

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As with most films you've not seen, your expectations about 'Born On The Fourth Of July' will probably be based on a variety of information picked up through the media, through discussions and through your existing knowledge of films.

What do you know about the film already, and where has your information come from?

Your presence in the cinema

at all will presuppose the success of the film's publicity. So, why will you go? What is it about this particular film that attracted your attention? The subject matter? Tom Cruise? The fact that Oliver Stone also directed the Oscar-winning 'Platoon'? Explain your motives to the rest of the group - and try not to be influenced by the others.

A film marketer's job is to fill the cinema by selling the film in a way that will appeal to as many of its target audience as possible. (This does not necessarily mean that publicity need accurately reflect the whole film. If a poster makes false promises, a bad film might for a while attract full houses. But this would undermine the public's confidence in advance publicity, and so be self-defeating in the long run.)

Given that a poster cannot tell the whole story, a clever publicist must use it to illustrate what s/he feels to be the most bankable features of the film.

Study the poster for 'Born On The Fourth Of July' printed on the next page.





List the ingredients of the poster. Think about:

WORDS IMAGES COLOUR COMPOSITION

Try to interpret each of these ingredients in turn - what role does each one play in selling the film?

What is your own immediate reaction to the poster?

Does the title hold any significance for you? Have you seen Tom Cruise in any other films? If so, are you expecting him to play a particular type of role? What does the poster encourage you to think the film will be about?

ON REFLECTION

Having seen 'Born On The Fourth Of July', consider whether you think the poster's image was appropriate for the film. Explain your answer as fully as possible.

Drawing on your knowledge of the film, can you say why the publicists chose to depict Cruise as a young soldier, and not as the bitter Veteran, the hippy, the doubter?

If the latter image had been chosen, what effect might this have had on the potential audience?

Imagine that 'Born On The Fourth Of July' has not yet been released. You are the publicist for the film's distributors and have been assigned the task of writing a 200 word preview for the film. The piece you write will be circulated to various 'what's on' magazines around the country.

Your aim is to arouse interest in the film and to assure the 'Nam cynics that this is NOT just another war film. How are you going to sell the film? Which aspects of it will arouse most interest in the cinema-going public?

Secondly, you have been asked to design an alternative poster for 'Born On The Fourth of July' - one that will trigger attention in the forthcoming film. How would you sell it?

ANOTHER 'NAM MOVIE?

List the names of any other films you have seen that deal directly, or indirectly, with the Vietnam war. Next to each title write a brief synopsis of the plot, and list any images, sequences or themes you associate with each film. Group these together - what do you notice? Is it possible to detect certain conventions or characteristics within these films?

You will probably find that a number share similar representations of the war and the experiences of young American soldiers. (Think about for instance, whether the central character was male or female, what s/he felt about the war before going to Vietnam, and whether these feelings changed afterwards.)

Are these similarities mere coincidences? Similarities breed 'genres' of film and the similarities between different films about Vietnam have created a genre of their own The Vietnam film.

Did the films you have already seen influence what you thought 'Born On The Fourth Of July' would be about? If so, then you have probably learnt to 'read' the genre - to make sense of, and anticipate the events and themes typical of 'Nam films.

The fact that 'Born On The Fourth Of July' challenges or avoids using many of these images is important, the sophistication and subtlety of the film helps it to escape easy categorisation.

WAR OR MORE?

Look at the following statements. Select the FIVE that best describe the film, and list them in order of importance.

'Born On The Fourth Of July' is about:

revenge

truth

coping with a disability

guilt

loyalty

courage

hippies

the effects of the Vietnam war on individuals

the effects of war on individuals

religion

patriotism

friendship

individuality

the need to love one's country

the Vietnam war

Compare your list to someone else's. If they are not identical, explain what prompted your choice.

This list only scratches the surface - what other statements do you think should be added to capture the spirit and themes of the film?

Next, refer back to your five statements and find two or three incidents in the film for each point.
Chart your findings below:

THEME	INCIDENT
1)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
2)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
3)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
4)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
5)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Films are constructed on many levels. Nothing in 'Born On The Fourth Of July' is wasted or insignificant. As minute a detail as the amount of facial hair that Ron Kovic has at each point tells us an enormous amount about his frame of mind, his function in the film, where a scene comes chronologically, and the theme at that point.

