



SCREEN

The Long War

by Katherine Dalton

Platoon; directed and written by Oliver Stone; Hemdale Film Corporation & Orion Pictures.

Some opinions are communicated like a virus, and the received wisdom on *Platoon* is a good example of this cultural dissemination on the scale of an epidemic. It's a movie that moviegoers have flocked to, and as for our collected punditry, bowing and scraping before *Platoon's* fashionable view of Vietnam, they have indulged in a collective rave.

Combine popular success and political correctness with this year's trendy subject matter, and you have the cultural icon for the '86-87 season. You need look no further than the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of weekly news journalism to see that this is so. *Time*, on the crest of the accolades, found in their mid-December review that "*Platoon* is different. It matters." *Newsweek* was a little slower on the draw but managed to arrive at a remarkably similar conclusion three weeks later. *Platoon*, it said, was "violent" but "deeply moving"—"After nine years of waiting, Stone has made one of the rare Hollywood movies that matter." *Time* went on to give the movie a cover story in late January: "Vietnam the Way It Really Was" went the headline.

But just what is it that matters so about a cheap (just \$6 million) picture that nobody in Hollywood wanted to make (the financing finally came from Britain), with no big stars, and a script that rolls out every moldy cliché from

the past 40 years worth of war movies? What is it?

Vietnam, 1967. That platoon of *Platoon* is "somewhere near the Cambodian border"—cliché number one. The new boys arrive, and soon Chris Taylor (our hero and Stone's mouthpiece/alter ego as played by Charlie Sheen) and his new patrol are about to set out on a night march into the jungle. "Wanna see a picture of my girl?" asks the lumpy grunt Gardner, pulling out a photo of the plain but worthy Lucy Jean. Doomed by that hackneyed setup, poor old Gardner doesn't make it through the next scene, blown away in the fighting.

And so on and so forth with old hat masquerading as Nam Like It Really Was—every cliché in the book from a man who was actually there, for yes, just like Chris Taylor, Stone dropped out of college and volunteered. The script, Stone claims, is full of men he knew and revised versions of events that happened. Like Taylor, he wasn't in Vietnam a day before realizing he'd made a big mistake. He heard the boasts of a soldier who claimed to have brained an old woman and knew the originals for both his good Sgt. Elias and his scarred and merciless Sgt. Barnes.

But all that touted real experience, once it is run through the mill of Stone's mind, still turned into a tiresomely typical Vietnam story: a green kid shipped in from the States finds himself in hell, among dopers and conscienceless good ol' boys from the rural South, tries to confront an enemy he never sees (the VC) and turns instead on that "worse" enemy, the enemy within, becoming the killer he must to survive, taking the law into his own hands as he must to wreak justice. It's all pure corn—Elias' head looming in a wide angle shot in the drug den (in this movie the good guys smoke dope), Barnes drinking his inev-

itable Jack Daniels, and worst of all, Taylor's sermonizing voice-overs.

Even *Time* faulted *Platoon* for being "overwritten," the perfect euphemism for any work that is both trite and verbose. I couldn't scribble fast enough to get down all the baloney. "Sometimes I just look at a guy," says Barnes, "and I know this guy is not gonna make it." Heard that somewhere? Or how about Bunny setting fire to a hut with his Bic and then lighting his cigarette—seen that one? But the best sanctimony got saved for the end. "We did not fight the enemy," says Chris, being flown out of Vietnam after a hellish last night of battle with the Vietnamese. "We fought ourselves, and the enemy is us."

He says that because the main conflict in *Platoon* as Stone has written it is not between the Americans and the VC but between those two sergeants. Barnes, shot seven times (mostly in the face, it seems) and not dead yet, maniacal, cruel; and Elias, in for his third tour and just as effective as Barnes against the VC, but kind to his men, mystical, and mysterious. Elias is a pot smoker to Barnes's J.D.; he is a man who has lost faith, rather than, like Barnes, incapable of it. Barnes is there to kill; Elias is still fighting the good fight and no longer sure why.

When Barnes gratuitously kills an old woman, Elias presses charges, and after they are sent back out together on an ambush, Barnes shoots Elias and leaves him for dead. Taylor had idolized Elias and intuits that Barnes murdered his friend, and after confronting Barnes nearly gets killed by him himself. But it's the night of the final melee, and as the American camp is overrun by the Vietnamese, the commanding officer finally calls in an air strike on his own position. That blast fortuitously knocks Barnes out and aside just as Taylor is about to get his

skull crushed.

Cut to the next morning, twittering birds and Taylor, bloody but alive, raising himself out of the muck. He finds a gun and then Barnes, alive as well and demanding a medic. Surrounded by bodies of Americans and VC, Taylor shoots him, killing this machine that could not die, beating Barnes at his own game.

