

Commentary by Don Kunz

**Barry Levinson's
*Good Morning, Vietnam***

Barry Levinson's *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Touchstone Pictures, 1987) is an oddity among Vietnam War films. Unlike most Hollywood treatments of that war, it focuses attention on REMFs (rear-echelon motherfuckers) rather than grunts. And, although based loosely on airman Adrian Cronauer's tour of duty as an Armed Forces Radio Disc Jockey in Saigon in 1965 and 1966, it nevertheless largely decontextualizes the war from specific historical events. At the same time, despite being produced at the end of the 1980s, it shuns the Reagan era's rewriting of the war as a cartoonish revenge scenario in which Americans fight and win a rematch against the North Vietnamese. But most peculiarly, it is a comedy. As a result of departing from expectations created by its subject matter, production era, and ostensible genre, critical assessments of the film have been sharply divided. William Palmer dismissed *Good Morning, Vietnam* as a "shallow, plotless combination of a Robin Williams comedy concert and an extended music video masquerading as a biopic" (Gilman 235). And Henry A. Giroux denigrated it as a Disney inspired slapstick version of the war which is sexist, racist, and colonialist in its representations (51-56). But Owen W. Gilman, Jr. celebrated it as an improvisational text whose form brilliantly mirrors the insanity and chaos of American involvement in Vietnam (242).

Whatever the critical opinion of *Good Morning, Vietnam*, it was Barry Levinson's most lucrative work to date, earning \$125 million (Greenburg 136), and it revived Robin Williams's flagging movie career with a Best Actor Academy Award nomination and a Golden Globe award for his performance as Adrian Cronauer (Dougan 119, 133-34). Evidently this film's peculiar treatment of the Vietnam War resonated with a substantial number of Americans.

I think *Good Morning, Vietnam* became a popular success because, coming twelve years after the war's official end, it made the reasons America lost Vietnam both clear and acceptable. For despite the improvisational quality of Robin Williams' comic performance, Levinson made this cinematic text a carefully structured allegory. The scenario Levinson constructs encourages

us to laugh at Americans whose strategy for prosecuting the war contradicted fundamental American values and to laugh with those Americans who reaffirmed those values while in country. Indeed, Adrian Cronauer has said “that because there was humor in the film and no graphic violence, the political implications were probably overlooked by some who simply saw it as a diversion” (Dougan 127).

“It was Cronauer’s idea to try to come up with an allegorical story about the effect of Vietnam on one man, reflecting the effect of the war on the United States as a whole” (Dougan 115). And in many respects, even when loosely fictionalized, Cronauer’s service as a disc jockey for Armed Forces Radio in Saigon is more representative of most American soldiers’ Vietnam experience than offered by more highly acclaimed cinematic treatments like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, or *Full Metal Jacket*. For one thing, according to Cronauer, twelve to fifteen times as many U.S. personnel served in non-combat roles on military installations or in urban areas than fought in the countryside or in the air above it. And *Good Morning, Vietnam* makes the point that these REMF positions were sometimes no less risky or necessarily less crucial assignments in a guerrilla war which was fought without clearly defined front lines and at great distance from the United States. For another thing, Cronauer’s role in broadcasting offered Levinson the opportunity to explore less viscerally and more reflectively how Americans perceived Vietnamese culture and represented their own while In Country. Finally, the intensifying conflict between the protagonist (whose experiences educate him as to the war’s true character) and his antagonistic immediate superiors (whose unquestioning allegiance to an official military view which keeps them ignorant) explains why patriotic Americans both opposed and escalated the Vietnam War.

Good Morning, Vietnam begins with Cronauer’s transfer to Saigon at the behest of General Taylor who has heard his comically irreverent, high energy Armed Forces Radio broadcasts on Crete and wants to shake up the more conventional, amateurish Armed Forces Radio in Saigon as a means of boosting troop morale in the early stages of the Vietnam War. And the General’s strategy succeeds. Instead of soporific easy listening acts like Ray Coniff and Percy Faith, Cronauer programs wake-up rock and soul music like Martha and the Vandellas and James Brown; he makes fun of everything from the weather in Vietnam (“it’s hot and damn hot”) to military intelligence (“it’s very hard to find an Asian man actually named Charlie”) to Vice President Nixon’s visit to South Vietnam (“yes, the big Dick is here!”); and he invents fictional char-

