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**This is the published version:**

Beattie, Keith 1996, Vietnam veteran as ventriloquist, *Media international Australia*, no. 80, pp. 46-52.

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# THE VIETNAM VETERAN AS VENTRILOQUIST

[W]ho is speaking?...Who is qualified to do so?

Michel Foucault

I am the man, I suffered, I was there.

Walt Whitman

Metaphors and similes related to the act of speaking, and the absence of speech, surround the Vietnam veteran. Young men and women were 'called' to Vietnam (whether they answered that call was, of course, another matter).<sup>1</sup> Among US troops in Vietnam the collective response to devastating action was the ironic 'don't mean nuthin', suggesting that further elaboration was futile. Equally as popular for such circumstances was the laconic 'there it is', a line that implies that 'Inothing more ... needs to be said, or indeed can be said' (Modleski 1988, 67). The US foot-soldier in Vietnam, the 'GI' of earlier wars, became a 'grunt', reduced to language's lowest common denominator (Berg 1986, 104). In this the veterans all became 'quiet Americans'. For many years, or so myth would have it, the war in Vietnam was the war no one spoke of, 'the War That Dared Not Speak Its Name' (Auster & Quart 1988). This was to change during the administration of Ronald Reagan, the 'Great Communicator', when the Vietnam veteran was 'hailed' as a hero and allowed, even invited, to articulate his/her experience.

The intense concern with giving the veteran a 'voice' has resulted in the veteran's central positioning within representations of the war and its impact. Specifically, the privileging of the veteran in this way is the outcome of various trends and assumptions which constructed and reconstructed the veteran in various guises during the twenty-year period from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Initially, the veteran was crudely depicted as a psychopath, a prejudicial

characterisation which effectively silenced him within representations. The inarticulate veteran continued as a motif within the dominant representations while at the same time, yet not solely within the same texts, the veteran was being constructed as an authentic spokesperson. The paradox involved in the veteran's 'speaking' role was extended, though not exposed, when the newly constructed veteran-as-spokesperson was permitted to speak only on a limited range of topics, predominantly, if not exclusively, concerned with the common-sense notion of national unity. In this way the veteran emerged as a 'hero', valorised, in effect, not for his war experience but for his ability to contribute to the maintenance of cultural homogeneity and holism.

Surrounding the contradiction at the centre of the representations of the veteran, is a debate concerning the meaning of the experience known as 'Vietnam'. The construction of the veteran as psychopath was predicated upon the notion of an unspeakably horrific 'Vietnam' which led to psychosis in all those unlucky enough to be sent there. (In this sense the term 'Vietnam' is used to evoke both the war and the alien and threatening country in which the war was fought.) Alternatively, yet equally as disturbing in its consequences, the image of the veteran as a 'hero' is implicated in the revised later view of 'Vietnam' as a 'noble cause'. A critique of the contradiction that informs the construction of the Vietnam veteran is therefore central to an understanding of the way in which the experience of the war and its impact have been represented. It is the distance between these two positions (silence and speaking) that is analysed here.

There is more at issue in this analysis than the irony that this appeal to national unity

takes place through representations of the actions and voice of a figure at the centre of the most divisive event in contemporary US history. The appeal to national unity is frequently represented in therapeutic terms in the sense that the discourse of 'healing' the divisions, or 'wounds', of the war is widespread. 'Healing' in these terms is a metaphor for national unity. What is at stake, finally, in the discourse of unity naturalised in terms of 'healing' is the erasure of cultural and political difference. The language of unity is an attempt to refuse the existence of a society and polity which remains, as it has always been, deeply divided along multiple lines of difference.

Within the present critique of the ideological language of unity, the term 'voice' is defined here in a way similar to that used by Bill Nichols:

By 'voice' I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is organising the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense 'voice' is not restricted to any code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary (1985, 260).

