to masculinity is that posed by a collective of women combatants, a body that operates by its own codes of warfare, and accomplishes a "mission" to destroy the body of masculinity. In these terms, any depiction of women with weapons would invoke the anxieties of such a scenario (why Bonnie had to be linked with Clyde, why the media wanted to believe that Patty Hearst was brainwashed, and so on). But such threats could be posed theoretically by any woman combatant. What function is served by these women being Vietnamese, perceived as not only nationally but racially different? What, in other words, is the connection between gender and race in these cultural narratives?

At its most direct, images of women combatants as racially separate from a dominant white male point of view work to defer any threats posed by the representation of women combatants, simply because the women who are mutilating and destroying men are not generally the women who live in white men's homes (at least not as their spouses, mothers, daughters, or partners), and are women over whom white men generally have other kinds of control—economic, institutional, religious, etc. Such a situation enables U.S. culture to maintain the illusive distinction between the relative "safety" of the home against the threats posed by an "outside world." If women combatants perceived as racially distinct can be shown to be "outside," then the white U.S. home—the model for U.S. domesticity—can be made to appear all that much safer.

Representations of Vietnamese women combatants work also to preserve a certain self-projection of dominant white culture as morally superior, principally through the status of women as embodying a set of moral and ethical values that men presumably fight wars to protect: notions of a nuclear family, of a type of domesticity, of racial purity, of a kind of innocence and virginity, of dependence—what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls the "Beautiful Soul" syndrome.<sup>27</sup> As Segal puts it, "Excluding women from combat may help to ensure the preservation of certain aspects of our stereotype of the ideal woman.... Excluding all women from combat roles can be seen as one way to ensure that some members of society will retain these characteristics...: warmth, nurturance, helpfulness, passivity, sensitivity, compassion, submissiveness, dependence, understanding, gentleness."<sup>28</sup> Because that role of "ideal woman" in the West is specifically linked to racial features, suggesting that women marked as racially different fail to fulfill these roles may reinforce a cultural perception that such "ideal" notions are still fulfilled by whites. Consequently, depicting a racially "different"



society as encouraging its women to stray from maintaining such roles may enable an internationally destabilized U.S. to maintain certain images of cultural superiority.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, and in a somewhat more complex fashion, a racial difference of women is used to negotiate racial differences among men. There is a constant tension in U.S. war films between the illusion of collectivity established during wartime and the hierarchical differences existing in the culture at large among men,<sup>30</sup> chief among such differences in the Vietnam war and the decades following it being the difference perceived as race. To the extent that women can be shown to maintain certain racial boundaries, it is possible for groups of men to be shown as disregarding those same boundaries. Women in these terms become the repository for forms of difference that are not negated but merely deferred in the negotiation of a masculine collectivity.

Judith Hicks Stiehm insightfully explains the importance of warfare to arguments of gender by recognizing that the role of warrior is the only remaining role in Western culture that is exclusively masculine: "The only unique role men have had in society is a social one—that of warrior—a role that is risky, unpleasant, and often short in duration. During peacetime modern men lack a specific way of proving that they are men."<sup>31</sup> Such a rationale would go a long way toward explaining the excessive violence with which women combatants are met in U.S. representations of the Vietnam war, forms of violence that frequently, as in those passages in *Paco's Story*, are enacted in ways that reinscribe gender difference as sexual difference. By narrating the elimination of combatants who are women of color, white men can be reassured about the gendered and raced hierarchies that structure their relations of power.

Perhaps more problematic though are the possible relationships women spectators and readers may have to these narratives. White women are encouraged to read women of color through the interpretive frame of a dominant (white male) perspective, so that the differences between women are emphasized at the same time that similarities between men are underscored. Women of color are being invited to see themselves as "snipers," lonely combatants in a war *they* will never win. There is equally a dual configuration of women's relationship to the role of combatant. On the one hand, they are asked to read racial differences between women through the vector of "the only unique role men have"—the warrior—so that differences among women are read through the single role that supposedly collapses difference among men. On the other hand, women are, I think, encouraged to reject the image of themselves as combatants, first because women combatants are so brutally and consistently punished, and second, because women who become warriors are somehow "other,"<sup>32</sup> not sharing positions with women—whether white or of color in the United States. The twofold goal of these films can be then: to encourage men to see women, particularly women of color, as "snipers" at *their* bodies; and to suppress any



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interests women may have in becoming snipers, particularly against the bodies of white males.