Similarly, characters are constructed on different levels. For example, on a basic narrative level, Mrs. Kovic is important. For instance, it is she who forces Ron to leave home, to cope with his disability on his own. But her function is broader and more subtle than this. She represents small town attitudes, godliness, authority and so on : all THEMATIC functions.

Now think of the following characters in these terms:

Ron Kovic, Donna, Charlie

For each individual, work out which episodes in the film link them directly to the five themes you chose earlier.

Remember, however, that a relationship does not have to be positive. The fact that someone is NOT patriotic, for example, may be important in itself.

We've talked about main characters as though they are always individuals. What about the government, the marines and the pacifists? They seem to take on a unified personality in the film. Can we consider them as characters in their own right?

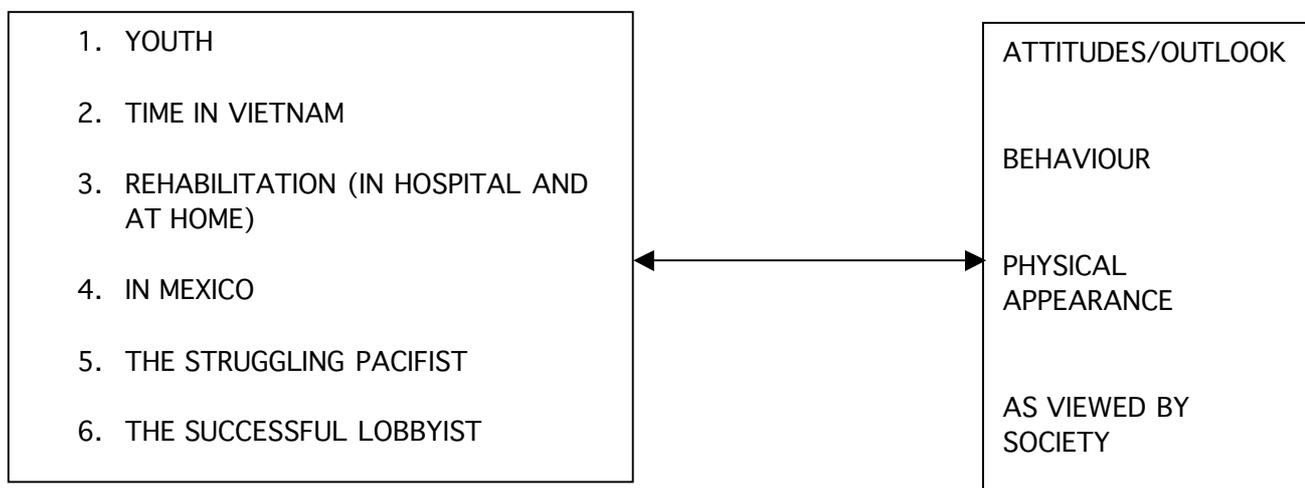
Describe what this 'unified personality' consists of and consider how each of these groups is also linked into the films main themes.

As a final thought, consider whether any of the groups were portrayed as stereotypes. If so, do you think that the stereotyping is justified?

RON KOVIC

The narrative structure of 'Born On The Fourth Of July' is very episodic. The blackouts between sections work as full stops, breaking up a paragraph into logical sentences. In this case the paragraph is Kovic's life and the sentences individual chapters within it. From the beginning to the end of the film, Kovic changes. We can hardly recognise the young, clean-cut recruit in the fully developed character of Kovic the pacifist veteran.

Using the chart below as a guide line, consider the changes in Kovic's character, chronologically.



To what extent are these changes a consequence of Kovic's involvement with other people, or to the events he is caught up in at a particular time? Select two of the six periods and answer in as much detail as possible.

In the late 'sixties, Kovic reaches an all-time low; he seems unable to make sense of past experiences, and to come to terms with the present. Physically and emotionally, he cannot cope with reality. His rejection of his family and time in 'Nam culminates with his participation in an anti-war demonstration organised by Donna. To him, the Vietnam war has become a lie.

What effect, if any, does the way he looks and behaves at this point have on our sympathy for him? Given that Kovic is the 'hero', with all that the term implies, do you think it was right that Stone preserved the authenticity of the moment by presenting Kovic in such an unendearing light? Does a director run any risk doing this?