In one sense, then, 'voice' is a metaphor for the ideological effects of the text. Ideology is not only inscribed in the articulations and actions of the veteran, it is etched in the text itself, in the author's language, and the common effects of the cinematic apparatus which permits only certain authorised 'speakers' a certain limited 'speech'. To grant sovereignty to the text in this way is to agree with Barthes that '*all speech is on the side of the Law*' (Barthes 1977, 191). Within this conception, the veterans' utterances are a sentence – a form of penology, a conformist act. Yet to claim that all speech supports the dominant order is to ignore polysemy, and to deny those texts in which the veteran retrieves a voice from what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'silence of the doxa' (1991, 131). 'Voice' is thus an ambivalent metaphor, one which registers ideological effects and which, in a different context, may represent the contestation of ideology. Through a focus on the former use of the term, a critical space is opened for the beginnings of an elaboration of the latter operation. In order to understand the manner by which what 'goes without saying' came to be expressed by the veteran, what follows is an explication and critique of the assumptions implicit in the textual

construction of the veteran, and the historical circumstances that attended that construction.

### SILENCING THE MESSENGER

The Vietnam veteran made his most prominent debut in *The Born Losers* (1967) in the character of Billy Jack (Tom Laughlin), Native American and ex-Green Beret, Vietnam veteran. The film did not augur well for the future of the veteran in mainstream fiction film; in fact it set a 'B-grade' precedent that was to have prominence for the next few years.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, Billy Jack confronts and defeats a gang of motorcyclists who have terrorised the citizens of a small Californian coastal town. In this precis, Billy Jack may sound like the kind of figure easily appropriated by a law and order campaign. However, his excessive use of violence and the fact that he is, as the introductory voice-over narration informs the spectator, a 'trained killer', position him outside acceptable society. When, at the end of the film, Billy Jack is shot by a policeman, the audience recognises that legitimate authority has been restored over the potentially wayward and dangerous veteran.

The veteran's potential for violence is matched only by, and reflected in, the fact that he is a character pathetically incapable of speaking for himself. The 'Billy Jack' cycle of films, for example, like the cycle featuring another Native American, John Rambo, employs features derived from the cinematic pidgin composed of little more than 'ugh' and 'how'. In one scene, Billy Jack states: 'I'm an Injun, we know how to strike secretly, silently'. Silence, and violence, are the keys to the character of Billy Jack. During a standoff with a member of the motorcycle gang, Billy Jack goads his opponent to violence with the words 'are you going to fight or talk me to death?' Like Rambo, Billy Jack would rather fight than talk. While in *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974), the character is eventually called upon to defend himself in a different way – in court – on his first appearance, Billy Jack abrogates the need to verbally express himself, with the opening voice-over being relied upon to inform the spectator of his background. The theme song of the film *Angels from Hell* (1968), 'No Communication', summarised this situation.

The figure of 'God's lonely man', Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) in *Taxi Driver* (1976), and the inchoate ramblings of Jack Falen (Dennis Hopper) in *Tracks* (1976), subsequently did little to contest this impression of the veteran as a figure incapable of effective speech.

Besides incoherence and inarticulation, the other aspect first associated in *The Born Losers* with the veteran, that of the presence of 'biker' gangs, continued to figure prominently in the early representations of the veteran. The intersection of biker and of veteran was exemplified in films in which the veteran fought against the motorcycle gangs (*The Angry Breed*, 1968, *Satan's Sadists*, 1969, *Chrome and Hot Leather*, *The Hard Ride*, both 1971), and in those films featuring a Vietnam veteran as a member of a biker gang (*Motor Psycho*, 1965, *Angels from Hell*, 1968, *The Losers*, 1970).