Let me return for a minute to *Full Metal Jacket*. When the sniper shoots at Eightball, a black man, the camera positions the audience to share the sniper's point of view. When he is shot, the camera sees him, not from the point of view of any of the men in his squad, but only from a closer and more detailed viewpoint that is aligned with the sniper's. But later, when the sniper shoots at Joker, a white man, the camera stands in his position, so that she shoots at the audience as the white man. Sequentially, the audience is invited to reject as its possible bodies in the film that of a black man—Eightball's mutilation—and that of an Asian woman—the sniper's death—and to *come to rest* in the body of a white man.<sup>33</sup> That the rejected bodies are both people of color is important, and might lead to a reading of the film as racially emphatic. But the audience positioning in relation to these bodies prevents such a reading. When the black male body is rejected, it is from the point of view of a female body of color, a position not at rest for the bulk of U.S. filmgoers, a position of bodily discomfort (the slow-motion camera helps here to make her vision more uncomfortable). It is as well a body that is quickly rejected by a point of view that is the focus of the film's attention and from which its resolution stems—that of a white male. Consequently, the film comes to rest only after the brutal elimination of the body and audience position of a woman of color.

To tease out the threads of race and nation, we must ask the question, Is this film about an Asian woman? When the sniper first fires, and for several minutes after, her body is not identified. Her identity is not revealed *until she shoots at a white man*. If her identity were hinged upon firing at U.S. soldiers, her status as Vietnamese fighting in a political war would be enhanced. But that her identity is withheld until she fires at a white man, more importantly a white man whose antiwar attitudes have been pronounced throughout the film, pressures this scene to be read as more race and gender motivated than as nationally and politically written.

As it currently stands, fighting in the military in the U.S. is grounded upon a willingness to defend white masculinity, specifically masculinity as defined in relation to the power interests of the white male. Therefore, the chief question about whether women should enter into combat is not one of physical strength, emotional stability, fraternization, or even military cohesiveness—it is, I would offer, whether women would be willing to defend masculinity. Consequently, I want to suggest this argument as specifically addressing, not the status of Vietnamese women, or the abilities or interests of Vietnamese women combatants, but the circumstances of U.S. women, specifically, U.S. women of color, and the anxieties presented by the image of such women firing at white men, anxieties that films and narratives like Kubrick's are asking U.S. audiences to share.

The representations discussed here are then only very confusingly “about” Vietnamese women. Additionally, they are about the perceived threats posed by women—particularly women of color—to the positions of (predominantly white) U.S. men. More pointedly, Vietnam war narrations are “about” the woman depicted in *Apocalypse Now*, about women who would throw a grenade into a helicopter of wounded men, about women who would deliberately harm men who are already “down,” about women snipers, about violent women and passive men, about “male-bashing”—about women and combat and the men they would fight.

<sup>1</sup> There are other narratives that present images of women in the U.S. as combatants, particularly those of Israeli and Iranian women, though the images of Vietnamese women remain the most prominent. There have been a few film narratives as well of women as terrorists, particularly *The Little Drummer Girl*, *The Raid on Entebbe*, and the dramatizations of and accounts about Patty Hearst’s kidnapping by the Symbionese Liberation Army. But these narratives of terrorism have been displaced recently by focuses on terrorism in the Middle East, in which terrorist groups are depicted as exclusively male, a possible reflection of the degree to which the U.S. and many European nations have come more acutely to define terrorist activities—both in perception and in practice—in terms of a combat of masculinities (focusing on individual male terrorists or leaders—Abu Nidal, Muḥammad Kaddaḥfī, and others; speaking of terrorist attacks by both state and non-state agencies in terms of “strengths,” defiances, etc. rather than any political issues). These images are the subject of my book-in-progress, *They Shoot Women, Don’t They?*

<sup>2</sup> The only exception I can think of to this is Emily Prager’s provocative short story, “The Lincoln-Pruitt Anti-Rape Device,” a narrative of a U.S. combat unit of women who use seduction, coupled with a lethal device inserted into their vaginas, as combat weaponry. Even here, though they are assigned and trained as a unit, they still work individually in the act of seduction. In Prager’s story, the women are by and large incapable of carrying out their assignments and are finally killed by suspicious U.S. male soldiers. Before she dies, one woman hands over the device to a Vietnamese woman.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Arms and the Enlisted Woman* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 1989: 12.

<sup>4</sup> In this way, gang-rape takes on a metaphoric relationship to gendered relationships of warfare as a whole. For specific discussions of the use of gang-rape in the Vietnam war, see Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster) 1975. See as well Jacqueline Lawson’s work on rape, “She’s a pretty woman...for a gook’: The Misogyny of the Vietnam War,” forthcoming, in *Journal of American Culture*.

