"I believed in our country, believed in the ideals, believed the communists were undermining us everywhere"

Oliver Stone, Director of "Platoon".

Oliver Stone's film, "Platoon" tells the story of a young soldier who arrives in Vietnam in 1968 with all of the thoughts that Stone himself had as a soldier in the same period in the same war. It is too easy to say that "Platoon" is simply an autobiographical film. What it contains is Stone's view of his experiences nearly twenty years after they happened. The fact that such a long time has passed between the actual events and the film appearing says a lot about both Stone and also about America's desire to face up to what really happened in Vietnam. "Platoon" tells the story of the soldiers who fought the war, not in a glorified way as we might expect from an ordinary war film. There are no real heroics in "Platoon", just discomfort, fear, violence and confusion.

The fact that Stone had to wait so long for the film to be made and also that the money to make it came not from America but from a British company, Hemdale, may give us some idea about the ways in which America and particularly, Hollywood view the Vietnam War. This aspect of the film will be looked at later in this Study Guide.

In 1968, when the events in the film happened, you were probably not even born. The impact that the Vietnam War had on the world may well seem very distant to you. You may have heard about it, may even have studied the war in History lessons, but what happened is possibly, to you, nothing more than some facts in a history book or some films that you have seen.

TASK ONE

Ask a variety of people what they remember about the Vietnam War. Ask your teachers and also people at home. Ask them if they remember any events from the war. Ask them how they found out about the war.

VIETNAM - THE TEN THOUSAND DAY WAR

VIETNAM - PRE 1975

To describe all of the events that occurred in Vietnam between the end of the Second World War and the final victory of the North over the South in 1975 is well beyond the scope of this Guide. There are, however, a few general points that can be made which will, we hope, give some indication of what type of war it was and why first France and then America had no real chance of ever winning the war. Vietnam had been a colony of France since 1858. At the end of the Second World War, America had felt that the country should become independent and had already established contact with Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the left wing nationalists. It is here that the first irony occurs as it would be Ho Chi Minh who would lead North Vietnam in its struggle to unite the country against the wishes of the United States

Cold War pressures in Europe meant that the United States went against its original belief that the country should be given its independence and followed the French wishes to retain it as a colony. America looked on as in the early 1950's France failed to win the struggle that was developing in Vietnam. France failed to defeat the Nationalists because it adopted tactics which, whilst being suitable for a war fought by two armies in open warfare failed when it came to fighting a population which supported independence. When the French tried to force a battle at Dien Bien Phu, its forces were roundly defeated. In 1954 the country was divided into North and South. That same year, French forces left Vietnam and the U.S. agreed to provide aid to the South. By 1960 the first U.S. military advisors are in place in the South. It is from here on that the involvement of the United States grew and grew, from advisors to armies and it is the height of this involvement that forms the backdrop to "Platoon".

Just as the French tried to fight a conventional war, so did the Americans. In Vietnam, however, there were no front lines, no places to which to advance. The American armies simply tried to protect the South against guerilla action by the North. The enemy were sometimes soldiers, but more often than not were indistinguishable from the people that they were supposed to be protecting. How could soldiers who, in the main were in Vietnam for only a year, grasp the difference between friend and foe ?

Politically the American adventure was doomed to failure, fought in the way that it was. But possibly the greatest defeat was of the soldiers themselves whose beliefs and ideals were destroyed. They were unable to see why they were in Vietnam, what they were trying to do (beyond the somewhat vague concept of "defeating communism"). The war that they had been shown in John Wayne movies was not to be found in Vietnam.

VIETNAM - THE MEDIA AND HOLLYWOOD

Because of television, Vietnam was one of the most widely reported wars in history. On the breakfast time news in the United States, news reporters would be able to report on current events often with horrific accompanying film footage. It was a war which was seen in everybody's living room. In many ways this accounted for the tremendous anti-war feeling that was generated in America at the time. People could not see why U.S. troops were in Vietnam being killed. It was this public opinion that helped force the various presidents to seriously consider why America was involved in the war at all, considering the tremendous cost in life and money.

Despite the coverage in the news, the Vietnam War was a subject that was initially avoided by Hollywood filmmakers. War films had always been popular with Hollywood, but here was one war that it seemed not to wish to look at.