The equation of the veteran and bikers functioned to ensure that not only marginality but also violence would be associated with the veteran, a prejudicial assessment that increased in currency after the public disclosure of the events at My Lai. That the violence at My Lai was so excessive – so outside of acceptable or accepted boundaries (even in war), and therefore determinately 'insane' – opened the way for a further demonisation of the veteran as mentally deranged or psychotic. Indeed, the veteran is literally turned into a fiend in the execrable *Blood of Ghastly Horror* (1971) and *Deathdream* (also known as *The Night Walk* and *Dead of Night*, 1972), both of which had release dates which corresponded with the revelation of the full extent of the My Lai massacre.<sup>3</sup>

This conflation of violence and psychosis proved to be immensely popular in mass culture representations of the veteran during the early 1970s. In a number of films, including *My Old Man's Place* (also known as *Glory Boys*), *The Visitors*, *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* and *To Kill a Clown* (all 1972), the veteran is marked by the war in his murderous outbursts. In other films, including *The Crazy World of Julius Vrooder* (1974) and *Heroes* (1977), the veteran had 'overcome' senseless violence, to be depicted as merely 'senseless' or 'crazy'. The veteran's 'derangement' was parodied in *The Stunt Man* (1978), in which Pirandellian techniques cunningly exposed the veteran's 'psychosis' to be the result of the operation

of a cinematic apparatus which ideologises the real conditions of existence. Ironically, beyond the world of film, the veteran was mildly chided for having 'adjusted too well' to postwar life (O'Brien 1981, 205-207).

Lurking behind this discussion is the question of why the culture industries 'mystified' the veterans' real conditions. The reason for the popular media's willingness during the late 1960s and early 1970s to construct and circulate images of demonised veterans needs to be historicised. By the early 1970s, the nightly vision of body bags and metal coffins signified a failed military venture in which the veteran, albeit the dead veteran, was, in effect, *screaming* of the immorality of the war and of its disastrous human toll. To permit the living veteran a speaking voice – to permit him to articulate the same issues that the dead were already exemplifying – would have further damaged the 'war effort'.

It is significant, then, that during the early 1970s, when negative representations of the veteran flourished, veterans' antiwar activity was at its peak. Paul Camacho, a Vietnam veteran and political analyst, regards the negative representations as reactions to the rise of veterans' political protest. According to Camacho, the mainstream media, by labelling the veterans as deviant, were 'damaging the witnesses' – attempting to silence the veterans' voice of protest on matters relating to the conduct of the war (Camacho 1990, 38). In another way, the veterans' experiences provided a cogent source of criticism of US governmental policy. Contrary to the cliché that the returning veterans were 'spat upon' by antiwar protesters (a view that attempts to deny that many veterans were members of the antiwar movement), the main agent of abuse of the veterans was the US government, and the Veterans Administration in particular, that failed to provide returning Vietnam veterans with adequate benefits or sufficient health care. The experience of this maltreatment was the basis of informed criticism by Vietnam veterans of governmental inaction on matters of priority for many veterans. The labelling or demonisation of the veteran served, therefore, to contain the veterans' voice of protest on a range of issues involving US government policies and actions.

### 'IF I ONLY HAD THE WORDS' 4

However, such a form of representation was not without its problems. By continuing to circulate derogatory stereotypes, the culture passed judgment on the veterans' wartime experience: it was best forgotten, avoided, negated, or denigrated. If the veterans' experience had any utility within the culture, it was restricted to serving as a pretext for psychosis or violence, or both. John Carlos Rowe (1986) has noted that the negative representation of the veteran thus ran contrary to the 'personalist epistemology' which has a 'venerable history' within American representations. Specifically, it contradicted 'the American myth that an individual's experience must be significant' (Rowe & Berg 1991, 129). Rowe's suggestion can be extended through reference to Christopher Lasch's (1979) outline of cultural trends within the 1970s. The preoccupation with the self, documented so effectively by Lasch, intersected with representations of the veteran to produce the beginnings of the veterans' 'rehabilitation'. The representational privileging of the veteran as psychotic figure contradicted the 'therapeutic sensibility' and the cultural need for images of well-being mapped by Lasch. In this way the 'culture of narcissism' provided a context for the 'redemption' of the Vietnam veteran, leading to his representation in the service of certain cultural characteristics, particularly the expression of 'healing' or national unity (Lasch 1979, *passim*).