acters for improvisational interviews on air rather than following a militarily sanitized script. As a result, the fictionalized Cronauer is the first Armed Forces Radio disc jockey ever to get fan mail from the troops. But those who supervise the Saigon station—Lt. Hauk (who is introduced as “the Westmoreland of Wit”) and Sgt. Major Dickerson (a menacing former Special Forces veteran who has been transferred from combat as a result of “a social infection which won’t go away”)—regard Cronauer as subversive. Consequently, they lobby General Taylor to cancel Cronauer’s broadcasts. At first he refuses to do so. But then Cronauer edits an interview to make visiting Vice President Nixon look like a sadly misinformed, impotent fool; and later he circumvents military censors in reporting a terrorist bombing which he witnessed in Saigon. Consequently, Taylor suspends him. But when the troops in the field protest Cronauer’s silencing, the General orders the disc jockey reinstated. Thus Levinson’s scenario represents U.S. military leadership in the early stages of the war as pragmatic rather than dogmatic, innovative rather than conventional, and more democratic than authoritarian—in a word, revolutionary. But despite the General’s support, Cronauer and his immediate military superiors continue to clash. And when the disc jockey proposes interviewing soldiers in the field to get their perceptions of the war and broadcasting the tapes, Lt. Hauk and Sgt. Major Dickerson conspire to put him in mortal danger by censoring news that the road Cronauer intends to travel to An Lac is controlled by the Viet Cong.

This theme that we lost Vietnam because we fought ourselves has become commonplace: It is quite explicit in *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* for example, but *Good Morning, Vietnam* offers a more balanced and thoughtful version of it. Certainly, Levinson softens criticism of U.S. military leadership by making General Taylor an archetypal American cracker-barrel philosopher. He is an honest, plain-spoken man with an irreverent sense of humor and a genuine desire to discover how to conduct the war successfully, even if that means unconventionally. But *Good Morning, Vietnam* also satirizes the U.S. military’s unimaginative, authoritarian, arrogant bureaucrats for losing the war by betraying fundamental American values.

Successfully opposing a guerrilla war for revolution requires open mindedness, spontaneity and improvisation. But Lt. Hauk and Sgt. Major Dickerson are close-minded, imperceptive, humorless automatons eager to deny all but official truths and to suppress democratic sentiments. Their slavish devotion to conventional behaviors, established procedures, and officially scripted attitudes are self-defeating. In fact, *Good Morning, Vietnam’s* allegory

represents the American military bureaucracy as the ideological equivalent of the presumably tyrannical and oppressive North Vietnamese communist government which Americans are fighting to save the South Vietnamese people from, as well as of an officially democratic South Vietnamese regime which stifles dissent with violence. Conversely, Cronauer's rebellious behavior makes him the ideological equivalent of freedom fighters against colonial oppression much like American Revolutionary War soldiers and, as he discovers to his mortification, the Viet Cong.

To prepare us for this shocking theme and to expand on the complex cultural reasons for America's loss in Vietnam, Levinson fictionalizes an evolving relationship between Cronauer and South Vietnamese civilians. This evolution begins when Cronauer first arrives in Saigon. Having just come from a posting in Crete where he claims all women look like Zorba, Cronauer finds South Vietnamese women beautiful and lusts after everyone he sees. They all look alike to Cronauer who is only seeing them from the back in their conical hats and white ao dais. Levinson makes his protagonist's attempt to court one an allegory of the war itself.

At first, the disc jockey objectifies Vietnamese women as sexual commodities for his consumption. When he does approach a particular young Vietnamese woman named Trinh, he finds her completely immune to his charm and clever stateside patter. Nevertheless he pursues her. In the process he discovers she, her brother, and other South Vietnamese civilians are taking English lessons from a U.S. Army Sergeant. Hoping, as he says to "get to first base with her," Cronauer bribes the teacher to abandon the class to him then realizes to his chagrin that he knows nothing about teaching. However, he recognizes immediately that the textbook English they have been taught so far only enables the South Vietnamese to purchase western commodities like butter and cheese. It is of little real value to them. So, Cronauer proceeds to teach them phrases like "piss me off" and "full of shit." If "English has a long tradition of being the linguistic face of colonialism" (Giroux 54), Cronauer's lessons in American street slang seem more the linguistic face of resistance and revolution. But while the South Vietnamese find such self assertive terms hilarious, they consider them, well . . . foreign. The South Vietnamese readily tangle themselves up in these vernacular idioms and can't imagine expressing themselves in that way even under the most dire circumstance. So, while Cronauer's attempt to seduce Trinh by becoming her English teacher fails, it provides him with his first glimpse of the substantial cultural differences between Americans and South Vietnamese, differences which have implica-

tions not only for America's initial military intervention in Vietnam but for its later strategy of Vietnamization of the war.