Why do you think this was? Why do you think that it is only now that American filmmakers are able to raise finance to make films about Vietnam which attempt to portray actual events and not simply repeat the old style of war films?

Two films which are very different from "Platoon" - "Rambo" and "Top Gun" - also have war as their subject. Yet the treatment is very different.

Of "Top Gun" Oliver Stone, the director, says the following:

"You see a movie like "Top Gun" if you're a kid, you join the navy. It looks great. I join the navy, I get to wear that spiffy uniform, I get to ride at the speed of light, I get the machine under my legs so / get that sexual energy, plus I get Kelly McGillis if I blow up the MiG ! Nobody mentions the fact that he possibly started World War Three by doing that So, the message of the movie is "I get a girlfriend if I start World War Three !""

In the way that he describes this film, how far is Oliver Stone also summing up other war films?

Does this type of description suggest reasons why war films are popular with Hollywood filmmakers ?

What other attractions do you think war films hold for an audience ? Using these two films as examples, as a class try to work out what they were about and what their message was, then compare them to "Platoon". We have drawn up a chart to help you do this.

	STORY	MAIN CHARACTER	ENEMY	ACTION	MESSAGE
RAMBO					
TOP GUN					
PLATOON					

When you have completed the chart, try to write up your findings in an essay entitled "Images of War in 'Platoon', 'Rambo' and 'Top Gun'.

Many of the Americans who went to Vietnam expected a "real war," one as in the movies where "ground was taken, advances made". The shock of finding that they often took the same piece of land again and again, that there was no front line, that this was not a war between nations but a revolutionary struggle confused them simply because of the image of war that they had been given by the movies, in many ways the description of "Top Gun" given by Oliver Stone.

Who was the enemy? Was it the villager? Was it a shadow? Was it themselves? If there was no obvious enemy then how could they see themselves as liberators? What were they defending? They had been brought up on movie wars - this was very different.

PLATOON' A WAR FILM?

One possible way of describing "Platoon" is to call it a war film. This is a type of "shorthand" term that we, as an audience, often use when we see films and then describe them to friends. Thus, we may say "I've just seen a horror/love/western/gangster film" We assume that the person that we are talking to will understand exactly what we mean by this. But how do we come to such descriptions ? How do we group films together in this way ?

If you are talking about a horror film, then what do you expect to see in a horror film ? Try to make a list of all the things that you would expect to see in either a horror film or a western. When you have done this, compare your list with that of the person sitting next to you. How similar are they ? Compare both of your lists with the rest of the class so that you have a class list of expectations for either horror or western.

What you have just done is to come to some sort of conclusion as to what makes up a particular type, or "genre" of film. "Genre" is a French word which is normally used in Film Studies to mean "type of film".

Before we continue let us see if we can attempt a definition of the word genre. Genre is a term which groups films together by way of their similarities. Each genre consists of a range of elements which allow us to recognise it and also allows us to expect certain things to occur within it. These elements are commonly called "conventions-.

CONVENTIONS

Conventions are really collections of ideas that we all share about certain genres. We probably would not see all of the conventions that you have listed above in one film. But we would expect to see quite a few of them and would be disappointed if we did not see them. The lists that you prepared above on horror and westerns were very general.

If we wanted to say that "Platoon" is part of the war genre, then we need to be very clear as to what we mean by "war genre". What do we expect in such films ?

It is possible to arrange ideas about conventions under certain headings and in discussing "Platoon" as a war film we need to be precise about our expectations.

TASK

Copy out the chart below. You will see that we have included certain headings under which you must group together your expectations about what you think you would expect to see in a war film.

CHARACTERS	SETTINGS	PLOTS	CLOTHING	SITUATIONS

What you have written down are your own expectations of war films, that is, the things that you would normally expect to find in any war film.

When we pay our money for any of these types of products then we have certain expectations of them. Part of our pleasure in watching certain types of films is that we enjoy predicting what will happen and having these expectations fulfilled.

But what happens when we think a film will fall into one genre and then in fact it does not? Look at all of the ideas that you wrote down about war movies. How many of these apply to "Platoon"?

We have said that when we see a certain genre product then we expect to see certain things appear in it - characters, settings etc. But do genres operate only on a visual level? Although "Platoon" looks like a war film, it is possibly the THEMES of the film that make it different.

