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**“What a Wonderful World”:
The Rhetoric of the Official
and the Unofficial in *Good
Morning, Vietnam***

“ood morning, Vietnam!” A raucous welcome introduces American rock-and-roll to the rice-paddy battlefields of the Vietnam War, rock-and-roll that replaces mellow standards on Armed Forces Radio in Saigon during the middle sixties. The 1987 movie *Good Morning, Vietnam*, a retrospective of American policy during the early stages of the war, focuses on Airman Adrian Cronauer’s outrageous on-air antics designed to boost troop moral. The film, however, is not merely a humorous biography or a showcase for popular music from the 1960s. It is a multi-layered discourse on “the effect of Vietnam on one man, reflecting the effect of the War on the United States as a whole.”¹ Beneath the humor, tensions between song melodies, lyrics, and screen images create a story of the conflict between official and unofficial versions of the Vietnam War. This conflict precipitated growing cynicism about how the war was being waged—a cynicism that attempted to influence policymakers decisions. The conflict becomes apparent by analyzing the juxtaposition of images and music through the lens of standpoint theory.

Standpoint Theory in Film Design

The way images are assembled and coordinated with dialogue and background music creates a motion picture’s story. The design of a film’s parts “gives it certain direction or intent of meaning,” and the story becomes “evident in the rhetorical arrangement of its devices.”² The design of *Good Morning, Vietnam* is influenced by the arrangement of two unique standpoints. A standpoint is a point of view exhibiting distinctive, contextually derived values³ and “from which particular features of reality are brought into sharp perspective and other features are obscured.”⁴ Furthermore, when a cultural reality is hierarchically structured one “cannot see everything from everywhere.”⁵ That is, each group has only a partial

view, dependent on its position in the hierarchy and subject to distortion “by the way the relations of domination are organized.”⁶ When these standpoints occupy opposing locations, conflicts arise from partiality (identifying with only one’s own group) and lack of objectivity (looking at only one’s side or standpoint). Such is the case with *Good Morning, Vietnam*’s two standpoints—the views of military commanders’ culture butt heads with those of enlisted soldiers.

In *Good Morning, Vietnam*, these two focal points are the standpoints of the official and the unofficial. The official standpoint encompasses unquestioning allegiance to conventional warfare, and the unofficial represents innovative, imaginative, and unconventional conduct during war. The official is the bureaucratic leadership plus those who give it carte blanche; the unofficial are soldiers and American citizens who express views not sanctioned by the military hierarchy. Official language is “a kind of abstract code, full of icy, bloodless euphemisms, mind-numbing acronyms, and meaningless statistics.”⁷ Unofficial language develops with the “growing awareness of U.S. citizens of the distance between what policy makers said about the war and the battlefield realities.”⁸ *Good Morning, Vietnam* portrays the beginnings of public awareness about what was really happening in Vietnam, a reality at odds with the “upbeat official pronouncements and optimistic news accounts that passed on administration reports without question.”⁹ The character of Lt. Hauk, the radio station, and the approved music list represent the official standpoint. The character of Adrian Cronauer and his antics, plus images of the real war, represent the unofficial view. The tensions between these two standpoints tell the story.

The Official and the Unofficial in *Good Morning, Vietnam*

The opening scene sets up the opposition between official and unofficial standpoints through images chosen to portray traditional military orderliness and music harkening back to the fifties decade of peace and prosperity. A clean, bright radio station office symbolizes the military’s claim of complete control of its environment. Serene and evenly paced music represents the official, calm and in-command character of the military. As “Around the World in 80 Days” by the Lawrence Welk Orchestra plays quietly in the background, a dulcet-toned DJ reads public service announcements: “And now an item of special note. Barring any change in the weather, the softball game between the 133rd and the 4th Infantry Divisions will resume as scheduled [...]” The champagne music, however, does not fit the expected character of a war zone anymore than the tidy office does. War is ugly, not pretty. The announcements, which sound like they are from the Midwestern farm belt rather than a war zone, enhance this contradiction. The combination of Welk’s music, innocuous text, and pristine U.S. military

headquarters symbolize official efforts to diminish “public awareness about the U.S. presence in Vietnam.”¹⁰ The images and music introduce one standpoint—military leaders sanitizing the war.