As a result of these changes, the 'psychotic veteran' image subsided after the mid-1970s to be replaced by a seemingly more acceptable representation. However, inarticulation, the other aspect of the veteran's mass-mediated persona, persisted in a number of texts after this time. Inarticulation, in effect, served to contain the veterans' voice of protest while reserving the veterans' voice for the subject of 'healing'. Examples of the inarticulate stereotype abound within textual representations of the Vietnam veteran. In *The Deer Hunter* (1975), for example, Cimino's directorial style fails to invest his characters with anything other than a rudimentary level of expression. In one scene, Linda (Meryl Streep) asks of Michael (Robert DeNiro): 'Did you ever think life would turn out like this?' Michael's response is a perfect summation of his communicative abilities: 'No'. Michael's

friends habitually rely on physical gestures such as back-slapping or the use of expletives to express themselves – 'fucking A' is the response by Axel (Chuck Aspergren) to most situations. In a scene in which the American captives are forced to play 'Russian roulette' and in the subsequent scenes of the 'game' being played in Saigon, speaking – other than the hysterical shouts of those betting on the outcomes – is absent. As a result of the violence he experiences at the hands of his captors, Nick (Christopher Walken) is excused from further attempts at speech by retreating into virtual catatonia.

Released the same year as *The Deer Hunter*, the film *Coming Home* explicitly addresses itself to giving the veteran a 'voice' – in fact, the film opens with physically disabled veterans speaking of their attempts to come to terms with their situation. One paraplegic veteran comments: 'You got to justify it to yourself, so that you say it's okay. If you don't do that the whole thing is a waste'. In line with this, the film shows Luke Martin (Jon Voight) attempting to justify his participation in the war. At the end of the film he addresses a group of high-school students on the topic of the war and is reduced to the line '[War] ain't like it is in the movies' – and then to tears. Ironically in this scene the film exposes its own inability to explain the war or the impact of the war. The result is the inescapable conclusion: 'it ain't like it is in *Coming Home*'. In an overtly visual medium, the picture of the weeping wounded veteran is meant to tell a thousand war stories. However, this picture inadvertently tells one story too many. The conclusion is excessive in the sense that it fails to contain the narrative and produce successful closure. The *mise en scène* of a weeping veteran in a wheelchair is meant to serve as a statement regarding the wounding impact of the war on US culture. Yet another conclusion is available. The scene suggests that the experience of this particular war defies the veteran's language. Try as he might to express his experience, he is only capable of tears. The veteran is reduced to silence, the war remains unintelligible.

Like Luke Martin, Nick (William Hurt), the character of a veteran in *The Big Chill* (1983) is a failed instructor: he was an 'on-air' radio psychologist, presumably able to 'speak' in a medium that demands eloquence. His background, however, is inconsistent with his present persona. Throughout the film Nick is taciturn, alternately silent or expressing himself laconically. The friends

gathered at the home of Harold and Sarah (Kevin Kline and Glenn Close) revel in an orgy of conversation while in one scene Nick retreats to the seclusion of the living room and films a conversation he has *with himself*. Another scene contrasts the group of friends noisily watching a football game on television while, at the same time, Nick is alone at the hosts' cabin listening, in silence, to the sound of bird calls. Elsewhere, Nick's inarticulacy is underscored when, narcotised, he watches late-night television (ironically, and cruelly, Nick is obsessed, it would seem, with the communicative potential of the electronic media). Nick is interrupted by Sam (Tom Berenger), who asks him what he is watching. Nick answers: 'I'm not sure'. When Sam asks: 'What's it about?' the reply is brief: 'I don't know'.

It is possible, as illustrated here, to register a variety of examples of the silencing of the veteran in post-Vietnam war representations. However, the simultaneous operation of certain cultural and critical trends during the 1970s and 1980s indicates that the practice was not universal. In a variety of texts, a number of interrelated assumptions concerning representations of the war functioned to reconstruct the veteran, ostensibly, as a spokesperson centrally placed to interpret the war and its impact on the American domestic scene. That this 'change' was merely apparent is illustrated by the fact that far from being able to comment on a range of topics, the veteran was restricted to speaking of the culturally necessary topic of unity.