Other Vietnam War films (like *Casualties of War* in which a U.S. squad kidnaps, rapes, and tortures a Vietnamese woman or *Full Metal Jacket* in which a U.S. squad is nearly destroyed by a Vietnamese woman sniper or *Heaven and Earth* in which an American soldier rescues a Vietnamese woman by marrying her and taking her to the United States) have dramatized the relationship between Vietnam and America in sexual terms. But *Good Morning, Vietnam's* development of this allegorical strategy is more inventive, complex, and thought-provoking. For although the sexual interest in Levinson's film is between Cronauer and the South Vietnamese woman, the real love story is between him and her brother, Tuan (Dougan 119-120). Cronauer courts him in a failed attempt to get her. This is a painful but instructive experience for both men.

The brother introduces Cronauer to authentic Vietnamese food which badly burns him, takes him home to see how the Vietnamese really live, and even arranges a date for him with his sister—one chaperoned by her entire family. During the date with this Vietnamese other he has come to save, the American soldier learns he cannot buy her family's approval by bankrolling them on a shopping spree or help them understand Americans by treating them to a screening of *Beach Blanket Bingo* with French and Vietnamese subtitles or develop a sexual relationship with her because of the enormous cultural differences between them. Still, he persists in trying to be her friend until she tells him directly that friendship is not possible between an American man and a Vietnamese woman. Meanwhile, the two men continue a kind of doomed love story.

When Cronauer takes the brother to Jimmy Wah's Vietnamese bar to drink beer with his friends from Armed Forces Radio, he saves Tuan from a beating by two American soldiers who declare it is a GI bar where no gooks are allowed. Clearly the episode illustrates allegorically how easily the American protectionist intervention in Vietnam could be perverted into a colonialist and racist policy—attempting to use Vietnamese resources to recreate a version of America in Vietnam which absurdly excludes the Vietnamese. Subsequently, Tuan repays Cronauer by pulling him out of Jimmy Wah's Bar before it is blown up by the Viet Cong and by rescuing Cronauer and his military driver from the Viet Cong when their jeep is blown up by a landmine on the road to An Lac.

The bombing of Jimmy Wah's Bar fits neatly into the sexual allegory

of American / Vietnamese relations. Jimmy Wah, whose divided loyalties may be inferred from his half-American / half-Vietnamese name, is a flamboyant homosexual physically attracted to American soldiers in uniform and ridiculously eager to buy naked pictures of the American cowboy actor Walter Brennan. Even Cronauer, who seems amused by Jimmy Wah, calls him “a sick man.” In Levinson’s allegory the chaste, brotherly love between the two heterosexual men, Tuan and Cronauer, is construed as natural, but the erotic, homosexual relationship between Jimmy Wah and Americans is represented as unnatural and perverted. In political terms, Jimmy Wah has betrayed his people by perversely loving Americans and so is a legitimate target for destruction. And just as Jimmy Wah traitorously betrays the South Vietnamese, his foil, Tuan patriotically betrays the American. For the climax of the love story between Cronauer and Tuan, is the revelation that Tuan is really Phan Dac To, a Viet Cong soldier. In a tearful confrontation, Tuan tells Cronauer that the Americans—not the North Vietnamese—are the real enemy, the invaders responsible for the death of many of his friends and family. In other words, Cronauer is forced to see that from a South Vietnamese point of view that Jimmy Wah is like Benedict Arnold and that U.S. policy toward Vietnam is a quasi-British colonialist interference in a war of revolution, hence a betrayal of America’s founding principles.

To summarize, Cronauer’s persistent courtship of the South Vietnamese allegorically represents a misperceived and unwinnable war of attrition. Cronauer learns by informal, direct contact with the South Vietnamese people what the U.S. military bureaucracy cannot through its formal contact with the South Vietnamese Government. In other words, Cronauer discovers through improvisation what the U.S. military bureaucracy remains unaware of by sticking to a prepared script (Gilman 245). As a result, the fictionalized Cronauer abandons his sexist American attitude, combats the racism of ethnocentric American soldiers, and works to subvert the tendency of American intervention to degenerate into colonialism. He discovers that unbridgeable cultural differences make America’s winning the Vietnam War impossible. About all the protagonist is able to salvage from his Vietnam experience is that although the South Vietnamese brother thinks Cronauer is the enemy, the sister believes he is a good person trying to be kind. All this considered, Cronauer seems to speak for most Americans in retrospect when he shouts out that his experience in Vietnam is not going to look good on a resume.