<sup>5</sup> William Broyles, Jr., *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Knopf) 1986: 273

<sup>6</sup> John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley* (New York: Avon) 1982: 103.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 179.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel E. Georges-Abeyie, “Women as Terrorists,” in Lawrence Zelic Freedman and Yonah Alexander, eds., *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources) 1983: 78.

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<sup>9</sup> Robin Morgan suggests that in a masculinist philosophy, "What is beautiful must be transient, something to be valued because it is already lost or will be. Aesthetics is in a continual state of perceptive mourning." [Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover* (New York: Norton) 1989: 111.]

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Morse, "Sport on Television: Replay and Display," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute) 1983: 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> Contrary to their self-proclaimed sensitivity and disinclination to contribute to sensational imagery, sports broadcasting's decision in 1987 not to replay scenes in which players are injured works more effectively to maintain an invulnerable image of the male body.

<sup>12</sup> In such terms, it is not whether the bodies are perfect or imperfect that matters, so much as that in both cases they are inanimate, and then the uses to which that inanimation is put.

<sup>13</sup> I want to thank Rob Kirsch for suggesting this interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> We might think here as well of the murder in *Platoon*, where Sergeant Barnes kills, at point blank range to the head, a Vietnamese woman he believes to be Viet Cong.

<sup>15</sup> The only scene I can think of that is similar is that in *The Deer Hunter*, when Michael turns the Russian roulette pistol from his own head to that of a Vietnamese gambler and fires. But this scene lacks the deliberation and control of the scenes with women. The attention of the scene is that Michael and Nick may lose their own lives in the process, whereas these other scenes depict men who are not at all threatened by the women they shoot.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon) 1978: 71.

<sup>17</sup> Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Penguin) 1986: 176-7

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 193.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Mady Weschler Segal, "The Argument for Female Combatants," in *Female Soldiers—Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Nancy Loring Goldman, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press) 1982: 268.

<sup>21</sup> Denmark and Canada, militaries in which women are in combat, are exceptions here.

<sup>22</sup> The only defensive line-of-sight weapon women in the U.S. military are currently assigned to use is air defense artillery, as were women in the British, Soviet, and Germany armies during WWII.

<sup>23</sup> It is in this way that a film like *Platoon*, which is often read as "antiwar," recapitulates the visible masculinity made popular in the Western. Sergeants Barnes and Elias face off as if they were in the O.K. Corral.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel E. Georges-Abeyie, in his essay on "Women as Terrorists," in Lawrence Zelic Freedman and Yonah Alexander, eds., *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc.) 1983: 71-85. Georges Abeyie includes among the "known variables associated with female terrorist behavior" (81), that "Contemporary female terrorists are likely to exhibit male personality or physical traits" (82).

<sup>25</sup> As a four-year old friend once described the difference between "good guys" and "bad guys," "They both kill people, only the good guys always say something afterwards."

<sup>26</sup> John Wheeler, in his *Touched With Fire: The Future of the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Avon) 1984, best articulates this logic when he declares that "the

Vietnam veteran was the nigger of the 1970s" (p.17), and that women were the "niggers" before them.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic) 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Segal: 282.

<sup>29</sup> This strategy was certainly at work for Germany during World War II. When 100,000 Russian soldiers were captured early in the war, the Germans were horrified and referred to these women as *Flintenweib* ("musketwomen" in English). German women, especially those serving as civilians in the auxiliaries, were constantly cautioned against becoming like these Soviet women. Jeff M. Tuten, "Germany and the World Wars," in *Female Soldiers*: 55.

<sup>30</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see "Things Worth Dying For": Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation," *Cultural Critique* 8 (Winter, 1987-1988): 79-105.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Bring Me Men and Women: Mandated Change at the U.S. Air Force Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1986: 296. William Gibson, in "Paramilitary Culture" (*Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6.1 (March 1989): 90-4) applies this concept to contemporary fascinations with paramilitary culture in the U.S.

<sup>32</sup> Julie Wheelwright makes this point in *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (Boston: Pandora) 1989, where she examines the stories of women who have disguised themselves as men to fight in battle. In discussing the case of Flora Sandes, Wheelwright concludes: "Her status as an exception rather than the forerunner of a trend, ensured that a heroine unmasked...could become a celebrity and her feats exaggerated.... But since she remained unique, imbued with fantastic qualities or infantilized, assuming the role of mascot, the radical potential of her actions was undercut": 82.

<sup>33</sup> This is, for example, the difficulty felt by many white viewers of a film like *Do the Right Thing*, where the white body never comes to rest.