

The Vietnam War: A Call for Existentialism

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From 1955-1975, the Vietnam War made its mark on the world as hundreds of thousands of people were affected by the terrifying and distinctly human experience of combat. From its ongoing persistence, the struggle for freedom, and the mental adoption of fear and hatred, people were faced with nothing short of an apocalypse—an unveiling of truths. Although the Vietnam War exposed a world that deemed itself so unique and different from any experience faced before, it held uncanny familiarities to be recognized and acknowledged. The dominating, foreign element of it the war transposed “human outlook on the world formed by the mysterious triumvirate of strangers, gods, and monsters...constitutes a central part of our cultural unconsciousness” (Kearney i). With the lack the means of understanding, individuals became surrounded themselves with the ‘Others’ in so that their relationship with such created instability for their identities and in that paradoxes within the person arose and found means to coexist. The act of becoming complacent and scapegoating to preserve the illusion of a clean conscious is detrimental to everyone involved. It is nothing more than the acceptance and practice of bad faith; it is fundamental that the world be experienced through true consciousness, one that is not self-deceit. With the use of Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Kearney’s teachings, I will explore the need for existential thought throughout the Vietnam War on the accounts of the war’s history, interviews from *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, “Apocalypse Now Redux: a Heart of Darkness”, and *Foreign Correspondent: A Memoir* by H.D.S Greenway.

The Vietnam War was a drawn out struggle between nationalists aimed at unifying the South and North Vietnam under a communist government. The United States’ involvement was done in good faith and assistance to protect South Vietnam, as well as other future countries who

may come under the threat of falling under communist ruling. Unfortunately, despite the good intentions, the executive measures did not follow. While the U.S soldiers entered the foreign grounds embodying the notion of American-exceptionalism, their mindsets soon shifted and developed into an apocalyptic view. A number of military and political experts who analyzed the Vietnam War labeled it unnecessary as the chances of winning was slim to none. The extreme horrors caused the situation to become surreal and numbing, and those involved in the war were faced with pure delusion. Americans never really knew what was going on in Vietnam nor were there any efforts to connect to the land on which they fought. Vietnam was nothing more than a “a piece on a chessboard. Not a place with a culture and a history that they would have an impossible time changing even with the U.S force” (*The Vietnam War* ep. 2). Albeit, by setting up the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and seeing others as nothing more than ‘Others’, killing became easier over time. There was comfort provided by doing so during combat.

The Vietnam War was one of the loudest yet quietest wars; the inhumanity during this time caused much silence around the topic. The overwhelming presence of fear continuously gloomed the war. In connection, it was that that led the people to see their enemies not as human but instead unidentifiable monsters. From the Americans, South Vietnamese, to North Vietnamese there were no questions asked nor any emphasis placed beyond calculative thinking. In the *The Vietnam War*, a film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick conducted interviews on those who lived out the war. Although great insight was given by everyone in the documentary, there were two men in particular who described the epitomized feeling of the Vietnam War that was acquired and carried out. Bao Ninh, a North Vietnamese Veteran summed up the Vietnam War when he noted “who won and who lost is not a question. In war, no one wins or loses. There is

only destruction.” In the mystery of not knowing what was to come about the Vietnam War due to unfamiliarity and foreignness, man intensified his killing. Marine John Musgrave cautioned, “my hatred for them was pure. I hated them so much, and I was so scared of them...and the scarer I got, the more I hated them” (*The Vietnam War* ep. 1). Again, it was not anger that fueled this desire to make one go extinct but it was the intermingling of fear turned hatred.

Moreover, another illustration of the horror felt by man is conveyed in the “Apocalypse Now Redux: a Heart of Darkness” which tells the story of a U.S. Special Forces Officer, Lieutenant Willard, who is tasked to terminate a renegade Colonel, Walter Kurtz, as the Colonel’s methods of handling enemy soldiers has been deemed immoral by the U.S. Army. Kurtz’s aim is to return to a state of peace as quickly as possible no matter the process. The problem lies in that said process had been deemed “quite simply insane” and inhumane. As he ventures into the “heart of darkness”, Kurtz’s den and logic, Willard begins to realize Kurtz’s horrific acts are “no more than efficient enactments of so-called ‘legitimate’ military behavior. The distinction he then must make is if Kurtz is a true hero for working towards a swift end to war or if he is simply a psychopathic monster. While the audience is not privy to how Willard comes to his conclusion to kill Kurtz, the question remains of how does one judge horror (Kearney 53-57).