One could say that war films look at the victory of one side over another. We, as an audience, know straight away which side we are meant to identify with, who we are to support, who are to be the heroes and who the enemy.

Who would you say are the Heroes in "Platoon"? Who would you say is the enemy?

Look at your answers to the two questions above. Taking each answer, say whether or not the heroes and enemies fit into the normal ideas about these two types of characters in war films. Are the normal "heroic" qualities that you would expect to see in a war film shown in "Platoon"?

If you think that they are not then why do you think that the writer/director has chosen not to show them in this way ? What is the writer/director trying to do?

Look at the image above, Is this typical of what we would expect to see in war films What ideas does it give you about the war that is going on?

If "Platoon" does not fit in with the normal idea of a war film then we need to consider the ways in which it differs. Does it show the same types of character? Do they show the same types of morality and ways of looking at society?

"PLATOON" - A DIFFERENT WAR, A DIFFERENT STORY

One method of looking at the ways in which "Platoon" is different from other war films is to examine the central character, Chris, and see how he changes during the film and what it is that makes him change. Turn to the chart - you will see that we have shown Chris' journey through Vietnam from the moment he arrives to the moment that he is in the clearing at the end of the film. Think what other incidents happen to him on the way (the episode in the village for example) and try to each how he reacts and how we are shown visually the change that has occurred.

We need to think, in the last case, that as film is a visual medium, the director must think of ways in which changes can be shown on screen through actions and images.

	WHAT IS SHOWN	HOW DOES CHRIS REACT	HOW IS THIS SHOWN VISUALLY
ARRIVAL IN VIETNAM			
INCIDENT ONE			
INCIDENT TWO			
INCIDENT THREE			
INCIDENT FOUR			
THE CLEARING			
THE ENDING			

One could say that two attitudes towards the war are represented by the two sergeants, Barnes and Elias, and that Chris reacts to the war from the ways in which he sees them act, both to others and between themselves.

Try to describe each of them and the attitudes that they seem to hold. How are we given this information in the film ?

As well as portraying certain ideals or beliefs, these two characters are also important in the way that the story, or narrative develops. If we say that war films normally show the victory of the "good" side over the enemy, then the characters within that film will be used to show how this defeat is obtained. However, in "Platoon", there is no such defeat shown. Do we even know which is the "good" side and who are the enemy?

Look back at the chart that you completed about the changes that occurred to Chris. How important were one or other of the sergeants in each of these episodes? How did each affect the way in which Chris saw the events happening? How important was each to the events that were taking place?

Because, in a film, we get involved with the characters, we should consider the ways in which both of the sergeants die - the way in which each scene is shot and the effects that each scene has on us, the audience and the effect that we are shown on Chris. Complete the chart below which refers to the death scenes of Elias and Barnes.

	DESCRIPTION OF SCENE	WAY IN WHICH FILMED	EFFECT ON CHRIS
BARNES			
ELIAS			

If we return to the original question of whether "Platoon" is a war film or not and the idea of genre, we can now see that genres are not only made up of visual conventions but also of themes and stories (or narratives). We can show this in diagram form.

VISUAL CONVENTIONS

THEMES ———————————— NARRATIVES
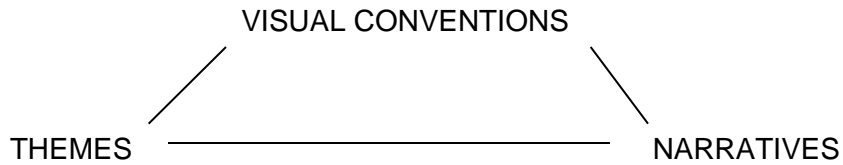
The idea of the narrative can best be explained in the following way. Each different genre of film tends to tell its story in a similar way. So, when we talk about westerns, there are certain types of stories that recur in the genre. For example, there is the gunfighter story, the cavalry and Indians story, the railroad story, each type of story is reworked in different films, new ideas being added, stale ideas being removed. Often, stories show two sides which come into conflict. The world that we are shown at the beginning of the film is disrupted, altered for the worse, and the narrative of the film tells how this world is changed so that by the end a new view of the world is formed. In diagram form this would look as follows -