Good Morning, Vietnam’s two allegorical plot strands merge when

Cronauer's immediate supervisors discover his unwitting friendship with a member of the Viet Cong and use it to get him discharged from military service and returned to the United States. General Taylor, who has protected Cronauer's irreverent and subversive broadcasts because they remind American troops of what they have left behind in America, is unable to excuse his fraternization with the enemy. The thematic implication is that even in the earliest stages of involvement, it became clear to those who got to know the Vietnamese that America would lose the war because it was betraying its own revolutionary history by fighting in Vietnam. Military bureaucrats unquestioningly implemented an unwittingly racist and colonialist policy in Vietnam which arose from a failure to understand cultural differences. Moreover, *Good Morning, Vietnam* implies that while the observant American soldier In Country came to recognize why the war would be lost, the U.S. military bureaucracy stubbornly persisted in implementing a ridiculously ill conceived strategy for winning it. Ironically, in doing so, the bureaucrats were un-American: Fearful of dissent, they failed to recognize—and in some cases simply denied through censorship—critical information that might have confirmed what more and more soldiers in the field came to discover about the revolutionary character of the Vietnamese conflict. Thus, Levinson alleges that in our attempt to make Vietnam more like America we exported our country's worst failings as well as its best intentions.

These reasons for America's loss in Vietnam are neatly previewed and recapped in the opening and closing scenes of *Good Morning, Vietnam*. Cronauer is greeted at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport by a black U.S. soldier assigned to orient and drive him to his assignment. When Cronauer discovers the soldier's name is Edward Montesque Garlic, Cronauer quips, "We're going to have to requisition you a new name." As Cronauer is being sent home, he leaves Garlic with an irreverent farewell tape to broadcast along with the instruction to "Carry on, Montesque." At first Garlic replies, "I like that. It makes me sound British." But then he reveals he has requisitioned a new middle name, "trouble." As a result of Cronauer's example, Garlic refuses, no matter how classy it sounds, to carry on a name associated with the country which oppressed the American colonies. Instead, he chooses a name suitable for an American revolutionary soldier who will attempt to carry on his mentor's rebellious tactics. Of course, Garlic fails to cause enough trouble to revolutionize the military bureaucracy. *Good Morning, Vietnam* persistently construes the war as a lost cause because of blindness to cultural differences. We have a glimpse of that in the penultimate scene as Cronauer is being sent

home. On the way to the airport Cronauer and his military police escorts make an unscheduled stop so that he can say goodbye to his South Vietnamese students. As one MP complains, “He’s gonna say goodbye to the whole damn country!” And as he does, Cronauer and his entourage spontaneously indulge the South Vietnamese students’ long standing request to learn how to play baseball. Because they have no equipment, the pickup game is played with native materials—a basketful of melons, a stick, and a dusty field strewn with clothes and books for bases. Naturally, teaching them this quintessential American game proves a hopeless task. Despite their enthusiasm, the South Vietnamese never become players. Although the American soldiers assist them and only play aggressively against each other, the South Vietnamese are unable to understand the game. They can’t remember to touch base. And when they are advised to run home, they leave the field and don’t return.

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Commentary by Susan O'Neill

The Song of the Pawn

I know I'm not alone in cringing at the coverage of war on T.V.; I know I'm not the only human being alive who doesn't feel that national grudges are best settled with shiny new video games where the targets live and breathe.

However, in the United States these days, those of us who are truly, to-the-bone pacifists, those who feel that a powerful, well-armed nation is dangerously, morally wrong to play Goliath to an enemy whose major defensive slingshot is the righteousness of the embattled ground on which they stand—well, we're seldom invited to the podium. There isn't room for us up there. All the space—the floor and the very air—is taken by a word that calls to mind crumbling towers and exploding strangers in a crowd: *Terrorism*.

And it is a very frightening word. You can do so much in the name of fighting Terrorism; the word is so scary that it makes other, older words and concepts obsolete—words like Morality, concepts like Situational Ethics. *Terrorism*—so simple. Black and white; a great “sound bite” bugle call to war.

Some thirty-plus years ago, we in the US followed a different, equally frightening, equally simple, call to battle: *Communism*. Viet Nam was a small but vital domino that had to be held up, or we would find the Communists hammering at our gates. And so we were called. And we went, many of us. Some of us went willingly, fired with patriotism; some of us went skeptically, because we were drafted and didn't have a good excuse to turn away. Me, I went for a complicated variety of reasons—financial incentives, curiosity, naiveté. I was a woman, so I wasn't drafted; the Army needed nurses and promised to help pay for my education and send me someplace safe to replace a nurse who wanted to go to Viet Nam.

Whatever the promises, the motives, the personal philosophies we had, there were many of us who found ourselves in Viet Nam.

Pretty much everyone knows, by now, that what we did in that far land was not glorious. That our efforts did not further Democracy; it did not create order in the world; it did not save Civilization. In the end, in the final analysis—if any analysis of Viet Nam can be said to be final—we killed a lot of people on their own soil, created an economic chaos that only war can foster,