### YOU HAD TO BE THERE

The first step in the process that permitted the emergence of the veteran as a 'spokesperson' or 'privileged interpreter' was the circulation and wide acceptance of a definition of the war in Vietnam as a *unique* conflict. This assumption, like the others listed here, had wide currency and was devised within various texts and circulated by critics in response to the texts. More than any other work, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978), and the almost universal critical acclaim that the book has received since its publication in 1977, helped to circulate and make acceptable a definition of the war in Vietnam as unique.<sup>5</sup> Herr's frequent use of hyperbole evokes the impression that this war was unlike any other. For example, casualties were

'unbelievable' (Herr 1978, 160), and fire fights focused 'all the dread ever known, ever known by *everyone* who *ever* lived' (Herr, 111). The terrain upon which the war was fought defied typography and normal expectations: the Vietnamese highlands were 'spooky, unbelievably spooky, spooky beyond belief' (Herr, 79). The war itself is described in terms that inspired one critic to refer to Herr's version as America's 'first rock and roll war' (Herr, back-cover blurb).

Accordingly, it was felt that this 'unique' war demanded a form of representation capable of depicting its alleged exceptional qualities. The construction of the basis of this common(sense) assumption is clearly evident within Herr's *Dispatches*.<sup>6</sup> Herr argued that conventional written histories were incapable of adequately representing this war. He decried:

traditional historical analysis [as] [s]traight history, auto-revised history, history without handles [in which] something wasn't even answered, it wasn't even asked...The thing had transmitted too much energy...hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out (Herr, 46).

What is implied here is that only those who participated in the experience, '[running] in low under the fact-figure crossfire', can adequately describe the experience. Participation, 'having been there', became the crucial yardstick that determined accounts as *truthful*. The issue of 'having been there' is reflected in the large number of oral histories dealing with the war which privilege personal experience as the only viable method of knowing, or understanding, the war.

The relevance of 'having been there' was established in the film *The Green Berets* (1968). Confronted by a liberal journalist (David Janssen) sceptical of the value of the US involvement in Vietnam, a Marine captain (John Wayne) asks: 'Have you ever been to southeast Asia?' When the journalist responds that he hasn't, the captain ends the discussion and walks away in disgust. With this exchange the film unproblematically insists that only those who have experienced the war can judge it or speak of it. The point becomes explicit when the captain states: 'It's pretty hard to talk to anyone about [Vietnam] till they've come over and seen it'.

The result of the acceptance of the assumptions outlined here was that the 'grunt', the figure originally deprived of language, became privileged as the sole legitimate spokesperson of the *truth* of the war. The truth that such texts presumed to present is, supposedly, beyond politics: a transcendental, unifying truth – the truth of *unity*.

### TEACHING THE TRUTH

The assertion of unity – of the reality and *truth* of unity – was especially pronounced in the early and mid-1980s. The articulation of this truth by the Vietnam veteran positioned him as the bearer of an essential and immutable characteristic of culture. The recuperative power of this message for the veteran was tremendous. Represented as the embodiment of the notion of incorporation, the veteran was no longer an outsider. From a battered victim suffering shock, disorientation, and especially, disillusionment, the veteran became the model and sole authentic spokesperson of the truth of national unity.

Nowhere was this situation more pronounced than in Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* (1986). The popularity of the film, plus its attention to realistic detail, together with its documentary-like voice-overs (spoken by a character who is a veteran), reinforced the impression that this film contained the one and only truth. In the Introduction to the published film script of *Platoon*, Stone underlines the fact that there are many truths but maintains the existence of an overriding truth – his own. Stone comments that he wrote the film script 'as straight as I could remember it', asserting that, as a result, he had captured the truth of the war. During the filming he hoped that he wouldn't fail the veterans who had admonished him 'not to ruin their dreams that the truth be told' (Stone 1987, 5-6). The truth that *Platoon* speaks is summarised in Taylor's final soliloquy. Here Taylor observes that 'we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves'. It is a comment that is repeated in various forms throughout the discourse of 'Vietnam', its continual repetition pointing to something that lays deep within the culture beyond the ethnocentrism encoded within the remark. A variant of this notion, namely, that the war in Vietnam was 'something that Americans did to themselves', was first promulgated culturally in the misleading and lamentable

