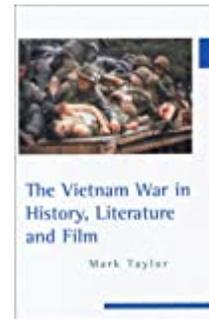




Mark Taylor. *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. xiii + 160pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5118-2; \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1401-9.



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Arguing for Interdisciplinarity

As recent debates over the war in Iraq and the military service of George W. Bush and John Kerry have reminded us, the Vietnam War remains a powerful influence on American culture, politics, and memory. Of course, in the intervening years, historians, authors, filmmakers, and countless others have offered myriad and diverse accounts of what happened in Vietnam and have endeavored to explain why it happened, who was responsible, and how it affected those who fought it and the country as a whole. The accuracy of these narratives and the degree to which an interdisciplinary approach to their study can offer contemporary Americans an accurate view of the war is the subject of Mark Taylor's recent book, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film*.

Clearly, Taylor is not working in uncharted territory. While the Vietnam War has been the subject of a vast number of texts—historical, fictional, and cinematic—the number of scholars who have grappled with reinterpreting those texts, and with the war itself in relation to those texts, is perhaps nearly as great. Taylor, however, seeks to make a methodological intervention, arguing that only an interdisciplinary approach that blends textual analy-

sis with more traditional history can offer an accurate account of America's involvement in Vietnam. Although he acknowledges that traditional history, literature, and film all provide important perspectives on the war, he asserts that relying on a single genre is insufficient, given the particular strengths and weaknesses of each method of inquiry. "America's war in Vietnam," he writes, "was such a complicated war that inter-disciplinary study, in this case the consideration of film, history, and literature, is an essential aid to understanding what the war was like, especially when applied to particular episodes of the war" (p. 27). Indeed, although Taylor's work consists primarily of five independent case studies, it ultimately advances an overarching theme: While film and literature often distort the historical record to advance a particular reading of larger issues—such as why America became entrenched in Southeast Asia—they also enable a more thorough exploration of the individual behavior that augments the historical record of particular events like the massacre at My Lai or the battle at Khe Sanh.

Taylor begins by acknowledging both the difficulty of finding accurate information about combat and the de-

gree to which the Vietnam War presented its own particular set of challenges. Contending that it is, in fact, possible to deduce facts and realities about the war, he suggests that a full understanding of Vietnam and its impact on American culture can be achieved only when historical and imaginative interpretations of the war are read in concert with one another. As he writes, “the ideas about the war of an individual offered in a novel or a feature film and the more distanced perspective of a historian ... both contribute to an understanding of the war, providing each is received with the necessary skepticism” (p. 29). Cultivating this skepticism is a difficult but doable task, best accomplished through a recognition of the inherent limitations of each genre and the ways in which the juxtaposition of creative and historical narratives can provide a more complete vision. Ultimately, however, Taylor privileges history; his case studies suggest that while literature and film are valuable in clarifying the truths of the historical record, it is most important to use historical texts as a means of exploding the fallacies of fictional accounts.

Taylor’s first case study explores the fictional representations of the American Special Forces that appeared during the war in the form of a collection of short stories, *The Green Berets* by Robin Moore, and John Wayne’s subsequent and better known film of the same title. Arguing that these works elucidated the rationale behind early popular support for the war, Taylor deftly details the degree to which many Americans pinned their hopes of winning the war in Vietnam—and, by extension, the Cold War—on the Special Forces, despite their rather marginal role in the conflict. His textual analysis reveals that the book and film reiterate this nationalist mythology by pitting humane, skillful, and determined Americans against barbarous and racialized enemies in order to save a country that cannot defend itself.

Taylor’s reading of the texts is skillful, but the weaknesses in this chapter are symptomatic of the flaws that appear throughout the book: Although he raises several important and interesting points, Taylor often fails to develop them. Here, he emphasizes the degree to which the book and film version of *The Green Berets* relied upon frontier mythology to establish Vietnam as a noble cause. Yet his analysis simply asserts that these texts augment the historical record and echo the pro-war propaganda of the early years of the war; the frontier metaphor is left largely unexplained. As a result, Taylor’s conclusion that “Wayne’s propaganda serves a useful purpose today, demonstrating the nature of the arguments the American government wanted to present to its people in support of

its war in Vietnam,” adds little to a large body of existing criticism on *The Green Berets*.