A
    C———————— D ———————————— E
B
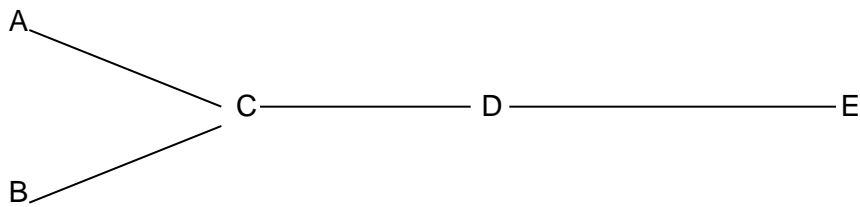
In the diagram, A and B stand for the good and bad side of the story. These can be represented either by individual characters or by groups. C is the moment when these two clash and things become disrupted. D shows the solving of this disruption and E shows the final part of the narrative when things are put right.

Now, see if you can apply this pattern to "Platoon". Think about the following questions.

1. What are the two sides A and B?
2. How is Chris presented at the start of the film?
3. What is the "disruption" at the beginning of the film?
4. How does the film end? Does this sum up what has happened during the film?
5. Do you think that the ending is effective?

You should ask yourself whether the narrative of "Platoon" is similar to any other war films that you have seen.

"PLATOON" - FILM AND VIOLENCE

One complaint often made about films these days is that they are too violent. People claim that seeing violence on film can make an audience violent.

What did you feel when you came out of seeing "Platoon"? Were you aware of the violence that was in "Platoon"? Do you think that the film would have been just as effective if the violent parts had been changed? Why do you think the director and the scriptwriter included these scenes? How did they help the film get across its message?

Was this film more violent than others that you have seen?

FURTHER WORK

1. Essay - "'Platoon' is not simply about the Vietnam War. It is about all wars and how soldiers experience them". Do you agree?

2. Imagine that you are in charge of creating the publicity for "Platoon". Design a poster for the film. You need to think of a slogan for the film, what information you will give on the poster and also how you will illustrate the poster.

3. Describe the view of the Vietnam war given in "Platoon".

4. Collect together as many reviews of "Platoon" from newspapers and magazines as you can. Read each one and then try to compare the ways in which each reviewer describes the film. As a further piece of work, try to write your own review of the film.

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FILMOGRAPHY

Following the screening of "Platoon" or preceding it, it would be useful to put it within a context of other films about Vietnam. What follows is a highly selective list of films. Reference to Adairs book will give a full listing of films about Vietnam. We apologise for any films that you think ought to have been included. As we say, this is a selective list.

"The Green Berets" - 1968. dir. John Wayne/Ray Kellog

Stars John Wayne. As one would expect from a John Wayne movie, this presents a very "gung ho" view of the war, with the United States totally in the right being in Vietnam to save it from Communism. It makes an interesting comparison with "Platoon" as it could be called the first Vietnam movie and the attitudes expressed differ immensely from the recent film. Useful as a starting point to trace the way that Hollywood has treated the war.

"Letter to Jane" - 1972. dir. Jean-Luc Godard/Jean-Pierre Gorin A critique of Jane Fonda's visit to North Vietnam, using still images of Fonda taken from press reports. Subtitled and probably for older groups only. Interesting in relation to Fonda's later film, "Coming Home".

"Taxi Driver" - 1976. dir. Martin Scorsese. The first of the "effect on the veterans" films. A very violent film, yet one which could well be screened with a more mature group. It would make an interesting comparison with the later "Coming Home" or "The Deerhunter".

"The Boys in Company C" - 1977. dir. Sidney J. Furie. In many ways a similar treatment to the war as shown in "Platoon". It concentrates on the experience of a group of private soldiers in the war. Also interesting because like "Platoon", it was financed in the United Kingdom.

"Coming Home" - 1978. dir Hal Ashby. Notable for Bruce Dern's performance as the returning husband, 'Coming Home" glosses the problems of the Vietnam veteran after a very dramatic and powerful opening. Stars Jane Fonda and John Voigt.

"The Deerhunter" - 1978. dir. Michael Cimino.

A film as much about the Polish community in America as about Vietnam. A thought provoking film on first viewing but demands study in order to see if there is anything really there.

"Apocalypse Now" - 1979. dir. Francis Coppola. "Adapted" from Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", an exploration of one man's reaction to the war. Stunning in its cinematography, its negative attitudes to the absurdity of the war in many ways paves the way for "Platoon'.