metaphor of an American with a gun aimed at his own head in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In *Platoon*, the allusion to suicidal tendencies within Taylor's comment intersected with the notion of a fratricidal malaise (Americans fighting each other), to reinforce the conclusion that it was morally wrong for Americans to fight themselves and that such a 'civil war' should not occur again.

Taylor's most engaging words, however, concern his desire 'to teach to others what we know and to try to find a goodness and meaning to this life'. Here Stone, who incidentally first went to Vietnam as a teacher, delivers *Platoon's* ultimate lesson: that it is imperative that the veteran become a 'teacher' and guide to unity on the homefront. Chris Taylor must return to impart the knowledge (the 'truth') that he has learnt: that Americans should not fight amongst themselves, that unity and consensus must be maintained. The veteran had not only found a voice, he was virtually condemned to speak the healing truth, the truth of 'healing'.

However, the efforts to retrieve these voices must contend with a history in which the Vietnam veteran has been characterised as an heroic figure by the mass media, by 'common sense' assumptions, and by politicians seeking to appropriate features of his experience for political gain. The history of the changes undergone by this figure is a history of ideological attempts to deny different voices in and through the representation of cultural unity within the specific historical context of post-Vietnam United States culture.

### ENDNOTES

1. However, Lee Iacocca, for one, has offered his personal interpretation in a promotional segment accompanying the US video edition of *Platoon* (1986): such people 'knew only one thing, they were called and they went' (Haines 1990, 81). In Iacocca's interpretation, those who go to war are not only silent – they are called and they go, with no questions asked – but are also lacking intellectual faculties; the only thing they know is to go quietly. Iacocca legitimates this condescension when he elsewhere offers his well-known sales pitch: 'I guarantee it'.
2. According to a recent 'filmography', the Vietnam veteran first appeared in films in 1965 in *Bus Riley's Back in Town* and *Motor Psycho* (Walker 1991, 159, 179, 183). The 'Billy Jack' films are selected here as a focus of discussion because of a number of factors: the widespread

distribution, relative audience popularity and commercial success of these films. Other 'B' grade films were produced. See, for example, *Nam's Angels* (1986). While films featuring veterans and 'biker' gangs proved popular during and immediately after the war, more sophisticated representations of the Vietnam veteran subsequently eroded the prominence of the 'veteran/biker' image.

3. Details of the massacre at 'Pinkville' on 16 March 1968 had been known publicly since 1969. Ron Haerberle's photographs of the dead at My Lai appeared in *Life* magazine in November 1969, for example. The next year a number of publications revealed further details (Hersh 1970; Hammer 1970).

4. The following discussion deals with stereotypical representations of the inarticulate or silent veteran. The phrase 'If I only had the words ...' is spoken by the narcotised hippie photojournalist played by Dennis Hopper (who else?) in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The inarticulacy of the character played by Hopper is emblematic of the veteran's silence.

5. Lance Morrow of *Time* magazine called it a 'masterpiece' (Morrow 1981, 61). No less a critic than Fredric Jameson praised *Dispatches* for '[t]he extraordinary linguistic innovations of the work' (Jameson 1984, 84). Herr first published portions of the material included in *Dispatches* in the journals *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *New American Review* during 1968 and 1969. *Dispatches* was published in book form in 1977 by Knopf in New York. The edition quoted here is the 1978 paperback.

6. The assumptions that the war in Vietnam was a unique conflict and that as such it required an innovative form of representation has, through repetition, acquired its own 'common sense' within critical analyses of the war in Vietnam (Herzog 1992).

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A version of this paper was presented to the 7th History and Film Conference, Canberra 30 November-2 December 1995.