This is not the only episode when Kovic's role as 'hero' might be questioned. Take into account the fact that Kovic has slaughtered innocent Vietnamese villagers and killed a fellow marine. How do these two events also challenge the way in which we see him?

Ultimately, what is the audience left feeling about Kovic? Is the final more positive vision of him a necessary or inevitable conclusion to the film?

Few of us have experienced war: our knowledge has been shaped by other people's accounts, presented in different branches of the media.

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT?

In particular, the Vietnam war has become a source of inspiration for many Hollywood directors. For director Oliver Stone, 'Born On The Fourth Of July' marks his second major film on the subject. In making the first, the autobiographical 'Platoon', he outlined what he considered to be one of the main reasons for such movies.

"to put the viewer in the war, to make him a participant"
(International Herald Tribune. 29 Jan 87)

Films are never neutral. They all make statements. This is particularly true of American films about the Vietnam war, which can be seen as partly mass communication and partly propaganda, stemming many critics believe, from the United States' feelings of embarrassment about their role in the war.

In brief, the Vietnam war was a war fought largely by working class and black Americans. Those who managed to avoid being drafted into the forces were either white and middle class, or opinion makers. Many of these people were pacifists, non-believers in a war that was being fought thirteen thousand miles away.

Twenty years on, these opinions have been turned on their head and any embarrassment felt since the end of the war has largely been amongst this group. The writers and film makers amongst them have found that producing books and films on the subject, has helped to expiate some of their guilt. Hollywood, if you like, has vocalised the current attitude of the United States.

Whilst Stone's film deals with issues associated with the Vietnam war, 'Born On The Fourth Of July' also works as a memorial to the young lives that were wasted there. Like other Hollywood directors, Stone offers the type of heroic tribute these men were denied at the time of the war.

Obviously, reducing twenty years of shifting feelings into a few sentences is not satisfactory. We hope that, having been given a flavour of the issues surrounding the war, you will feel inclined to pursue the subject further. You will find a suggested reading list at the end of the guide.

'QUOTE UNQUOTE'

The following quotations might provide useful starting points for discussions or essay topics:

"Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country"

- President John F. Kennedy. 20th February 1961

"I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting the war in the streets of America. I didn't want to believe it at first - people protesting against US when we were putting our lives on the line for our country"

Ron Kovic - 'Born On The Fourth Of July'. Corgi.

"More and more he thought about what a priest had said to him in Da Nang: 'Your fight is just beginning. Sometimes no one will want to hear what you're going through. You are going to have to learn to carry a great burden and most of your learning will be done alone.'"

Ron Kovic 'Born On The Fourth Of July'. Corgi.

"In telling Ron's story, I hoped that I could get to the heart of veterans' issues, to what the veterans' had come back to after the war."

Oliver Stone 1989

"The war in Vietnam left a wound on my generation that hasn't healed. It has closed with the infection still raging inside:"

Mark Baker - 'Nam'. Abacus

People don't understand. They hate you for being there, like you should feel guilty for it"

- Vietnam veteran

"I noticed people were treating me funny, like I was a psycho, like a slightly retarded child who had a history of violent outbreaks."

- Vietnam veteran

"Americans were wasted in an amazing variety of ways in Vietnam. When they returned home, they were wasted again, like greasy paper plates after a picnic."

Vietnam veteran

"Somebody stabbed us in the back."

Vietnam veteran

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ON THE VIETNAM WAR

'Born On The Fourth Of July' - Ron Kovic. Corgi. 'Nam' - Mark Baker. Abacus. 'Vietnam The Ten Thousand Day War' - Michael Maclear. Thames/Methuen 'Despatches' - Michael Herr. Picador. 'To Bear Any Burden' - Al Santoli. Abacus.

ON FILM

'Hollywood's Vietnam' - Gilbert Adair. Proteus. 'War and Cinema' - Paul Virrilio. Verso. 'Hollywood Goes To War' - Ed. F. Dolan. 'Film Theory and Criticism' - Ed. Mast and Cohen. Oxford. 'The Film In History' - Pierre Sorlin. Oxford.

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