Fortunately, Taylor’s subsequent chapters offer more original and thorough analyses, largely due to his choice of texts. The analysis of Oliver Stone’s *JFK* is perhaps the strongest chapter, and Taylor provides a thorough, well-executed discussion of the impossibility of judging film according to the traditional standards of written history. At the same time, he concedes that film has the potential to deliver historical evidence to a wider audience than any scholarly book might be expected to reach. This theoretical framework provides a sound starting point for a critique of the failures of *JFK*. Taylor convincingly demonstrates how Stone’s assertion that Kennedy’s assassination was the result of the military-industrial complex’s desire to escalate American involvement in Vietnam relies on a highly selective use of evidence and misreads a crucial government document detailing Kennedy’s plan to withdraw American troops from Vietnam. Unlike *The Green Berets*, which Taylor sees as an augmentation of the historical record, *JFK* is an oversimplification of the historical record that limits viewers to a single, largely inaccurate interpretation. The Stone film thus serves as the prime exhibit in Taylor’s defense of traditional historical analysis.

What is missing, however, is a careful examination of the film’s cultural significance. The widespread popularity of *JFK* during the 1990s raises significant questions about the public memory of Kennedy and Vietnam that go largely unexplored. That the film appeared on the eve of the Gulf War is worthy of more analysis than Taylor’s unelaborated statement that “by arousing popular interest in the questions surrounding Kennedy’s assassination and the origins of the Vietnam War, Stone administered an important corrective to the mood President Bush had sought to inspire after American success in the Gulf War earlier in 1991” (p. 79). Although the book claims to examine “the extent to which history, literature, and film offer compatible approaches to understanding America’s war in Vietnam and, indeed, the world in which we live,” here Taylor misses a crucial opportunity to investigate the latter (p. 2).

Taylor next turns his attention to a consideration of specific events and experiences that occurred in Vietnam. In two chapters that examine specific instances of combat and atrocity—the battle at Khe Sanh and the My Lai Massacre respectively—he explores the degree to which fictional accounts of specific incidents can illuminate the experiences of individual soldiers. Although Taylor care-

fully notes the selectivity and inaccuracy of works like Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, he also asserts that they are valuable texts which accurately portray the experiences and motivations of American servicemen. Yet here again, Taylor's best points seem underdeveloped, as when the smart and original juxtaposition of the compelling John Irvin film *Hamburger Hill* with the World War II-era *Sands of Iwo Jima* comes off as brief and superficial.

Once more, Taylor ultimately places more faith in what he considers the unambiguous historical record. In particular, he cites Robert Pisor's *The End of the Line*, Eric Hammel's oral history *Khe Sanh: Siege in the Clouds*, and the Peers Report on the My Lai Massacre as texts that "encourage the reader to develop a broader grasp of what occurred" (p. 95). While it is true that historic documents of the sort found in Pisor's book and the Peers Report add important information and offer useful explanations, Taylor's unquestioning acceptance of oral history as absolute fact is problematic. At the very least, these works require a more nuanced treatment that takes into account the selectivity of individual memories.

Taylor concludes with a discussion of how popular films depicted Vietnam veterans, with specific attention to the mythology of the POW that gained popularity during the Reagan years. As with the earlier chapters, the analysis of the films is competent. Taylor traces the

transition of the celluloid veteran from demon to victim and persuasively demonstrates how veterans have consistently been used as stock characters to advance political agendas. But here too, the shortcomings of the earlier chapters are apparent as well. The discussion of the classic 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives*, while highlighting the potential of film to convey accurately the experiences of veterans, is far too brief (a single paragraph) and largely unconnected to his subsequent analysis of Vietnam-era films. Nor do Taylor's discussions of *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, or *Rambo: First Blood Part II* make significant contributions to the existing scholarship on these films.

Overall, Mark Taylor's *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film* is a competent and well-written text that rightly advocates an interdisciplinary approach to the study of America's most complex war, while also reminding readers that traditional accounts—not cultural analyses—must remain the bedrock of historical understanding. Although the book presents little that is new to those familiar with the literature on Vietnam, it offers a clear demonstration of the danger of relying too heavily on a single work or genre for an understanding of the war. By showing how some cultural texts oversimplify complex historical events while others supplement the historical record, Taylor has demonstrated the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach and produced a work that many students will likely find engaging and provocative.

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