Then, the film cuts to a counterpoint to the pretty music and tidy office space—an out-of-focus view into the broadcast room through a glass window that reflects the word “Air” in reverse twice. Going from orderly sharpness to confused fuzziness represents the conflict developing between the official and the unofficial versions of what is happening in Vietnam. For example, in 1966 in a private memorandum, Assistant Secretary John McNaughton wrote that the “present U.S. objective in Vietnam [...] is to avoid humiliation.”¹¹ At the same time, officials talked publicly “about fighting for freedom and self-determination and to repel communist aggression.”¹² The reversed word *air* brings to mind this double-voiced approach of the managers of the war; the out-of-focus interior of the broadcast booth signifies the falsehoods emanating from officials. The window with reflecting contrasting metaphoric images suggests “the insanity and chaos of the Vietnam war.”¹³

Next, the film introduces Adrian Cronauer and humanizes the opposition of official and unofficial. When Cronauer arrives at the Armed Forces Radio station, he is dressed in civilian clothes, with his Air Force cap properly on his head. His mixture of civilian and military dress is a visual representation of standpoint theory: “People who are not of the dominant [...] perspective in society, not only have their own view of the world based on their experiences, but also the view of the mainstream society because understanding that view is necessary for survival.”¹⁴ The “dominant perspective” in the film is that of the military leaders of the radio station, and, by extension, the whole war effort from Washington to Saigon. Cronauer’s “own view” is represented by his Air Force cap and casual Greek shirt. He is a member of the Air Force and, like all members of the military, is supposed to follow orders “for survival.” In addition, he remains connected to civilian or public life, shown by his civilian shirt. He is military *and* civilian, a conflicted embodiment of the official / unofficial dichotomy, a conflict that will increase in intensity throughout the film.

Musical Choices

Music choices heighten the film’s tension when Cronauer goes on the air. After he greets the troops with his rousing “Good morning, Vietnam,” he plays his first record, “No Where to Run” by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. This early rock-and-roll hit with a heavy, bass beat and driving, dance rhythm suits Cronauer’s personality—loud, raucous, and enlivened. It is not, though, on the approved play list. It is not what station supervisor Lt. Hauk calls “normal modes” of music. The official play list, he

informs Cronauer, consists of Lawrence Welk, Jim Nabors, Montovoni, Percy Faith, Perry Como, and “certain ones of Sinatra’s songs.” The contrast between Armed Forces Radio’s “normal modes” of music and Cronauer’s rock-and-roll illustrates the disagreement of private and public knowledge of the war:

While *privately* agreeing to a deployment of one hundred thousand troops in 1965 and another one hundred thousand in 1966, in *public* LBJ merely announced a commitment to raise U.S. forces to fifty thousand and hid the fact that U.S. troops were already fully engaged in combat missions.¹⁵ (Emphasis added)

Lt. Hauk’s orders to play from the official play list mirror official pronouncements from the Washington standpoint. They are attempts to silence Cronauer’s personal views, much as authorized news tried to hide the facts of events in Vietnam.

Soon after Cronauer begins his disk jockey duties, the story expands the opposition of the official and the unofficial beyond the radio station’s sound room. As rock-and-roll booms from loudspeakers in staging areas, on PT boats, and in helicopters, Lt. Hauk demands to know: “Who gave anyone permission to play modern music?” He gets no answer—just more “modern music”: “I Get Around,” “The Game of Love,” and “I Feel Good.” Cronauer tosses aside records from the official list. He spouts a stream-of-consciousness barrage of jokes. Soldiers in the field laugh and dance. Supervisors Sgt. Major Dickerson and Lt. Hauk scowl. The relationships between these imagic and musical layers—the opening golden-oldie, the rock songs, the war raging off screen, the new DJ’s humorous irreverence, and the restrictive official stiffness—are skillfully intertwined to portray conflicting beliefs about the Vietnam War. This war is not like any previous war; traditional methods of combat are not effective in guerilla-style battle. The American public was beginning to sense that sanctioned news reports were amiss, and the enlisted soldiers were experiencing how erroneous these reports were. However, the officers, isolated from battlefields, were sticking with their unquestioning allegiance to the official military view, even if it obscured reality and kept them ignorant of the truth.

Marginality and Straddling Borders

According to standpoint theory, Cronauer’s innovation and rule breaking can be “perceived as a function of marginality, of [occupying] the location of the ‘outsider within.’” He displays a “double consciousness of ‘crossover’” identity. Even though Cronauer is an Airman, his decision to ignore Armed Forces rules of dress and action places him outside the dominant standpoint of military culture. Cronauer

is the “stranger” who “moves across contexts and encompasses them in double vision.”¹⁶ That is, he is the serviceman who also occupies the civilian standpoint. He straddles the border between standpoints. When he jokes irreverently on air about the President, when he plays “Cast Your Fate to the Wind” and “Liar, Liar,” and when he makes up news rather than read approved text, he becomes the spokesperson for those questioning American involvement in Vietnam.