I am the child, Taylor muses in the chopper flying out, "of those two fathers," and they "fight for the possession of my soul." To revenge Elias, you see, he had to fight Barnes on Barnes's own terms, tainting himself with Barnes's own evil.

Taylor then goes on about the "obligation to build again," our need to find "goodness and meaning in this life," and the movie ends with a close-up of Sheen's profile in bright white light, an epiphany. Stone concludes by running his dedication to the men who died serving in Vietnam, in one great last presumptuous act.

Platoon is presumptuous, and it is powerful as well. Put a bunch of kids in the Philippine jungle, get a good makeup man, and blow them up realistically on film, dredge up all our harbored fear and awe of war and play on our feelings about Vietnam, and you can move an audience.

What I cannot stress enough is that there is no skill to it. It doesn't take a genius to upset an audience. Violence does not need even a particularly good manipulator behind the lens—it is of its own self a powerful thing, and any hack in California can build a script around it. Violence is, in fact, Stone's trademark as a scriptwriter—he also gave us that cinematic meatgrinder *Scarface*. But just because Stone has chosen a period most Americans feel strongly about, and worked us over with his tortured, dead, and dying, that does not make the movie anything other than an exploitation—of his moviegoer's emotions, and especially of the Vets he presumes to portray.

Success inevitably brings a certain measure of complacency. Praise begets self-praise, and enough good reviews and a man begins to think he knows what he's talking about. "I never was a religious person," Stone told *Time*, "—I was raised a Protestant, the great compromise—but I became religious in Vietnam. Possibly I was saved for a

mission. To do some work. Write about it. Make a movie about it." How hard it must be, when millions of people trot off to see your movie, not to believe that Heaven hadn't spared you just for this.

Katherine Dalton writes from New York.

STAGE

A Female Aesthetic

by David Kaufman

Interviews With Contemporary Women Playwrights by Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, New York: Wm. Morrow and Co.; \$25.00.

While Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig are desperate to find, if not manufacture, a "female aesthetic," it fails to emerge from their *Interviews With Contemporary Women Playwrights*; in fact, most of the 30 represented playwrights deny either its existence or its relevance. Liliane Atlan (French) claims, "I don't look for the masculine or the feminine elements; both exist in the world, and it is when we are not completely free that we are either too masculine or too feminine," while in response to the question "Do you feel that there is a female aesthetic in drama?" Susan Yankowitz (British) begins, "I wouldn't say so."

Somewhere in between A and Y, Maria Irene Fornes' reaction may be the most indicative: "How could there possibly not be? Not only is there a women's aesthetic, each woman has her own aesthetic and so does each man. It's like saying 'Is there a Hispanic aesthetic?'" Rosalyn Drexler proclaims, "People make art. Gender is only part of the artists' experiential stockpile." Then there is Janet Neipris' reply: "You mean does it come in the color pink? No. I know women playwrights who write in red, then one who writes in desert colors, another in black, maybe I write in blue. . . . There's a human aesthetic that both connects and separates all playwrights." More ironically still, Nto-

zake Shange, who suggests that there is a "female aesthetic," refuses to identify it: "Because I've written [about] it already and I don't want to mess with it."

Perhaps Corinne Jacker's summary is the best. When asked "Should women try to formalize their feelings about how womanhood affects their work?" Jacker explains, "Not if it is going to be a complaint, an accusation that critics and producers don't take us seriously enough . . . of all the women's organizations that have seminars and panels about how to get women's plays produced, I haven't yet found a conference that tried to grapple with whether or not women have identifiably different senses of time, event, objectivity, character, action, and so on."

While these are among the concerns we might have hoped would be raised, it is only *despite* Betsko and Koenig that they are. The interviewers have invested too much in their narrow-minded mission to recognize that they are not receiving much support from their subjects. It's their own bad faith which is most evident; at times it leads to some shameful exchanges which should have been too embarrassing to include in the final transcripts. When they remind Adrienne Kennedy that "You once described your divorce as 'a choice for writing,'" Kennedy replies, ". . . I don't know whether I ever said that," before elaborating: "Looking back, I think that people put those words in my mouth, because the divorce was not that clear-cut. One paradox I've never quite recovered from is that I feel my former husband encouraged me to write more than anybody has since then. And he supported me financially, and wanted to, and enjoyed doing it."

As clear as Kennedy's words may be to us, they apparently eluded her interviewers. Betsko and Koenig are obviously guilty of putting words into these writers' mouths, as well as ideas in their heads. Their account is filled with deceit and distortion—they misrepresent these playwrights not only to us, but to each other, as when they tell Karen Malpede, "Some feel that the commercial theater is not ready for the truth of women's lives, that they must gain their credibility before exploring