It is not man’s unconsciousness that is fault for his wrongdoings nor should the exemplified savagery be said to be anything other than his innate choosing to do so. This deceitful existence that man so willingly lives by by rejecting his responsibility of his own freedom, he restricts the opportunities that are up for his selection. The exuberant possibilities he rightfully once had, now dwindles. According to Sartre, he would define this as being in the state

of bad faith and someone in such a state is using his circumstances to blame for his limitations. This bad faith man ever so dwelled in became the excuse that would free himself from guilt, convincing he had no other option but the approach he voluntarily convinced himself to take on—his scapegoat. Similarly to how man had no desire to understand the true Vietnam, this extended to him not seeing any relation to him and the foreign entity. Even with the antiwar demonstrations rising, “the peace demonstrators cared nothing about Vietnam for Vietnam’s sake. They wanted to stop the war, but they weren’t the least interested in the country in which the war was being fought” (Greenway 69). This was a common theme that can be traced back to man’s seeing himself as a conviction of innocence. Regardless if man was indirectly or directly participating in the war, he allowed himself to be influenced to the point no comparison could be made between himself and the war. He was the hero, the protector and everything done was done so in the world’s best interest. “What man sees as best, he holds as best for all mankind and creates the image of man as he would have him be” (Sartre 4). With this in play, could his saintly position he stands on ever be broken?

Undeniably, Sartre would argue on the basis of of the first principle of atheist existentialism that there is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it. “Man simply is—man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Sartre 3). Existence precedes essence. The Vietnam War by no means converted man to be anything other than himself, the fragility in his humanism collapsed under the intense horrors and conditions within his environment. As a result, his savagery presented itself for survival. The moment framed no longer to be man with nature but man versus nature. It is this that is at root of the death and destruction found during the Vietnam War, humanity’s own will-to-power (Kearney 52).

Needless to say, men grasp the paradox of being able to kill and love and “what looked like madness is in fact a (perverse) obsession with peace, the desire to win the war as effectively and rapidly as possible” (Kearney 57). Ironically, when trying to rid the ‘Others’, man became the image of those he feared and the monsters within himself were revealed.

On the account H.D.S Greenway, the year 1967 was a fatal mark for Vietnam: “U.S command decided that Americans would fight the main force war while the South Vietnamese would take a secondary role in the defense of their own country. It sapped the will of the South Vietnamese, who always should have been at the forefront of their own defense (Greenway 53). While the mission of the U.S’s service was to protect, the power man received from having his purity be untouchable began to act opposite of its original purpose. “America was not wrong to try to distance itself from French colonialism, but the Americans couldn't that they themselves were becoming the new colonial masters in the eyes of the Vietnamese people, and that Diem and all the other South Vietnamese leaders would be perceived as tools of American power” (Greenway 58). Perhaps due to the lack of seeing the self defined in the context of the ‘Other’ and his concern about the foreignness of such, he incapable to see how he too consumed by the ‘Other’.

On the grounds of which man assumes his essence prior to his existence, his judgement manifests thereon his misunderstandings. A solution to this would be to take away the prejudices assumed, or to say viewing the foreign/ ‘Other’ with more familiarity and the familiar with more foreignness (Kearney 11). As Sartre mentions, existentialism is humanism and the challenge to investigate the bad faith that impedes in the personal life of the said individual is mandated to bring a grander understanding of the cruelty and abuse that surrounds them in their everyday life

and being as a whole. However, it should be emphasized that there is no force other than man himself that can get him to act on this accord. It is he who is in control of who he is and what he is to be. He dictates his existence and essence. In the account of the Vietnam War, demonstrated by the sources *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, “Apocalypse Now Redux: a Heart of Darkness”, and *A Memoir* by H.D.S Greenway it is clear that the truths of humanity and the individual was unearthed yet liberation is not as too far from his grasp. Man can realize himself as truly human with both the good and bad. The question is rather, when should he live with the ‘Other’ and when should he fight it? As people of paradox, a middle ground can be found to allow both to coexist in a manner that neither leans too far to the left or right; a perfect balance. Intrinsicly, existentialism is putting oneself forth of adversity while finding means to grasp a good faith that returns a better hope for the future—it is optimism and action.

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