Cronauer’s standpoint becomes more complicated when his commanders censor him for playing music not on the “official play list” and take him off the air. Later, when ordered to return to his duties, he ignores the order and drives around Saigon until he meets a convoy of troops. In the midst of soldiers crowded into transport trucks, he comes face-to-face with the reality of war. Even though no combat scenes rage on the screen, the symbolism is clear—Cronauer has crossed completely over the border that divides the official from the unofficial. He sees clearly the flesh and blood reality of the men who fight in jungles and rice paddies. Nothing filters what he sees. These soldiers need to hear what he says. His irreverent ranting from the borderline between the sanitized view of the war and the unedited reality of battle experiences serves a purpose beyond personal expression. He is speaking not just *to* the soldiers in the field; he is speaking *for* them. The experience with the troops affects Cronauer profoundly. In full uniform, he returns to the air and quietly dedicates “What a Wonderful World” to the men he met on the streets of Saigon. Cronauer’s sad, pensive attitude reflects the realization of how different the experiences of the fighting soldiers are from those of the office-bound commanders.

Conflicting Images and Music: The Rhetoric of the Official and the Unofficial

While Louie Armstrong sings “What a Wonderful World,” a montage of fifty-five scenes positions images of war in opposition to the peace-and-love theme of the lyrics. The images move from the natural and neutral beauty of the Vietnamese landscape—a glorious sunset with towering dark clouds and lush rice paddies—to the horrors of napalm bombing runs, protesters struggling with police, and an assassination. The sequence concludes with a benumbed aftermath that continues beyond the song’s end—American soldiers staring pensively across their camp. The visuals depict the reality hidden from public view. The music represents the government’s version of the war. The result is a narrative of how “leaders were not merely sugarcoating the war news, but blatantly lying about the nature and success of American intervention.”¹⁷ This segment dramatizes the reality that “filtered home with returning veterans” and increased the numbers of Americans who “saw through the mask of official rhetoric.”¹⁸

The refrain of Armstrong's song makes a particularly poignant statement when it underscores images of the Vietnam War. "What a wonderful world" is the official standpoint before 1968: "The Johnson administration had been telling the American people that the war was being won, that the enemy was weak, and that there was 'light at the end of the tunnel.'"¹⁹ The American public "had been led to believe that the enemy was incapable of a major offensive; they had not been prepared for a Communist escalation of the war" during the Tet Offensive.²⁰ By examining the choices of images that accompany the refrain, it becomes apparent that these images represent the developing unofficial standpoint, one that would have been prepared for Tet.

In the first stanza, "what a wonderful world" accompanies a succession of images that represent the official view of the Vietnamese culture: a Vietnamese woman washes clothes in a shallow, dirty river; a Vietnamese boy bathes in a river midst trash and junk; and Vietnamese shoppers haggle over purchases in a cluttered, open-air fish market. The segment cuts to an image that represents the official standpoint of military assistance to the Vietnamese—Lt. Hauk ensconced in the clean and bright Headquarters office, looking contentedly out a window. The standpoints represented in this film segment are contextual. The Vietnamese nationals' daily lives go on in primitive simplicity, and the American military looks at the foreign land it occupies with official smugness. Viewed by themselves, the individual scenes are relatively innocuous. However, each is a partial and distorted view of the reality of Vietnam. When juxtaposed with the song's idea of wonderfulness and with the war zone, they are an ironic portrayal of what Americans thought of the early stages of the intervention policy.

During the refrain in the second stanza, the images move to the horrors of war. First, a mongrel dog eats something in front of a burning heap of ashes. Then the screen is filled with a still-life composition consisting of a single, woman's, red sandal in the foreground, a street with burned-down ash pile in middle-ground, and a darkened background in the upper one-third of frame. There are no people in these two scenes—only decimated inanimate objects and a lone, mongrel dog. This symbolizes more than the traditional destruction of war:

Some of the myths [perpetrated by the official standpoint] were outright lies. Others were lies of omission. All were flagrant distortions of reality. United States soldiers who fought in Vietnam experienced many of those contradictions first hand. [...] While policy makers talked about "saving" Vietnam, it soon became clear that U.S. military policy was doing far more to destroy it.²¹

The graphic images of the dog, the shoe, and ashes represent the flagrant destruction of the Vietnam War, a reality hidden in official press release rhetoric that presented military operations in a “wonderful world” way.

In the fourth stanza, images move from a mid-close-up shot of a group on patrol to a panning shot of a crude, dusty military field camp. In the wide-range shot, helicopters fly to the right as the camera pans left to show the entire camp, including anti-aircraft guns, tents, trucks, jeeps, men doing calisthenics—all the various equipment and activities necessary for a successful military operation in a combat zone. The camera stops panning at the edge of camp and frames two soldiers sitting behind sand bags while staring out across the yard. A radio hangs on a pole supporting the roof of their lean-to shelter. The oppositions are stark: the companionship of soldiers versus individual loneliness, the familiar versus the exotic, and—particularly relevant to the importance of music in this film and symbolized by the portable radio that plays unapproved music—duty versus defiance.

Spokesperson for the Unofficial

The soldiers in the military camp work within the closure of officially installed boundaries. Yet, they can bridge or cross over the boundaries via the rock-and-roll Cronauer plays. Cronauer’s deliberate choices of music are acts necessary for the formation of the unofficial standpoint, because standpoints must be “intellectually filtered,” “constructed, and *performed*” (emphasis added). His flamboyantly constructed on-air performance legitimizes the viewpoint opposed to the official stance, since standpoints “need to be *spoken* in order to become constituted as standpoints” (emphasis added).²² Thus, when Cronauer plays unapproved music, he becomes the spokesperson for the unofficial standpoint. Even “What a Wonderful World” speaks for the unofficial; it focuses attention on what the Vietnam War is not.

From his marginal position in the military culture, Cronauer realizes the reality of the Vietnam War. He has the “redemptive privilege of outsidership” in relation to the official standpoint.²³ From this position he can attempt impartiality—to “identify with the interests and values of social groups of which one is not a member” and objectivity—to “prepare to decentrate from one’s viewpoint or purely selfish interests in order to comprehend fully the perspectives of all parties to a dispute.”²⁴ He sees both sides, and he understands that the soldiers occupy the position with “the highest moral claim” because “it is fairer [and] more inclusive.”²⁵ It is “fairer” and “more inclusive” than the military leaders’ viewpoint because the soldiers have experienced the real war and not a sanitized fiction. As a journalist writes of a soldier’s experience: “I told one reporter the truth and

he didn't believe me."²⁶ Cronauer comes close to the truth when he meets the troops on the street, and he believes it. "What a Wonderful World" is his way to letting the soldiers know that he understands that they are part of a very real, but officially unacknowledged, war.

Images versus Music

Throughout *Good Morning, Vietnam*, the juxtaposition of images and music representing opposing concepts "shapes and defines visual meanings."²⁷ However, when there is contradiction between the visual and the verbal, as there is throughout this movie, the "visual image is virtually always taken as 'true' in contrast to the action that is merely verbally described."²⁸ For instance, even though Cronauer responds to superiors with the appropriate "Sir," his mixture of military and civilian dress shows that he is outside the official military standpoint. In addition, when he returns to the air, the visual of Cronauer in full uniform represents his attempt to move from the unofficial to the official, a move sabotaged by his knowledge of soldiers' experiences. The graphic images speak clearly. When Armstrong sings "what a wonderful world" and a Vietnamese villager's hut explodes, the visual overrides the verbal, and the viewer *sees* the truth of a horrific war rather than hearing the verbal proclamation that all is well.

The contrasts between music and images, with the images trumping the music, emphasize the tragic reality of Vietnam: "Arrogant confidence in American power, when added to the ideological rigidity of Cold War orthodoxy, blinded Washington officials to the steady stream of bad news about the war."²⁹ The blinders of the official standpoint sharply focused what the leaders wanted to make public. The blinders obscured or blocked from public view other features the leaders wanted kept secret. They prevented a successful opposition to the guerilla war, which required "open mindedness, spontaneity, and improvisation."³⁰ However, military commanders, like those represented by Lt. Hauk and Sgt. Major Dickerson, were "close-minded, imperceptive, and humorless automatons eager to deny all but official truths and to suppress democratic sentiments."³¹ As one Vietnam veteran observed, "There was no doubt that they had tricked us, deceived us—they with their John Wayne charging up Mount Suribachi [...]. We had imagined a movie. [...] What we got was a garbage pail."³²

The Legacy

The Vietnam War left a lingering legacy: "Disbelief in the words and disapproval of the actions of government officials caused a deep sense of loss and a growing cynical attitude on the part of American citizens."³³ Cynicism broke through "the veil of government rhetoric and mythology" and "enabled many to see through the

vener of phrases like ‘defending freedom’ or ‘fighting for democracy.’”³⁴ Rather than accept official Washington pronouncements and mainstream news reports at face value, the public learned to question, criticize, poke, and prod to get at the truth. They demonstrated and pressured Congress and the President to end the war. Wariness replaced acceptance. Americans discovered that the “official explanation of the war proved essentially meaningless”³⁵ and they demanded the truth. They knew it was not such a “wonderful world.”

Notes

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33. Appy and Bloom, 62
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